

URSULA K. Le GUIN

OLDERS

The moon slips and shines in the wrinkled mirror before the prow, and from the northern sky the Bright Companions shoot glancing arrows of light along the water. In the stern of the boat the polesman stands in the watchful solemnity of his task. His movements as he poles and steers the boat are slow, certain, august. The long, low channelboat slides on the black water as silently as the reflection it pursues. A few dark figures huddle in it. One dark figure lies full length on the half deck, arms at his sides, closed eyes unseeing that other moon slipping and shining through wisps of fog in the luminous blue night sky. The Husbandman of Sandry is coming home from war.

They had been waiting for him on Sandry Island ever since last spring, when he went with seven men, following the messengers who came to raise the Queen's army. In midsummer Four of the men of Sandry brought back the news that he was wounded and was lying in the care of the Queen's own physician. They told of his great valor in battle, and told of their own prowess too, and how they had won the war. Since then there had been no news.

With him now in the channelboat were the three companions who had stayed with him, and a physician sent by the Queen, an, assistant to her own doctor. This man, an active, slender person in his forties, cramped by the long night's travel, was quick to leap ashore when the boat slid silently up along the stone quay of Sandry Farm.

While the boatmen and the others busied themselves making the boat fast and lifting the stretcher and its burden up from the boat to the quay, the doctor went on up to the house. Approaching the island, as the sky imperceptibly lightened from night-blue to colorless pallor, he had seen the spires of windmills, the crowns of trees, and the roofs of the house, all in black silhouette, standing very high after the miles of endlessly level reedbeds and water channels. "Hello, the people!" he called out as he entered the courtyard. "Wake up! Sandry has come home!"

The kitchen was astir already. Lights sprang up elsewhere in the big house. The doctor heard voices, doors. A stableboy came vaulting out of the loft where he had slept, a dog barked and barked its tardy warning, people began to come out of the house door. As the stretcher was borne into the courtyard, the Farmwife came hurrying out, wrapped in a green cloak that hid her night dress, her hair loose, her feet bare on the stones. She ran to the stretcher as they set it down. "Farre, Farre," she said, kneeling, bending over the still figure. No one spoke or moved in that moment. "He is dead," she said in a whisper, drawing back.

"He is alive," the doctor said. And the oldest of the litterbearers, Pask the saddler, said in his rumbling bass, "He lives, Makalidem. But the wound was deep."

The doctor looked with pity and respect at the Farmwife, at her bare feet and

her clear, bewildered eyes. "Dema," he said, "let us bring him in to the warmth."

"Yes, yes," she said, rising and running ahead to prepare.

When the stretcher bearers came out again, half the people of Sandry were in the courtyard waiting to hear their news. Most of all they looked to old Pask when he came out, and he looked at them all. He was a big, slow man, girthed like an oak, with a stiff face set in deep lines. "Will he live?" a woman ventured. Pask continued looking them all over until he chose to speak. "We'll plant him," he said.

"Ah, ah!" the woman cried, and a groan and sigh went among them all.

"And our grandchildren's children will know his name," said Dyadi, Pask's wife, bossoming through the crowd to her husband. "Hello, old man."

"Hello, old woman," Pask said. They eyed each other from an equal height.

"Still walking, are you?" she said.

"How else get back where I belong?" Pask said. His mouth was too set in a straight line to smile, but his eyes glinted a little.

"Took your time doing it. Come on, old man. You must be perishing." They strode off side by side toward the lane that led to the saddlery and paddocks. The courtyard buzzed on, all in low-voiced groups around the other two returned men, getting and giving the news of the wars, the city, the marsh isles, the farm.

Indoors, in the beautiful high shadowy room where Farre now lay in the bed still warm from his wife's sleep, the physician stood by the bedside, as grave, intent, careful as the polesman had stood in the stern of the channelboat. He watched the wounded man, his fingers on the pulse. The room was perfectly still.

The woman stood at the foot of the bed, and presently he turned to her and gave a quiet nod that said, Very well, as well as can be expected.

"He seems scarcely to breathe," she whispered. Her eyes looked large in her face knotted and clenched with anxiety. "He's breathing," the escort assured her. "Slow and deep. Dema, my name is Hamid, assistant to the Queen's physician, Dr. Saker. Her majesty and the Doctor, who had your husband in his care, desired me to come with him and stay here as long as I am needed, to give what care I can. Her majesty charged me to tell you that she is grateful for his sacrifice, that she honors his courage in her service. She will do what may be done to prove that gratitude and to show that honor. And still she bade me tell you that whatever may be done will fall short of his due."

"Thank you," said the Farmwife, perhaps only partly understanding, gazing only at the set, still face on the pillow. She was trembling a little.

"You're cold, dema," Hamid said gently and respectfully. "You should get dressed."

"Is he warm enough? Was he chilled, in the boat? I can have the fire laid--"

"No. He's warm enough. It's you I speak of, dema."

She glanced at him a little wildly, as if seeing him that moment. "Yes," she said. "Thank you."

"I'll come back in a little while," he said, laid his hand on his heart, and quietly went out, closing the massive door behind him.

He went across to the kitchen wing and demanded food and drink for a starving man, a thirsty man leg-cramped from crouching in a damned boat all night. He was

not shy, and was used to the authority of his calling. It had been a long journey overland from the city, and then poling through the marshes, with Broad

Isle the only hospitable place to stop among the endless channels, and the sun beating down all day, and then the long dreamlike discomfort of the night. He made much of his hunger and travail to amuse his hosts and to divert them, too,

from asking questions about how the Husbandman did and would do. He did not want

to tell them 'more than the man's wife knew.

But they, discreet or knowing or respectful, asked no direct questions of him. Though their concern for Farre was plain, they asked only, by various indirections, if he was sure to live, and seemed satisfied by that assurance.

In

some faces Hamid thought he saw a glimpse of something beyond satisfaction: a brooding acceptance in one; an almost conniving intelligence in another. One young fellow blurted out, "Then will he be--" and shut his mouth, under the joined stares of five or six older people. They were a trapmouthed lot, the Sandry Islanders. All that were not actively young looked old: seamed, weather beaten, brown skin wrinkled and silvery, hands gnarled, hair thick, coarse, and

dry. Only their eyes were quick, observant. And some of them had eyes of an unusual color, like amber; Pask, his wife Dyadi, and several others, as well as

Farre himself. The first time Hamid had seen Farre, before the coma deepened, he

had been struck by the strong features and those light, clear eyes. They all spoke a strong dialect, but Hamid had grown up not far inland from the marshes,

and anyhow had an ear for dialects. By the end of his large and satisfying breakfast he was glottal-stopping with the best of them.

He returned to the great bedroom with a well-loaded tray. As he had expected, the Farmwife, dressed and shod, was sitting close beside the bed, her hand lying

lightly on her husband's hand. She looked up at Hamid politely but as an intruder: please be quiet, don't interrupt us, make him be well and go away. .

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. Hamid had no particular eye for beauty in women, perhaps having seen beauty

too often at too short a distance, where it dissolves; but he responded to a woman's health, to the firm sweet flesh, the quiver and vigor of full life.

And

she was fully alive. She was as tender and powerful as a red-deer doe, as unconsciously splendid. He wondered if there were fawns, and then saw the child

standing behind her chair. The room, its shutters closed, was all shadow with a

spatter and dappling of broken light across the islands of heavy furniture, the

footboard of the bed, the folds of the coverlet, the child's face and dark eyes.

"Hamiddem," the Farmwife said--despite her absorption in her husband she had caught his name, then, with the desperate keen hearing of the sickroom, where every word carries hope or doom--"I still cannot see him breathe."

"Lay your ear against his chest," he said, in a tone deliberately louder than her whisper. "You'll hear the heart beat, and feel the lungs expand. Though slowly, as I said. Dema, I brought this for you. Now you'll sit here, see, at this table. A little more light, a shutter open, so. It won't disturb him, not at all. Light is good. You are to sit here and eat breakfast. Along with your daughter, who must be hungry, too."

She introduced the child, Idi, a girl of five or six, who clapped her hand on her heart and whispered "Give-you-good-day-dema" all in one glottal-stopped word

before she shrank back behind her mother:

It is pleasant to be a physician and be obeyed, Hamid reflected, as the Farm-wife and her child, large and little images of each other in their shirts and full trousers and silken braided hair, sat at the table where he had put the

tray down and meekly ate the breakfast he had brought. He was charmed to see that between them they left not a crumb.

When Makali rose her face had lost the knotted look, and her dark eyes, though still large and still concerned, were tranquil. She has a peaceful heart, he thought. At the same moment his physician's eye caught the signs; she was pregnant, probably about three months along. She whispered to the child, who trotted away. She came back to the chair at the bedside, which he had already relinquished.

"I am going to examine and dress his wound," Hamid said. "Will you watch, dema, or come back?"

"Watch," she said.

"Good," he said. Taking off his coat, he asked her to have hot water sent in from the kitchen.

"We have it piped," she said, and went to a door in the farthest shadowy corner.

He had not expected such an amenity. Yet he knew that some of these island farms

were very ancient places of civilization, drawing for their comfort and provision on inexhaustible sun, wind, and tide, settled in a way of life as immemorial as that of their plow-lands and pastures, as full and secure. Not the

show-wealth of the city, but the deep richness of the land, was in the steaming pitcher she brought him, and in the woman who brought it.

"You don't need it boiling?" she asked, and he said, "This is what I want."

She was quick and steady, relieved to have a duty, to be of use. When he bared the great sword-wound across her husband's abdomen he glanced up at her to see how she took it. Compressed lips, a steady gaze.

"This," he said, his fingers above the long, dark, unhealed gash, "looks the worst; but this, here, is the worst. That is superficial, a mere slash as the sword withdrew. But here, it went in, and deep." He probed the wound. There was no shrinking or quiver in the man's body; he lay insensible. "The sword withdrew," Hamid went on, "as the swordsman died. Your husband killed him even as he struck. And took the sword from him. When his men came around him he was holding it in his left hand and his own sword in his right, though he could not rise from his knees. . . . Both those swords came here with us. . . . There, you see? That was a deep thrust. And a wide blade. That was nearly a deathblow. But not quite, not quite. Though to be sure, it took its toll." He looked up at her openly, hoping she would meet his eyes, hoping to receive from her the glance of acceptance, intelligence, recognition that he had seen in this face and that among Sandry's people. But her eyes were on the purple and livid wound, and her face was simply intent.

"Was it wise to move him, carry him so far?" she asked, not questioning his judgment, but in wonder.

"The Doctor said it would do him no harm," Hamid said. "And it has done none. The fever is gone, as it has been for nine days now." She nodded, for she had felt how cool Farre's skin was. "The inflammation of the wound is, if anything, less than it was two days ago. The pulse and breath are strong and steady. This was the place for him to be, dema."

"Yes," she said. "Thank you. Thank you, Hamiddem." Her clear eyes looked into his for a moment before returning to the wound, the motionless, muscular body, the silent face, the closed eyelids.

Surely, Hamid thought, surely if it were true she'd know it! She couldn't have married the man not knowing! But she says nothing. So it's not true, it's only a story. . . . But this thought, which gave him a tremendous relief for a moment, gave way to another: She knows and is hiding from the knowledge. Shutting the shadow into the locked room. Closing her ears in case the word is spoken.

He found he had taken a deep breath and was holding it. He wished the Farmwife were older, tougher, that she loved her farmer less. He wished he knew what the truth was, and that he need not be the one to speak it.

But on an utterly unexpected impulse, he spoke: "It is not death," he said, very low, almost pleading.

She merely nodded, watching. When he reached for a clean cloth, she had it ready to his hand.

As a physician, he asked her of her pregnancy. She was well, all was well. He ordered her to walk daily, to be two hours out of the sickroom in the open air.

He wished he might go with her, for he liked her and it would have been a pleasure to walk beside her, watching her go along tall and lithe and robust. But if she was to leave Farre's side for two hours, he was to replace her there:

that was simply understood. He obeyed her implicit orders as she obeyed his explicit ones.

His own freedom was considerable, for she spent most of the day in the sickroom, and there was no use his being there, too, little use his being there at all; in

fact: Farre needed nothing from him or her or anyone, aside from the little nourishment he took. Twice a day, with infinite patience, she contrived to feed

him ten or a dozen sips of Dr. Saker's rich brew of meat and herbs and medicines, which Hamid concocted and strained daily in the kitchen with the cooks' interested aid. Aside from those two half hours, and once a day the bed-jar for a few drops of urine, there was nothing to be done. No chafing or sores developed on Farre's skin. He lay unmoving, showing no discomfort. His eyes never opened. Once or twice, she said, in the night, he had moved a little, shuddered. Hamid had not seen him make any movement for days.

Surely, if there was any truth in the old book Dr. Saker had shown him and in Pask's unwilling and enigmatic hints of confirmation, Makali would know? But she

said never a word, and it was too late now for him to ask. He had lost his chance. And if he could not speak to her, he would not go behind her back, asking the others if there was any truth in this tale.

Of course there isn't, he told his conscience. A myth, a rumor, a folktale of the 'Old Islanders'. . . and the word of an ignorant man, a saddler. . . . Superstition! What do I see when I look at my patient? A deep coma. A deep, restorative coma. Unusual, yes, but not abnormal, not uncanny. Perhaps such a coma, a very long vegetative period of recovery, common to these islanders, an inbred people, would be the origin of the myth, much exaggerated, made fanciful.

. . .

They were a healthy lot, and though he offered his services he had little to do

once he had reset a boy's badly splinted arm and scraped out an old fellow's leg

abscesses. Sometimes little Idi tagged after him. Clearly she adored her father

and missed his company. She never asked, "Will he get well," but Hamid had seen

her crouched at the bedside, quite still, her cheek against Farre's unresponding

hand. Touched by the child's dignity, Hamid asked her what games she and her father had played. She thought a long time before she said, "He would tell me what he was doing and sometimes I could help." Evidently she had simply followed

Farre in his daily round of farmwork and management. Hamid provided only an unsatisfactory, frivolous substitute. She would listen to his tales of the court

and city for a while, not very interested, and soon would run off to her own small, serious duties. Hamid grew restive under the burden of being useless.

He found walking soothed him, and went almost daily on a favorite circuit: down

to the quay and along the dunes to the southeast end of the island, from which he first saw the open sea, free at last of the whispering green levels of the reedbeds. Then up the steepest slope on Sandry, a low hill of worn granite and sparse earth, for the view of sea and tidal dams, island fields and green marshes from its summit, where a cluster of windmills caught the sea wind with slender vanes. Then down the slope past the trees, the Old Grove, to the farmhouse. There were a couple of dozen houses in sight from Sandry Hill, but 'the farmhouse' was the only one so called, as its owner was called the Husbandman, or Farmer Sandry, or simply Sandry if he was away from the island. And nothing would keep an Islander away from his island but his duty to the crown. Rooted folk, Hamid thought wryly, standing in the lane near the Old Grove

to look at the trees.

Elsewhere on the island, indeed on all the islands, there were no trees to speak

of. Scrub willows down along the streams, a few orchards of wind-dwarfed, straggling apples. But here in the Grove were great trees, some with mighty trunks, surely hundreds of years old, and none of them less than eight or ten times a man's height. They did not crowd together but grew widely spaced, each spreading its limbs and crown broadly. In the spacious aisles under them grew a

few shrubs and ferns and a thin, soft, pleasant grass. Their shade was beautiful

on these hot summer days when the sun glared off the sea and the channels and the sea wind scarcely stirred the fiery air. But Hamid did not go under the trees. He stood in the lane, looking at that shade under the heavy foliage.

Not far from the lane he could see in the grove a sunny gap where an old tree had come down, perishing in a winter gale maybe a century ago, for nothing was left of the fallen trunk but a grassy hummock a few yards long. No sapling had sprung up or been planted to replace the old tree; only a wild rose, rejoicing in the light, flowered thornily over the ruin of its stump:

Hamid walked on, gazing ahead at the house he now knew so well, the massive slate roofs, the shuttered win-dow of the room where Makali was sitting beside her husband, waiting for him to wake.

"Makali, Makali," he said under his breath, grieving for her, angry with her, angry with himself, sorry for himself, listening to the sound of her name.

The room was dark to his still sun-bedazzled eyes, but he went to his patient with a certain decisiveness, almost abruptness, and turned back the sheet. He palpated, auscultated, took the pulse. "His breathing has been harsh," Makali murmured.

"He's dehydrated. Needs water."

She rose to fetch the little silver bowl and spoon she used to feed him his soup and water, but Hamid shook his head. The picture in Dr. Saker's ancient book was vivid in his mind, a woodcut, showing exactly what must be done--what must be done, that is, if one believed this myth, which he did not, nor did Makali, or she would surely have said something by now! And yet, there was nothing else to be done. Farre's face was sunken, his hair came loose at a touch. He was dying, very slowly, of thirst.

"The bed must be tipped; so that his head is high, his feet low," Hamid said authoritatively. "The easiest way will be to take off the footboard. Tebra will give me a hand." She went out and returned with the yardman, Tebra, and with him Hamid briskly set about the business. They got the bed fixed at such a slant that he had to put a webbing strap round Farre's chest to keep him from sliding quite down. He asked Makali for a waterproof sheet or cape. Then, fetching a deep copper basin from the kitchen, he filled it with cold water. He spread the sheet of oilskin she had brought under Farre's legs and feet, and propped the basin in an overturned footstool so that it held steady as he laid Farre's feet in the water.

"It must be kept full enough that his soles touch the water," he said to Makali.

"It will keep him cool," she said, asking, uncertain. Hamid did not answer. Her troubled, frightened look enraged him. He left the room without saying more.

When he returned in the evening she said, "His breathing is much easier."

No doubt, Hamid thought, auscultating, now that he breathes once a minute.

"Hamiddem," she said, "there is . . . something I noticed "

"Yes:"

She heard his ironic, hostile tone, as he did. Both winced. But she was started, had begun to speak, could only go on.

"His . . ." She started again. "It seemed . . ." She drew the sheet down farther, exposing Farre's genitals.

The penis lay almost indistinguishable from the testicles and the brown, grained skin of the inner groin, as if it had sunk into them, as if all were returning to an indistinguishable unity, a featureless solidity.

"Yes," Hamid said, expressionless, shocked in spite of himself. "The . . . the process is following . . . what is said to be its course."

She looked at him across her husband's body. "But-- Can't you--?"

He stood silent a while. "It seems that-- My information is that in these cases--a very grave shock to the system, to the body,"--he paused, trying to find words--"such as an injury or a great loss, a grief--but in this case, an injury, an almost fatal wound-- A wound that almost certainly would have been fatal, had not it inaugurated the . . . the process in question, the inherited capacity . . . propensity . . ."

She stood still, still gazing straight at him, so that all the big words shrank to nothing in his mouth. He stooped and with his deft, professional gentleness opened Farre's closed eyelid. "Look!" he said. She too stooped to look, to see the blind eye exposed, without pupil, iris, or white, a polished, featureless, brown bead.

When her indrawn breath was repeated and again repeated in a dragging sob, Hamid burst out at last, "But you knew, surely! You knew when you married him."

"Knew," said her dreadful indrawn voice.

The hair stood up on Hamid's arms and scalp. He could not look at her. He lowered the eyelid, thin and stiff as a dry leaf.

She turned away and walked slowly across the long room into the shadows.

"They laugh about it," said the deep, dry voice he had never heard, out of the shadows. "On the land, in the city, people laugh about it, don't they. They talk about the wooden men, the blockheads, the Old Islanders. They don't laugh about it here. When he married me--" She turned to face Hamid, stepping into the shaft of warm twilight from the one unshuttered window so that her clothing glimmered white. "When Farre of Sandry, Farre Older courted me and married me, on the Broad Isle where I lived, the people there said don't do it to me, and the people here said don't do it to him. Marry your own kind, marry in your own kind. But what did we care for that? He didn't care and I didn't care. I didn't believe! I wouldn't believe! But I came here-- Those trees, the Grove, the older trees--you've been there, you've seen them. Do you know they have names?" She stopped, and the dragging, gasping, indrawn sob began again. She took hold of a chair back and stood racking it back and forth: "He took me there. 'That is my grandfather,'" she said in a hoarse, jeering gasp. "'That's Alta, my mother's grandmother. Dorandem has stood four hundred years.'"

Her voice failed.

"We don't laugh about it," Hamid said. "It is a tale--something that might be true--a mystery. Who they are, the . . . the olders, what makes them change . . . how it happens. . . . Dr. Saker sent me here not only to be of use but to learn. To verify . . . the process."

"The process," Makali said.

She came back to the bedside, facing him across it, across the stiff body, the

log in the bed.

"What am I carrying here?" she asked, soft and hoarse, her hands on her belly.

"A child," Hamid said, without hesitating and clearly.

"What kind of child?"

"Does it matter?"

She said nothing.

"His child, your child, as your daughter is. Do you know what kind of child
Idi
is?"

After a while Makali said softly, "Like me. She does not have the amber eyes."

"Would you care less for her if she did?"

"No," she said.

She stood silent. She looked down at her husband, then toward the windows,
then
straight at Harold.

"You came to learn," she said.

"Yes. And to give what help I can give."

She nodded. "Thank you," she said.

He laid his hand a moment on his heart.

She sat down in her usual place beside the bed with a deep, very quiet breath,
too quiet to be a sigh.

Hamid opened his mouth. "He's blind, deaf, without feeling. He doesn't know if
you're there or not there. He's a log, a block, you need not keep this vigil!"
All these words said themselves aloud in his mind, but he did not speak one of
them. He closed his mouth and stood silent.

"How long?" she asked in her usual soft voice.

"I don't know. That change . . . came quickly. Maybe not long now."

She nodded. She laid her hand on her husband's hand, her light warm touch on
the
hard bones under hard skin, the long, strong, motionless fingers. "Once," she
said, "he showed me the stump of one of the olders, one that fell down a long
time ago."

Hamid nodded, thinking of the sunny clearing in the grove, the wild rose.

"It had broken right across in a great storm, the trunk had been rotten. It
was
old, ancient, they weren't sure even who . . . the name . . . hundreds of
years
old. The roots were still in the ground but the trunk was rotten. So it broke
right across in the gale. But the stump was still there in the ground. And you

could see. He showed me." After a pause she said, "You could see the bones. The leg bones. In the trunk of the tree. Like pieces of ivory. Inside it. Broken off with it." After another silence, she said, "So they do die. Finally."

Hamid nodded.

Silence again. Though he listened and watched almost automatically, Hamid did not see Farre's chest rise or fall.

"You may go whenever you like, Hamiddem," she said gently. "I'm all right now. Thank you."

He went to his room. On the table, under the lamp when he lighted it, lay some leaves. He had picked them up from the border of the lane that went by the grove, the grove of the older trees. A few dry leaves, a twig What their blossom was, their fruit, he did not know. It was summer, between the flower and the seed. And he dared not take a branch, a twig, a leaf from the living tree.

When he joined the people of the farm for supper, old Pask was there.

"Doctor-dem," the saddler said in his rumbling bass, "is he turning?"

"Yes," Hamid said.

"So you're giving him water?"

"Yes."

"You must give him water, dema," the old man said, relentless. "She doesn't know. She's not his kind. She doesn't know his needs."

"But she bears his seed," said Hamid, grinning suddenly, fiercely, at the old man.

Pask did not smile or make any sign, his stiff face impassive. He said, "Yes. The girl's not, but the other may be older." And he turned away.

Next morning after he had sent Makali out for her walk, Hamid studied Farre's feet. They were extended fully into the water, as if he had stretched downward to it, and the skin looked softer. The long brown toes stretched apart a little.

And his hands, still motionless, seemed longer, the fingers knotted as with arthritis yet powerful, lying spread on the coverlet at his sides.

Makali came back ruddy and sweaty from her walk in the summer morning. Her vitality, her vulnerability were infinitely moving and pathetic to Hamid after his long contemplation of a slow, inexorable toughening, hardening, withdrawal.

He said, "Makali-dem, there is no need for you to be here all day. There is nothing to do for him but keep the water-basin full."

"So it means nothing to him that ! sit by him," she said, half questioning half stating.

"I think it does not. Not any more."

She nodded.

Her gallantry touched him. He longed to help her. "Dema, did he, did anyone ever speak to you about--if this should happen-- There may be ways we can ease the change, things that are traditionally done-- I don't know them. Are there people here whom I might ask--Pask and Dyadi--?"

"Oh, they'll know what to do when the time comes," she said, with an edge in her voice. "They'll see to it that it's done right. The right way, the old way. You don't have to worry about that. The doctor doesn't have to bury his patient, after all. The grave diggers do that."

"He is not dead."

"No. Only blind and deaf and dumb and doesn't know if I'm in the room or a hundred miles away." She looked up at Hamid, a gaze which for some reason embarrassed him. "If I stuck a knife in his hand would he feel it?" she asked.

He chose to take the question as one of curiosity, desire to know. "The response to any stimulus has grown steadily less," he said, "and in the last few days it has disappeared. That is, response to any stimulus I've offered." He took up Farre's wrist and pinched it as hard as he could, though the skin was so tough now and the flesh so dry that he had difficulty doing so.

She watched. "He was ticklish," she said. Hamid shook his head. He touched the sole of the long brown foot that rested in the basin of water; there was no withdrawal, no response at all.

"So he feels nothing. Nothing hurts him," she said.

"I think not."

"Lucky him."

Embarrassed again, Hamid bent down to study the wound. He had left off the bandages, for the slash had closed, leaving a clean seam, and the deep gash had developed a tough lip all round it, a barky ring that was well on the way to sealing it shut.

"I could carve my name on him," Makali said, leaning close to Hamid, and then she bent down over the inert body, kissing and stroking and holding it; her tears running down.

When she had wept a while, Hamid went to call the women of the household, and they came gathering round her full of solace and took her off to another room.

Left alone, Hamid drew the sheet back up over Farre's chest; he felt a satisfaction in her having wept at last, having broken down. Tears were the natural reaction, and the necessary one. A woman clears her mind by weeping, a woman had told him once.

He flicked his thumbnail hard against Farre's shoulder. It was like flicking the

headboard, the night table--his nail stung for a moment. He felt a surge of anger against his patient, no patient, no man at all, not any more.

Was his own mind clear? Why was he angry with Farre? Could the man help being what he was, or what he was becoming?

Hamid went out of the house and walked his circuit, went to his own room to read. Late in the afternoon he went to the sickroom. No one was there with Farre. He pulled out the chair she had sat in so many days and nights and sat down. The shadowy silence of the room soothed his mind. A healing was occurring

here: a strange healing, a mystery, frightening, but real. Farre had traveled from mortal injury and pain to this quietness; had turned from death to this different, this other life, this older life. Was there any wrong in that? Only that he wronged her in leaving her behind, and he must have done that, and more cruelly, if he had died.

Or was the cruelty in his not dying?

Hamid was still there pondering, half asleep in the twilight serenity of the room,

when Makali came in quietly and lighted a dim lamp. She wore a loose, light shirt that showed the movement of her full breasts, and her gauze trousers were

gathered at the ankle above her bare feet; it was a hot night, sultry, the air stagnant on the salt marshes and the sandy fields of the island. She came around

the bedstead. Hamid started to get up.

"No, no, stay. I'm sorry, Hamid-dem. Forgive me. Don't get up. I only wanted to apologize for behaving like a child."

"Grief must find its way out," he said.

"I hate to cry. Tears empty me. And pregnancy makes one cry over nothing."

"This is a grief worth crying for, dema."

"Oh, yes," she said. "If we had loved each other. Then I might have cried that basin full." She spoke with a hard lightness. "But that was over years ago. He went off to the war to get away from me. This child I carry, it isn't his. He was always cold, always slow. Always what he is now." She looked down at the figure in the bed with a quick, strange, challenging glance.

"They were right," she said, "half-alive shouldn't marry the living. If your wife was a stick, was a stump, a lump of wood, wouldn't you seek some friend of flesh and blood? Wouldn't you seek the love of your own kind?"

As she spoke she came nearer to Hamid, very near, stooping over him. Her closeness, the movement of her clothing, the warmth and smell of her body, filled his world suddenly and entirely, and when she laid her hands on his shoulders he reached up to her, sinking upward into her, pulling her down onto him to drink her body with his mouth, to impale her heavy softness on the aching

point of his desire, so lost in her that she had pulled away from him before he

knew it. She was turning from him, turning to the bed, where with a long,

creaking groan the stiff body trembled and shook, trying to bend, to rise, and the round blank balls of the eyes stared out under lifted eyelids.

"There!" Makali cried, breaking free of Hamid's hold, standing triumphant.
"Farre!"

The stiff half-lifted arms, the outspread fingers trembled like branches in the wind. No more than that. Again the deep, cracking, creaking groan from within the rigid body. She huddled up against it on the tilted bed, stroking the face and kissing the unblinking eyes, the lips, the breast, the scarred belly, the lump between the joined, grown-together legs. "Go back now," she murmured, "go back to sleep. Go back, my dear, my own, my love, go back now, now I know, now I know . . ."

Hamid broke from his paralysis and left the room, the house, striding blindly out into the luminous midsummer night. He was very angry with her, for using him; presently with himself, for being usable. His outrage began to die away as he walked. Stopping, seeing where he was, he gave a short, rueful, startled laugh. He had gone astray off the lane, following a path that led right into the Old Grove, a path he had never taken before. All around him, near and far, the huge trunks of the trees were almost invisible under the massive darkness of their crowns. Here and there the moonlight struck through the foliage, making the edges of the leaves silver, pooling like quicksilver in the grass. It was cool under the older trees, windless, perfectly silent.

Harold shivered: "He'll be with you soon," he said to the thick-bodied, huge-armed, deep-rooted, dark presences. "Pask and the others know what to do. He'll be here soon. And she'll come here with the baby, summer afternoons, and sit in his shade. Maybe she'll be buried here. At his roots. But I am not staying here." He was walking as he spoke, back toward the farmhouse and the quay and the channels through the reeds and the roads that led inland, north, away. "If you don't mind, I'm on my way, right away. . . ."

The olders stood unmoved as he hurried out from under them and strode down the lane, a dwindling figure, too slight, too quick to be noticed.