



(Nothing But) Flowers

by John G. McDaid

For Cory and Alice

"By and by, nor spare a sigh

Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie."

-Gerald Manley Hopkins

Spring and Fall, to a Young Child

Every afternoon the rains, as they had for generations, swept in from the saltlands to the west and drove the scavengers into the shelter of the ruins ringing the lagoon. The sky grayed, and wind, pungent with ozone and canebrake, flung stinging flights of droplets into the dank concrete holes.

The Fox Man ran from squat to squat, warning. "Big storm coming." He wore an outfit of scraggy orange fur, scabrous and holed, and as he pranced past, fat raindrops spattered his costume to a blotchy patchwork. Women set out plastic jugs, gathered utensils, and shoveled coals from cooking fires into logs to hustle indoors. Naked children danced in the puddles.

Donal paid no mind to either the storm or the Fox Man, but he always had to smile at that fancy outfit, in a World of loincloths and grass skirts. To Donal, the costume looked more like a dog, though for effect the Fox Man -- or someone who owed him a favor, he was no Hunter -- had hung a poorly preserved fox head from a leather necklace. All Donal wore was a deerskin belt in which was tucked a roughly hammered machete. His

dozen braves followed behind like ducklings, spread out in a widening wake; the first rank had knives, as befitting his sidemen, but Donal alone carried a blade longer than his hand.

Donal and his pack had come in on the south side of the canal, and trooped past three ruins before he split off to his squat in the center. The two-story brick building was still standing -- unlike some of the neighboring metal structures which had long ago rusted and collapsed inward -- and while parts of the heavy stone roof and windows were gone, generations had fashioned replacements with tree trunks and grasses to maintain a weatherproof refuge. The second floor, with its huge rotted gathering place, was unstable; they never used it. But there was space for dozens of families downstairs, in the low oval room ringed with twelve pillars past which hung tattered remnants of pictures and signs in the script of the World builders.

The squat's position, its construction, and these ancient artifacts on the walls, gave it pride of place among folk at the lagoon. The squatters defended it ferociously, and Donal was its leading fighter.

He paused in the portico, blinking water out of his eyes, watching stragglers run for cover and canoes out on the lagoon pulling for shore. He could pick out the foreign visitors -- outsiders -- wandering aimlessly, sight-seers among the ruins even in this far corner of the World. Just a handful; nowhere near the number over at the Castle.

Donal wiped rain off his body, threaded effortlessly through the families crouched on pallets of palm leaves and grasses around the big room. A dim shaft of green stormlight picked out the faces watching from deep in the recesses, and as he walked by, he saw flickering shadows across their troubled eyes.

The rain was nothing new; storms rolled through predictably every afternoon, tiny mirrors of the much larger shift in the seasons. Each wheel of the year the rains started a little earlier; the bogs drained more slowly. The cultivated lands ran riot with grasses and weeds. The horses had nowhere to run. New trackways had to be built across the fens to the Castle each spring.

Donal found his way to the tiny pallet he shared with his five-year-old brother, a tiny square against the wall opposite the doorway, beneath one of the frayed signs of the Builders. He was used to the hunting, but today his gang had traveled all the way down by the World Tree, clearing paths and setting snares, and his shoulders ached from the daylong exertion. He missed his brother, left to be watched over by the other families in the squat when the work was dangerous. Donal trusted they would never leave him alone. Donal laid his machete at the foot of the mat and retrieved the small leather bag that held his most prized possessions, tied it again to his belt.

Ewen was waiting for him. He somehow managed to stay clean among the general filth in the squat. Ewen leaned against the wall, knees pulled up to his chest, looking exactly the way Donal remembered him. Donal was always struck by his skin, unnaturally white like their mother's had been.

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"Ergot," chirped Ewan, pointing. In front of him sat a lap-top memory-box with fragrant tufts of greenery poking from its partitioned slots. It was a rough-hewn affair, knocked together from scraps of wood by the acolytes of Emic. The wise women came by with fresh bits of plants and stories to jog memories, mostly of the elderly who tended the gardens and foraged for nuts and berries. Donal thought they must like his brother to give him one of the boxes; it certainly couldn't be for him. He didn't care about memory. Not remembering things, frankly, made it easier to do what was necessary.

Ewan, on the other hand, was young. The forgetting had not fully gripped him, and the whole world, nameable and retrievable, whirled incessantly at the tips of his fingers and tongue. Donal could almost remember what it was like to remember. Sometimes Ewan helped him, prompting, a whisper in his ear.

"Amanita muscaria!" cheeped Ewan.

Most children without mothers did nowhere near this well. Whatever the forgetting was, those fed at their mother's breast managed to fight it off for a year or two. Ewen was lucky for someone who had only been nursed occasionally by kind women in the squat, with Donal his sole caretaker since their mother died giving birth.

At least they had been able to eat her. When the wise women came to cut her up, while there was sadness at her passing with child, they found nothing bad.

His father, unfortunately, was a different story. He had been killed by a wolf on a hunting party when Donal was Ewen's age. When the women opened him, he was full of tumors. It was a troubling sadness; he had shown no sign, had been vigorous and healthy, but then he was dead, Ewen was now the responsible one, and they could not even share his father's flesh, leaving it instead for the wolves. May they be poisoned and die, Donal thought.

"Banisteria Caapi," Ewen pointed in the box. Donal smiled at him, nodded. "Banisteria Caapi," he repeated, scrunching up leaves so they could both take a nap.

He had slept under the same faded signs ("Letters," Ewen constantly reminded him) -- arrow head-forked branch-standing zigzag -- since he was a child. His parents parents had staked out a the space not long after the dawn of the World, and it was the only home he had ever known. He drifted to sleep with the reassuring smells of sweat and wood smoke, lulled by the spatter and drip of rain through the ceiling.

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When he awoke it was dark. He rolled over, grabbed his machete, and headed out back to pee. The reek of fermenting night soil was like a soft wet fist in his nose. A row of trenches marched off across the field behind the squat, each turned over to start a new one as they filled. Donal thought it was past time.

Back in the main room, the cooks had been working in their huge pot, one left over from the World Builders, which tonight held a bubbling stew of fish and late summer vegetables. Then it was time for everyone to come out of their squats and join hands for the evening chant, while six boats with priestesses of Emic circled the lagoon carrying their fires. Their acolytes, in dark robes and veils, set up on the paths, ladling drinks from black cauldrons. Donal knocked his back quickly; the taste was bitter, and almost immediately started up a vague itching sensation behind his eyes; within a few minutes, everything seemed to get wider, as if the world was being squashed. It was not an unpleasant sensation, and he walked with Ewen down to the lagoon, finding the hands of people next to him almost automatically.

Out of the earliest mist of childhood, one of the few things Donal could remember was this service, repeated, every night. Even so, he would still find himself forgetting the words if he didn't concentrate, as the sound of the big drums began from the squat next door.

"One World," came the chant. "One World for all."

The priestesses were spinning flaming balls on slings, and lofting them high to fall, hissing, into the lagoon.

"One moon. One sun. One World to hold the fallen sparks."

Donal joined in as he watched the flaming arcs over the lagoon with languid fascination. The chanting, well, that was just words. He believed far more in his machete and the men who followed him than in anything the priestesses said. The Castle was no more and no less than the rest of the World. Older, perhaps, but it held no

interest for him.

Occasionally, the high priestess -- Emic herself -- would show up at the ceremony, wearing her sleek black costume and grotesque mask, but tonight was not one of those times, and, a bit disappointed, the group slowly dispersed.

When he got back to his squat, a woman and child were lying on his pallet. The woman looked middle-aged -- but so, of course, did everyone, once they were older than about Donal's sixteen years.

"Out," he said. "My space." His neighbors, filtering in, were dimly visible in the torchlight from the entrance. A murmuring began, and groups jiggled and poked each other, drifting over to watch.

"My girl and I need a place to sleep. We were in the Volcano squat, but your gang has taken over. They're throwing out older women."

Donal knew this. A group of his junior squad members lived in the Volcano ruin, and they had been complaining about some of the dispossessed who had not been obliging company.

"Not my problem. This is my space."

"My daughter and I need a place to sleep. We thought you might be willing to share."

"No. Get out."

"I knew your mother. She and I used to dig for shining wire together as children. I used to take care of you sometimes. Don't you remember?"

"No."

"Please. We could cook for you. You have two whole pallets," begged the woman. "What do you need all that space for?"

"For my brother, Ewen."

She looked at him. Her child, a smudged-faced girl of four or five, was half-huddled behind her, wide-eyed, looking at where Donal had his hand on Ewen's head, then back to his face.

The woman saw she was gaining no ground, changed tactics. "You could take me as a mate," she said, shifting the front of her grass skirt.

Ewen turned away with an "Eew."

Donal grabbed the woman's arm, pulled her to her feet. The little girl screamed.

She slapped his face, a stinging blow that made his left eye water. He felt a trickle of blood in his eyebrow; he hadn't seen she was wearing a ring. She curled to deliver a kick to his stones, but he pushed her back, and she fell, off balance, against the wall.

Out came the machete.

He raised the blade, started to swing, then realized she was hunching over, protecting her daughter. At the last instant, he lunged forward, sending not the blade but his fist on the matted fiber handle into the woman's face.

Blood ran from her nose and she whimpered softly. Gathered up her girl, limped off his mat.

"You are a crazy evil fuck," she said. "And you..." she turned on the squatters who ringed them, watching. "You should all be ashamed. Using someone like this. You are animals. This land is not fit for humans."

She took her daughter by the hand and left.

"Hard fucking core," someone muttered. Neighbors patted him on the back, but he did not feel reassured.

"Come on, Ewen," he said. "Let's get some sleep."

He saw that the Fox Man had slipped in and was watching from the shadows. By tomorrow, this would be all over the World.

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When Ewen had fallen asleep, Donal rolled over and coupled with the woman on the next pallet, quickly and efficiently. She seemed to enjoy it, and her husband was used to this and seemed not to mind. Although, Donal guessed, he hardly could have said anything if he did.

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The next day, Donal let his junior braves go off to check the traps. He had enough of a reputation, and in the World, reputation was all that mattered. He made sure to be there with them for the hard work of clearing brush, but he was a good boss who let them take credit for kills and bring meat back to their squats. Instead, he wandered over the trackway to watch the action at the front gate. It was partly idle mooning over the fine blades on display, and partly hope that something violent and entertaining might happen.

It was a typical morning at the Castle. A line of outsiders, families mostly, milled in the damp, steamy sunshine waiting to get into the grounds. They had to pass through gates where Castle guards were inspecting for weapons, poking through bags and under skirts of the farmers and foreigners, and taking their trinkets and goods in trade for admission. Even in decay, their Castle was the tallest building in a week's walk. Outsiders were willing to offer perfectly good food and trinkets for a visit, even though there was no guarantee they would get to see Emic.

The sun was only up about four fingers, and already the air was humid and stifling. In addition to the ever-present mosquitoes, biting black flies hovered, lured perhaps by the crusting cut on Donal's face. These flies were new. Every year, it seemed, there were more flying pests, bigger and nastier. Though, he thought, if he were a bug, he might see things differently. The insane plant growth made it a paradise for insects. He wished he had ten arms and ten machetes.

Donal elbowed into the line at the gate, silencing outsider muttering with a hand on his weapon, and spend the wait watching the Castle gang strip and harass anyone who put up a fuss. Once again he envied those lucky enough to be born in this part of the World: they made sure everyone on the line had wicked blades. There was no local smith who matched the fine metalwork of the village to the northeast who ripped and sawed apart the fallen hulks of their strange, curving buildings and melted them down. Donal had made the trip to take delivery of his machete, and had seen the grimy knife makers, with their leather aprons and huge muscular arms amid the perpetual smell of hard charcoal smoke.

Arming everyone with such weapons cost a lot in trade, but when there was trouble at the gate, it was over quickly. And on those nights, they ate like kings.

"Can we go see Emic?" Ewen interrupted his thoughts.

"Ewen, it's really hard to..."

"Pleeeease?"

"Okay. We can try."

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The Castle had clearly once been a serene dream of perfection, dark stone blocks with pale bricks inset in attractive, rhythmic patterns; all meticulously worked, craftsmanship of the highest order. There must have been pinnacles and banners, fences and ironwork, a riot of decoration, and it had surely been home to a very important royal family. But all that was not stone had been eaten away by plants and the perpetual drip of water. The Castle they approached now, amid outsiders chittering in strange accents and pointing at everything, was a tumbled ruin, slumped in the soil and grasses of many seasons. Vines and creepers covered much of the visible structure, some native, some planted by the priestesses.

"YagÃ©," Ewen pointed.

They seemed to be in luck. A group was gathering beneath the surviving balcony fronting the moat. An acolyte dressed in a tattered green costume was doing a familiar call-and-response with the crowd, something Donal had no use for, but Ewen seemed to find comforting. She was clearly meant to be some kind of bug, the costume stuffed and rounded so that only her hands and feet stuck out.

The green bug worked the crowd into a soft frenzy, then left them to wait, a sea of sweaty faces with anxious eyes, eager for a once-in-a-lifetime glimpse of the priestess.

Donal had seen her, many times, so he was prepared, but the outsiders in the crowd gasped and recoiled. Emic wore an outfit of black fabric -- actual, made-by-the-World-builders fabric, patched and stitched meticulously. It was smooth and slick and glinted when she moved, dancing and leaping around the balcony.

And then, there was the mask.

It covered her whole head and was easily twice as big, with an enormous painted face, huge eyes, and a gaping, smiling mouth. It had always seemed to Donal the face of a small mammal; not a fox, but a skunk, perhaps, or a possum. There were seams on the side of the head where something -- horns, maybe? -- had been attached. How long ago? He marveled at how the priestesses had managed to keep this one icon in pristine condition. He could understand why the pilgrims felt

the magic in it, even if he did not.

"Estamos refugiados en una zona de apagon." The priestess, in a high, squeaky voice, rained down nonsense from the balcony. *"Nuestras casas desarraigados, arrastrando raÃ—ces profundas de concreta, fibrosas con tubos y conectores, giran y saltan a las fluctuaciones del campo de gravitacion. Â La gente tienen miedo."* She droned on like that, and Donal found himself scanning the crowd, idly yet thoroughly, to see if anyone unsavory might have snuck through the front gate.

There had been a small group, armed with pieces of metal no larger than their fingernails but sharpened enough to cut, and they had slipped in and managed to kill a handful of guests and Castle workers before they were hacked to bits. The memory was bitterly fresh. But no one in the group of soft, milling sheep around Donal seemed like a threat. Eventually, the priestess stopped and the crowd drifted off.

"Happy?" Donal asked Ewen, who just smiled.

Donal took the long way home, following the north bank of the canal, and then around past the sunken Dome, over to the Volcano lodge to check on his wild boys. Even though it was only mid-morning, there was a group huddled off in the rear of the squat, beneath the decayed altar under the faded image of a volcano. They had clearly been into the fermented shine already, and there was a good deal of laughter, metal clanging, and shouts of "Glory be to steel!" He could hear cats, mating loudly off in the dank recess of the building. Conscious of Ewen next to him, Donal paused at the front door to the hall, listening to the revelers, invisible past mounds of collapsed ceiling and the squatters' rough lean-tos. He had just decided to skip it and head home when suddenly, there was a figure beside him. It was Fox.

"Donal. You are wanted."

"Who?"

"The Keoh wants to see you."

The squatters work -- the hunting, cooking, farming -- was purely ad hoc, but there was a loose network of bosses, rolling up to the Keoh who decided all the practical things the priestesses did not. Fox answered to him, and so, ultimately, did Donal.

"Hunh," said Donal. "Of course, I serve the Keoh. But I don't know where to go."

Fox slid a rough fiber sack from inside his costume. "On your head," he gestured. "I'll take you."

"What about Ewen?" said Donal.

"Oh," smiled the Fox, "The Keoh isn't worried about him."

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Donal's childhood friend, Wally, who had gone off to become a monk, had often tried to explain the alphabet to him. Even as a kid, Wally had seemed like a grownup; the forgetting hit him as it did everyone, but he seemed, if not immune, at least less susceptible. His recall astonished Donal. He couldn't actually remember the alphabet -- such a thing was impossible -- but he could recite the letters off a carving. "moon-fork-sun," Wally had tried to explain to him, pointing to a letter at a time. "Keoh."

Their paths had slowly diverged after his father's death, when Donal had to begin hunting. Between that and caring for Ewen, he hadn't had time for childish things like alphabets. But at least he could recognize the letters for Keoh, and he saw them now over a doorway as the Fox Man removed his hood to reveal a dripping stone tunnel. The walls were florid with white scale and rising spikes of yellow and black mold; the only illumination ragged holes punched in the ceiling. It smelled like the basements of squats around the lagoon, rank and fungal.

Donal looked down at Ewen. He was quiet but seemed unafraid.

Two guards stood before a doorway holding swords. Not the swords of the Castle guards, these were antiques, long, curved blades forged with the skill and craft of the makers of the World.

"Your weapon," said one of the guards. He surrendered it without question, and the Fox led him in.

Donal had only met the Keoh once before, in passing, during solstice prayer at the lagoon. He wasn't sure

what to expect from the big man's quarters, but he was not anticipating the wild jumble of mysterious junk. The walls were the poured stone of the builders, but jutting irregularly from the spalling surface was a grid of rotting greenish wire, as if the whole room had been, in the past, some sort of bizarre cage. The space was stuffed to bursting with furniture, life-size dolls with human faces, rusting hunks of metal whose function Donal could neither discern nor guess, boxes, made of gray plastic stamped with ancient letter forms, from which poked colored strands of shining wire. Racks along the wall were packed with a profusion of books that would have had Wally goggle-eyed, yet most were furred with black mold. In one corner, the smudged remains of what had been a tall white cylinder tapering to a narrow point at the top, on which the signs for cupâ€“snake-arrow head were still faintly visible in a faded red.

The Keoh sat in an dark leather chair big enough for two people. He was nearly bald, with a paunch and man-boobs, and had the hard face of a bully, his fixed smile a cheerless grimace. The Keoh wore pants; whether as an affectation for company or as part of his everyday dress, Donal could not tell, but they were of a finely-tanned leather, a few shades lighter than the chair. They could not, possibly, have been comfortable. Next to him was a low table at which sat his scribe -- a monk of Etek, as Donal could see, from his red cape. The Keoh was playing dice with the monk when they entered.

"Donal, sir," the Fox Man said. Donal nodded, he hoped deferentially.

"So this is our angry young man. My Fox here tells me you are one hardassed motherfucker," said the Keoh, watching Donal's face.

"I kill my enemies and eat their brains."

The Keoh raised an eyebrow. Donal saw the opportunity to use a saying that Wally had drilled into him.

"Some think the soul lives in the heart," he said. "But I know it lives up here," he said, pointing to his head.

The Keoh barked a laugh. "You're all right, my friend. Have a seat. Let's play." He shook the dice and waved to the guards at the door. "Food and drink." He looked at Donal and his eyes twinkled. "Just no... heh heh... you know." He raised his hand to his head, made a scooping gesture. Laughed. "Yet."

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They sat on the floor around the Keoh's table, dipping handfuls of a fragrant grilled bird-and-vegetable mixture onto plantain leaves. "We can save some time and pass both ways," said the Keoh, handing a plastic bowl of crayfish. The conversation was superficial and yet, thought Donal, somehow charged with meaning. The thread repeatedly slipped away from him, and he had to keep reminding Ewen to sit up and pay attention to the grownup talk, which drew stares from the scribe. The Keoh was venting about the killers who had snuck through the gates with their tiny knives, and the need for more guards, more people watching. His hate was palpable but puzzling to Donal.

"They must have known they would be killed," Donal said. "There were only a dozen, and thousands of us."

"True believers," said the Keoh. "Against soft outsiders and members of the priestess caste. If we had an army of those..." he drifted off.

"Believers, but in what?" On this, both Donal and Ewen were clueless.

"Henh. Many beliefs out there," said the Keoh.

"But Emic is the truth," said Donal hesitantly.

"You think so because you've never spent time outside," said the Keoh. "People clutch their ideas tight as you. In the saltlands around us, some people follow the old gods. Farther south, it gets even stranger."

"You have been there?"

"Yes," said the Keoh, wiping his mouth. "I was born there, where the ancients built a river between the oceans. You have no idea about the world outside, Donal, or what you have to protect here."

Ewen hissed a question in Donal's ear. "If I can ask," said Donal. "How is it that you... well ... are so healthy and have traveled so far?"

"Pure chance," said the Keoh. "Do you see this scar?" He pointed to his neck. "That was a tumor. Had it cut out. I was lucky. Never came back. You know how you can't predict the number when you roll dice? It's like that, Donal. People are born with different strengths. Some, like you, are born to be Hunters. The unlucky are born unable to fight off the tumors, and they die. Just by chance, I was born able to remember better than others. And you know what they say, my friend, in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king."

"But the tumors -- the forgetting â€“ aren't those caused by the tiny monsters left by the World builders, the little dark men put inside our father's-father's-father's bodies." The Keoh's monk laughed. The Keoh, without a word, picked up a stool and hurled it at him.

"There are no monsters. No little dark men," said the Keoh, still glaring at his monk. "As much as Emic tries to scare you. It is only nature and chance. Trust me, Donal. No horror could be worse than now and real."

Donal tried to keep what the Keoh was saying in his mind, but he couldn't. It slipped away like water evaporating after a thunderstorm, turning into wisps of mist, visible briefly, twisting in eddying air currents, then gone, back to the endless blue sky. He realized the Keoh was looking intently at him, gauging his target like a cat readying for a jump.

"I have a mission for you," said the Keoh, in a calm, measured tone.

"A mission?"

"Those men who attacked the Castle. We found they came from Kisk in the far saltlands on the shore of the Ocean. Their leader calls himself the Colonel, and the people believe that he shows them the true ruins of the World builders, and that our Castle, that everything we call the World, is false."

Donal was stunned. Kisk? Donal had known people who had traveled to Kisk as outsiders; a week's journey to the east, just another ruin in a ruined landscape. "But... why would they say that? Look at the age of the World. The materials. The... construction."

The Keoh held up his hand. "I know, I know. As I said, these are matters of final belief."

Donal pondered that briefly, shook off his questions, and focused on the task. "I have never been that far, but I thought there were long fingers of Ocean between us and Kisk."

"We have swift boats, ready to take you within a half day's walk. Then, of course, you are on your own."

"And what am I to do when I meet the Colonel?"

"Donal," smiled the Keoh. "I fully expect you to eat his brain."

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Ewen thought it would be a good idea to talk things over with Wally before leaving the next morning, and Donal agreed, so after the Fox Man hooded him and guided him through tunnels and brush (doubling back to disorient him, Donal noted) he was released at the edge of the vegetable patch behind his squat.

The Fox man handed back his machete, shook his enormous, furred head, and for the first time Donal could recall, sounded almost human. "Look at this fucking shit we're in, man." He seemed to be about to shake Donal's hand or hug him. But he just muttered, "Good luck" and faded off into the twilight.

"You have any idea where they had us?" He asked Ewen, who just shrugged. "Never mind. Let's go see Wally," and they trudged off through the pumpkins. This late in the season, they were the size of pigs, giant orange mounds dotting the garden, with now-withered creepers shooting off in manic writhing arcs.

Wally lived in the Dome on the far side of the lagoon with the other monks of Etek. In the time of the World builders, it must have been an amazing sight. Even collapsed, enough of the metal framework remained that generations of workers had been able to prop and patch it over, producing an amalgam of wood and metal, silver and sod, with the random chimneys of cook fires poking from the curving thatched surface.

An apprentice dropped his broom and ran off to get the monk while Donal waited at the doorway. The space under the Dome was the largest indoor area in the World, and it was a buzzing, blooming confusion of activity, smells of people and baking, guides shouting to groups of outsiders, the whine of spindles and the rhythmic chop of hammers and axes, an oddly familiar whiff of charcoal and the clang of hammer on anvil, monks leading groups of children in sing-song chants for remembering that Donal had not the vaguest clue about the referents of: "Come over some day, maybe play poker..."

"It's been a long time," said Wally. Whenever Donal saw Wally, it was as if the months -- or years -- vanished, and they smiled and hugged. Wally was short, with close-cropped hair and the pale skin of someone who spent their life indoors. He wore pants that ended above the knee and the red cape of his order.

"Sorry I haven't come by," said Donal. "You'd think with all the warm weather the hunting would be better. But it means more wolves."

"And not all with four paws." Wally frowned. "Ugly business at the Castle a few weeks ago. And how is Ewen?" Wally crouched down to Ewen's eye level.

As usual, Ewen was shy in the strange environment. Donal listened to his whisper. "He's fine, thanks. He says he likes your cape."

"Well," said Wally, snapping it around himself. "Maybe someday soon we'll have this weaving process working in a way that scales. Come on over to my room, let's have a drink."

For someone raised on a reed mat against the back wall of a crowded squat, the monk's chambers looked like a castle to Donal. He wondered why the Keoh didn't live in a place like this instead of a hole in the ground.

"You'd think he'd want windows. No, he likes the security," said Wally, guiding them to rough hide cushions.

"Did I ask that out loud?" said Donal.

"Yeah, Donal, you did," said Wally. "I'm used to it. You've done it since you were five." He sliced the wax seal off a fired clay pitcher with the sharpened edge of his ring, and passed a drink that smelled sour and powerful and tasted like jellied fire.

Donal drank, shrugged. He looked around the room, noticing how many books Wally had, and how they all seemed to be in much better shape than the ones in the Keoh's hole. Ewen was staring at a figure of a monk, unmoving, bent over a table in the corner.

"Don't worry," Donal said to Ewen. "It's not real."

Wally followed his gaze and laughed. "Oh, right. That's just Woodrow. I like to imagine that he keeps working even when I sleep." Above the stuffed figure of the monk with its carved antique head, a panel showed the letters of the alphabet, painstakingly lettered on a wooden plaque. He remembered Wally trying to teach him: arrow head, breasts, moon...

They both drank.

"Something's bothering you, Donal. You didn't just come to see me."

"The Keoh called for me. He asked me to kill someone."

"I see." Wally swirled the pitcher, looked in, started to speak, thought better of it. "Anyone we...know?"

"The Colonel of Kisk."

Wally relaxed. "You had me worried for a minute there, Donal. Your reputation is pretty dark. Fox Man has been running around today telling everybody about some woman you hacked to pieces."

"She tried to take my space." He looked at Ewen, tried to remember. "Had to protect my brother. Had to kill her." Ewen tugged at his sleeve, trying to tell him something, but Donal shushed him.

"The cold arithmetic of survival," said Wally. He took a drink from the pitcher, passed it back to Donal. "What can I do to help?"

"You know what they say about Kisk," said Donal. "Everyone who goes there talks about the legend. They say it holds a pathway to the stars."

"That's the legend."

"But is it true?"

"Hm," said Wally. "From tiny acorns, great oaks may grow. Where there's a legend, there's probably a seed of truth. But you know how it is around a campfire. The bears get bigger, a dozen enemy braves become an army."

"Do they believe it? Is that why they hate the World?"

"If I could read half these books, maybe I could tell you," said Wally.

"So you don't believe the legend?"

"There are some things you believe in, like Emic, and some things that you don't."

Ewen whispered to him. "That's the other thing. The Keoh said Emic is just scaring us. He said the only things that existed were...uh... nature and chance."

"There was nothing natural about the great dying, or the plagues," Wally said gently. "Or the way things fell apart. We may not be able to remember, but we have put enough of that together."

"Plagues?"

"Never mind. All you need to remember is that the little dark men inside us are real, and that they were put there."

Donal considered this. "Are you are afraid of Emic?"

"No, not afraid," Wally answered patiently. "You've never seen her up close. There's something about her. The way she looks at you. When she speaks, you just...believe." He fingered the amulet on his neck with the three interlocking circles of Emic.

"And yet, for all that power, the World has no pathway to the stars. And Kisk does."

"Kisk? It's a..." Wally struggled for words, "I know you've never left the World. It's...a journey. That you take. To see something." He thought for a minute. "Donal, I've always tried to help you. Let me see if we might have a talk with one of the acolytes at the Castle."

#

"You have to remember, Kisk is a watery kingdom," said Wally. They were in a stone room at the back of the Castle, clearly a dining area from the rough hewn table that occupied most of the space. Wally had led them there, the last part of the way through a tunnel like the Keoh's, this one running under the main street, beneath the feet of outsiders already queuing up for evening chant at the Castle's lagoon.

They had been met by one of the pale, serious-eyed young acolytes who served the priestess. Like the rest, she wore a dark robe and a long black veil that covered the sides of her head and trailed down her back. Wally and the woman had talked quietly for a while before she led them to the room to wait.

"I've spent a lot of time diving in the lagoon," said Donal. "I know my way around a boat."

"Ah, this is no lagoon, Donal." Said Wally. "This is the eastern Ocean. The water is full of salt, and deep. Deeper than you can imagine."

"And getting deeper every year," said the woman who appeared at the door, wearing the high priestess's outfit of whispering black fabric, with a high collar that ran nearly up to her chin. She was pale and impossibly thin. Wally immediately fell to his knees and put his forehead on the floor. Ewen tugged at Donal's elbow to do the same, but he couldn't look away. Her gaze caught him, at once compassionate and remote; her eyes twinkled with enormous intelligence, and her faint smile suggested both calm cheer and depthless sadness.

"Mother Emic," said Wally. "We are graced by your attention."

"My daughter tells me an interesting story, about the Keoh and the land of Kisk," she said. She looked at Donal closely. Her eyes flickered to his side.

"My brother Ewen, and I am Donal." He saw Wally and the priestess exchange a look.

"I see," she said. "You are the one he is sending?"

Ewen had managed to drag Donal to his knees. "I am. I've come looking for your help. About the legend. The

pathway."

"As Wally might have told you.."

"Mother Emic, I said nothing..." She silenced him with a wave.

"As Wally would have told you, were it not heresy to question the ways of the builders. The 'pathway' is probably real, but not in the way you think. Almost certainly not in the way the Colonel's fanatics think. And soon, the water will be so deep that no one will be able to reach or remember it, and then, in just a matter of time, the Ocean will solve our problem for us." She frowned. "I dislike the Keoh's constant...attentions...to these things which the future can erase without our help."

"So the pathway...is real?"

She regarded him evenly. "You have a very good memory."

"My brother helps me," Donal admitted.

"And you worry about truth. Odd for an assassin."

"I only do what my father did, to protect the World."

"A Hunter with a taste for the truth may find more than you can imagine."

"It's too late for me to back up," said Donal.

"Fair enough. If you are going down this road armed with nothing but your own vision, at least let's make it clear." She waved, and the woman who had brought them to the room silently whisked in.

To Donal, she said, "This is one of the secrets of Emic, reserved for only a handful among the outsiders who seek our wisdom. But you seem someone able to keep things to himself." She looked at Wally and nodded in the direction of the door, and Donal's friend sidled immediately out, with what seemed an apologetic, or perhaps wistful, look.

"You are ready for the next step?" Donal nodded, and the priestess turned to her assistant.

"Take him on the Dark Ride."

#

"I am Mina," she said. "Follow me." The acolyte unhooked a torch and led Donal down a flight of stairs. He smelled water. Not the cool dampness of the tunnels under the World, this held the tang of brine and a warm humidity, like the steaming woods following an afternoon rain. Down a hallway, through a narrow door, and he was in a room almost completely occupied by a pool in the floor. The reek of salt was overpowering.

The acolyte placed the torch in a holder, then bent down and tested the water with her hand.

"Just right," she said.

"What is that?" Donal asked.

"This is where we connect with the Goddess," Mina said. "The pool is filled with salts from the eastern ocean."

It makes the water thick enough to float in. We heat it with stones to be warm as skin." She took a crockery pot from an alcove, poured a careful measure into a white plastic cup. "*La primer alma*," she said. "Drink this and lie down on that mat."

"What about Ewen."

"I think it would be best if he waits in the corridor," Mina said, as she slipped off his belt with the leather bag, and hung it outside the door, above his machete. She opened a wax-sealed jar, rubbed some liquid on her hands, and began to massage his shoulders. "Turn over," she said.

Whatever she had given him was relaxing all his muscles, and her fingers slid and prodded as she worked down from his back to his ankles. She told him to turn over again, and he saw that she was now naked as well, and she climbed on top of him, massaging his stiffening member, his nipples, and then her mouth was on his and he slid into her. He came so thoroughly his entire body shook, and she rode him and squeezed, in synchrony, draining him utterly.

Lazily, he realized he could see the sides of her head, and he understood why the Emic's costume had seams there. And why these acolytes wore the head covering. Not horns, he realized. Ears.

#

There was a black gap, and when he came to awareness, he had a sense of flying. He could feel the water, knew he was floating in the tank, but Mina had doused the torch; even with his eyes open, he saw nothing. The air and water were the same temperature, impossible to say where one ended and the other began. His mind was like an ox freed from a yoke, galloping effortlessly away, and his thoughts were racing, exploding, following one another in a way they never had before. Donal was aware, for the first time in his life, of being aware. He watched himself, watching his mind dreaming.

He could feel the blood pulsing, out to the ends of his fingers and toes, every tiny vessel, throbbing with life and energy.

And slowly, the riot of thoughts began to still, the flood of images slowed. Relaxed. Unwound.

Until one image remained.

The face of Ewen. As a baby.

Floating.

Like he was, still and empty, in a warm sac of fluid. Warm and happy and safe, in the world before the World.

And then Ewen's voice, speaking inside his head: "What if I had never been born?"

A brief flash of the old womens' knives, cutting up his mother for the feast. And then there was nothing. Floating emptiness, an endless black screen of death.

"What would you remember then?"

And suddenly, he was overcome with blind panic, thrashing wildly, trying to find the bottom with his feet, getting mouthfuls of rich, salty water.

Mina waded in and held him as he gasped, and sobbed, and his breathing eventually returned to normal.

#

The Keoh had been right about the boat, the ride was indeed fast. What would have been a four-day slog through the swampland to the southeast took just one afternoon, with help from a sail rigged up to catch the gust front running ahead of the day's storm.

Donal sat in the stern, staying out of the way as the crew struggled to keep the boat right in the water, twisting the stitched-together sail from side to side. He kept Ewen close, and fingered the amulet that the priestess had given him. "One more thing," she had said as he left, tossing the bit of worked metal on a leather thong. He ran his finger around the three interlocked circles and tried to forget his salty drowning nightmare.

The sailors put in at the edge of a ruined road of the ancients. Though they pretended to be tough, the Keoh's boatmen were clearly unnerved to be so far from home and they hurried their cargo off, tossed a plastic jug of water, and sailed away without looking back, tacking into the gathering wind.

"Well, Ewen, we better find someplace to get out of the rain."

The mosquitoes were unbelievable here, and soon the black flies came to join them. They never seemed to bother Ewen; Donal envied that. The entrance to the kingdom of Kisk was a short hike to the north, and Donal set out on a path that branched out from the road of the ancients, which curved away to the west, into the estuary they had just crossed.

A rattlesnake slithered onto out of the brush and Donal instantly, reflexively, caught it behind the head with his machete.

"Dinner," he said.

"Not hungry," Ewen shook his head. "I'm going for a walk."

Donal collected branches and built an ugly but secure lean-to that would protect them from the worst of the rain, then took some time skinning and cleaning the snake, whose head glared at him balefully until he carefully poked it into the underbrush with a stick.

There was no way to start a fire, so he hacked off chunks and spent a long time, chewing, watching clouds gathering to the west.

"Ewen," he called. There was no response.

"Ewen?" He yelled now, feeling raw snake rising in his gorge. He picked up the machete and ran in the direction Ewen had gone.

"Ewen!"

"Here," Ewen stood in a clearing where their path crossed a larger one leading east. This had obviously been a main road in the past, the edges still vaguely delineated by fractured stumps of the ancient's metal trees.

"I wanted to see what it felt like to be alone," Ewen looked up at him.

"What do you mean?" He was panting, sweating, and the mosquitoes were an audible buzz.

"Someday, you will leave and not come back." Ewen looked off west down the path. "And I wondered what that would feel like."

The first few drops of rain hit Donal, and he picked up his brother, cradling him in his arms for the first time in years, and carried him back to the lean-to. He did not sleep well.

#

The entrance to Kisk was surprisingly like the Castle, except the wait was ten times as long. Outsiders shuffled endlessly around the marshy ground at the end of the road, waiting their turn on the parade of ships that took outsiders to see the sunken wonders. Jugglers and tumblers entertained; vendors shouted from stalls full of fried critters on sticks and strange but delicious-smelling baked goods from the lands up north.

As they lined up for the boats, guards searched them, just as they did at the Castle, taking anything suspicious. Ewen walked right through. But when they came to Donal, they looked at his blade, then his necklace, and called over their boss, who eventually called over his boss. The men muttered to each other for a while, then waved him on. His fellow passengers eyed the machete with a mixture of envy and fear.

Once underway, the tedious ride quickly made Donal long for the pleasure of waiting in line. The boats were crowded, the outsiders smelled like poorly wiped asses and rotten fish, and the guides barked descriptions of the largely invisible wonders in an incomprehensible accent. All Donal saw was a few bits of rusted metal poking out of the water, and yet the crowd gasped and gaped and pointed like children.

The Colonel's island was artificial; an enormous white and rust-brown structure which, when it had been built, would probably have towered hundreds of feet over their heads -- and, Donal supposed, continued perhaps a hundred feet beneath. Even in ruin, it was awe inspiring; a scabrous, flaking hulk, collapsed on itself, rusted beams surrounding a hollow interior where waves slapped and boomed. Their boat's closest approach was a hundred yards off, and while the visitors were absorbed with the sight, Donal threw Ewen a look and they quietly went over the side and swam for it, staying underwater until they were safe among the piers of the structure.

#

"I was wondering when you would show up." The Colonel's face showed no sign of panic.

The old man sat in a chair that likely started its life as a boat, wood planks whose pores were sealed with some greasy black material, now pried apart and reassembled as a low seat with wide arms. The Colonel of Kisk had a long face, dark skin, and ears that stuck out past his thin frizz of graying hair. He could have been a thousand years old, or it might just have been the tired look Donal recognized from the faces of those who have seen quite enough of the world and are no longer frightened by what's next. He might have been forty. He wore a woven loincloth and a half-dozen rows of necklaces, some with teeth, some shells, some, Donal saw, threaded with the shiny discs of the ancients, and one, identical to his, with the symbol of Emic.

His perch was a rusted balcony which jutted from the side of the structure, a miraculously horizontal surface amid the crumbled and folded building, dotted with rust holes that offered windows to the sea beneath. Out to the horizon there was just a world of water, lapping peacefully. The slap of waves and the cries of terns were the only sound for a long moment.

"Welcome to my island, built by the shining people of Kisk, long ago," said the Colonel, "Like all islands, like our increasingly narrow toeholds of land, suspended above Mother Ocean. I assume you bring greetings from the Castle?"

Donal said nothing. The sun beat down.

"I was born on an island, and I guess I'll die on one. You think you're here to kill me," said the old man,

nodding at Donal's machete.

"I am here on a mission from the Keoh of the World."

"The World. Indeed." He smiled. "You know, every people, in every language, call their land 'The World' until they meet others." He shook his head, smiled. "You people are the only ones stubborn enough to keep calling it that. You are legend."

"Which is why you send your followers to attack our Castle? Kill innocent visitors? Women, children."

"I don't think even you really believe that."

"I believe you are a danger to the World."

"I am what I am because of who we all are," said the Colonel. "And you are no different. What's your name, son."

"Donal. And this is Ewen."

The Colonel paused and thought for a minute. "Donal. And Ewen. Look at me. I'm an old man with a big belly who enjoys sitting in the sunshine. The tumors took my wife and all my children before me, so whatever it is I have, whatever blessing or curse has spared me from the forgetting, well, it's going to die with me. So if you really are intent on killing me, at least let me show you why we believe what we do."

And that was how Donal found himself in the back of tiny boat, being rowed a half mile north over featureless ocean by this old man.

#

"I believed, myself," said the Colonel. "When I was growing up, a lot of people wanted to live out here. They took on faith that beneath us was a secret city, and within it, a gateway to the world beyond."

Donal was having trouble concentrating. This water was not like the placid lagoon, or even the ride across the estuary on the Keoh's boat. Here, he was constantly tossed, in a way that kept him from regaining his balance.

"My father said that his grandfather's father -- who claimed to have been Colonel here, who survived the great dying in the time of the builders -- had passed the knowledge of where this doorway was. My father had never tried to visit it, and wouldn't reveal the location until he was on his deathbed."

A duck bobbed ahead of them, and Donal expected it to take off at their approach, but it remained strangely motionless, and he realized it was a lifeless replica. The old man hooked it, and they sat, water lapping the sides of the boat, circling slowly. The Colonel lifted the duck with his gaff to reveal a yellow and white rope, descending.

"This line goes all the way down to the bottom, anchored to what they called the gateway between worlds. It's a shame my father never looked for himself. I might have spent my life rather differently."

The Colonel slid a rock from under the seat. "Hug this to your chest, and keep your arms around the line until you reach the bottom. Take a deep breath. If you are lucky, you may have a few moments to look around before you need to come back up. Be careful if you choose to go... inside. You could die down there."

Donal looked at the rock, at the water.

"You'll need to let go of your machete," the Colonel said gently. "And you'll want to leave your belt."

"No," Donal recoiled. The darkness of the floating pool came flooding back in; he felt a desperate urge to escape, to leap from the boat and flee.

"You think this could just be the way I dispatch assassins from the World?"

"No," Donal stared at the horizon. Distant clouds were building up into tall blue and gray anvils somewhere back over the land. The boat rocked in the sun.

"We do these things not because they are easy, Donal, but because they are hard."

Slowly, Donal put down his machete. Carefully, he undid his leather belt and set the bag down on the seat.

"You'll keep an eye on Ewen," he said.

"I will guard him like my own brother."

Donal grasped the rock and heaved over the side.

#

The first few feet was like the lagoon, warm and clear, but as he continued sinking, the light faded and rippled, the pressure in his ears increased.

Then he passed through an invisible layer and the water was suddenly colder. He began to make out shapes below -- a building, lying on its side, the line snaking into its open end. The light was dim here, and the water jittered with muddy particles, but through it, Donal could see that the structure had not fallen over; it had been built sideways, and inside was an enormous decaying object. He slowed himself on the line to hover, looking out over it, lit by the slanting rays of afternoon sun. It was clearly a device built by the ancients, hundreds of feet long. What must have originally been smooth metal was now a forest of kelp, sea anemone, mussels; rusted and sagging sections of the machine spilled intricate pieces, identities erased by corrosion, to the seafloor below. He could make out, in giant flaking letters on the side, a familiar pattern: cup-snake"arrow head. And as he saw that, he remembered the white cylinder in the corner of the Keoh's spider hole. That had been an image, a copy. And he was looking, he knew with certainty, at the original.

This was it. The pathway of the legend. A machine that took men between worlds, but those days were long gone.

He understood now that he had not eluded the Colonel's guards. He had been allowed to come. To be shown.

This, he realized, was the real World, had always been. A world that had existed before them, a world of both beautiful castles and amazing machines, and yet, a world whose builders had, through carelessness or malice, unleashed diseases that robbed people of their minds, sent growths through their bodies. A world of fabulous power, and yet unable to prevent the sea from rising to cover its buildings, the vines and grasses from reclaiming its roads.

And if such a civilization with time and power to spare had been doomed, what chance did Donal's grim, small, overgrown World have?

The Priestess of Emic had been right; the pathway was real. But not in any way he could ever have imagined. He knew that it was not, could never have been the Colonel's people who sacrificed their lives to terrorize the

Castle. They were not true believers; they were believers in the truth. The threat to the World lay much closer to home. If he had not been underwater, he might have laughed, screamed, pulled out his hair.

He dropped the rock and headed for the light above. Climbed into the boat and sat, dripping, looking at the old man, as if for the first time.

"You saw?"

"I saw."

He sat for a moment, salt drying on his skin, before picking up the machete and tossing it into the ocean. It twinkled, spinning, in the light, made a distant splash. He moved to pick up his belt and stopped, frozen, his hand hovering.

"What's that," asked the Colonel, pointing at the leather bag.

"My brother, Ewen," he said, "He died with my mother, in childbirth."

"I think you've come to the right place," the old man said.

Donal considered the tanned deerhide bag, closed with a simple flap and latched with the spine bone of a raccoon. He nodded. Undid the bag, released the pitifully tiny bones and powder into the water. For a moment, he could see his brother's skull, tumbling, end-over-end, off into the darkness.

"It is sadness we are born for," said the old man.

Donal looked at the sky. The wind was picking up, and the rains would be coming soon.

"We'd better get back," he said to the Colonel. He looked at the dust on his hands. He was just like Ewen, he thought, and he would die too. Alone.

"Are you still going to kill me?" asked the old man.

"We'll see. Row."

Thanks to the Gibraltar Point crew (Laurie, Sara, Janice, Becky, Lis, Michael, Dave, and Peter) who read this in zero draft and saved me from the most egregious errors. Steve Samenski caught a huge one. Those that remain are solely my responsibility. Thanks to bladesmith Chris Doherty for research and advice, almost none of which ended up the finished product. The story owes a debt to Alan Weisman's amazing *The World Without Us* for inspiration, and, of course, to David Byrne for the title.

Author's note:

Actually, this one is not so much a story as an occasional fiction, written for a very specific audience, halfway between homage and pastiche and larded with sly winks and intertextual references. My plan after using it for its intended purpose was to make only the most cursory attempt at selling it (as one is obligated to, if one follows Heinlen's Five Rules) and then cc-license it, which is the only appropriate thing to do with something written as a wedding present for Cory Doctorow and Alice Taylor.

You can read it here or download as rich text here.
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