

R. A. LAFFERTY

The Configuration of the North Shore

R. A. Lafferty started writing in 1960, at the relatively advanced age (for a new writer, anyway) of forty-six, and in the years before his retirement in 1987, he published some of the freshest and funniest short stories ever written, almost all of them dancing on the borderlines between fantasy, science fiction, and the tall tale in its most boisterous and quintessentially American of forms.

Lafferty has published memorable novels that stand up quite well today—among the best of them are *Past Master*, *The Devil Is Dead*, *The Reefs of Earth*, the historical novel *Okla Hannali*, and the totally unclassifiable (a fantasy novel *disguised as a non-fiction historical study, perhaps?*) *The Fall of Rome*—but it was the prolific stream of short stories he began publishing in 1960 that would eventually establish his reputation. Stories like “Slow Tuesday Night,” “Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne,” “Hog-Belly Honey,” “The Hole on the Corner,” “All Pieces of a River Shore,” “Among the Hairy Earthmen,” “Seven Day Terror,” “Continued on Next Rock,” “All But the Words,” and many others, are among the most original and pyrotechnic stories of our times.

Almost any of those stories would have served for this anthology, even those published ostensibly as science fiction—but I finally settled on the story that follows. It’s one of Lafferty’s least-known and least-reprinted, but a little gem regardless that demonstrates all of Lafferty’s virtues: folksy exuberance, a singing lyricism of surprising depth and power, outlandish imagination, a store of offbeat erudition matched only by Avram Davidson, and a strong, shaggy sense of humor unrivaled by anyone.

His short work has been gathered in the landmark collection *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*, as well as in

Strange Doings, Does Any-one Else Have Something Further to Add?, Golden Gate and Other Sto-ries, and Ringing Changes. Some of his work is available only in small press editions—like the very strange novel *Archipelago*, or *My Heart Leaps Up*, which was serialized as a sequence of chapbooks— but his other novels available in trade editions (although many of them are long out of print) include, *Fourth Mansions, Arrive at. Easterwine, Space Chantey, and The Flame Is Green.* Lafferty won the Hugo Award in 1973 for his story “Eurema’s Dam,” and in 1990 received the World Fantasy Award, the prestigious Life Achieve-ment Award. His most recent books are the collections *Lafferty in Orbit* and *Iron Star.*

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The patient was named John Miller.

The analyst was named Robert Rouse.

Two men.

The room was cluttered with lighting, testing, and recording equipment. It held several sets of furniture that conferred together in small groups, sofas, easy chairs, business chairs, desks, couches, coffee tables, and two small bars. There were books, and there was a shadow booth. The pic-tures on the walls were of widely different sorts.

One setting. Keep it simple, and be not distracted by indifferent details.

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“I have let my business go down,” Miller said. “My wife says that I have let her down. My sons say that I have turned into a sleepy stranger. Everybody agrees that I’ve lost all ambition and judgment. And yet I *do* have a stirring ambition. I am not able, however, to put it into words.”

“We’ll put it into words, Miller, either yours or mine,” Rouse said. “Slip up on it right now! Quickly, what is the stirring ambition?”

“To visit the Northern Shore, and to make the visit stick.”

“How does one get to this Northern Shore, Miller?”

“That’s the problem. I can locate it only very broadly on the globe. Sometimes it seems that it should be off the eastern tip of New Guinea, going north from the D’Entrecasteaux Islands and bypassing Trobriand; again I feel that it is off in the Molucca Passage toward Talaud; and again it should be a little further south, coming north out of the Banda Sea by one of the straits. But I have been in all those waters without finding any clue to it. And the maps show unacceptable land or open sea wherever I try to set it.”

“How long?”

“About twenty-five years.”

“All in what we might call the Outer East Indies and dating from your own time in that part of the world, in World War II. When did it become critical?”

“It was always critical, but I worked around it. I built up my business and my family and led a pleasant and interesting life. I was able to relegate the Thing to my normal sleeping hours. Now I slow down a little and have less energy. I have trouble keeping both sets of things going.”

“Can you trace the impression of the North Shore to anything? Transfigured early memory of some striking sea view? Artform-triggered intuition? Can you trace any roots to the evocative dream?”

“I had an inland childhood, not even a striking lake view in it. And yet the approach to the North Shore is always by a way recognized from early childhood. I don’t believe that I have any intuition at all, nor any sense of art forms. It is simply a continuing dream that brings me almost to it. I am rounding a point, and the North Shore will be just beyond that point. Or I have left ship and wade through the shallows; and then I have only a narrow (but eerie) neck of land to traverse to reach the North Shore. Or I am, perhaps, on the North Shore itself and going through fog to the place of importance, and I will have the whole adventure as soon as the fog clears a little; but it doesn’t. I’ve been on the verge of discovering it all a thousand times.”

“All right. Lie down and go to dreaming, Miller. We will try to get you past that verge. Dream, and we record it.”

“It isn’t that easy, Rousse. There’s always preliminaries to be gone

through. First there is a setting and sound and smell of a place near the surf and a tide booming. This watery background then grows fainter; but it remains behind it all. And then there is a little anteroom dream, a watery dream that is not the main one. The precursor dream comes and goes, sharp and clear, and it has its own slanted pleasure. And only then am I able to take up the journey to the North Shore.”

“All right, Miller, we will observe the amenities. Dream your dreams in their proper order. Lie easy there. Now the shot. The recorders and the shadow booth are waiting.”

Shadow booths reproduced dreams in all dimensions and senses, so much so that often a patient on seeing a playback of his own dream was startled to find that an impression, which he would have said could be in no way expressed, was quite well expressed in shadow or color or movement or sound or odor. The shadow booth of the analyst Rouse was more than a basic booth, as he had incorporated many of his own notions into it. It reproduced the dreams of his patients very well, though to some extent through his own eyes and presuppositions.

First was given the basic, and Rouse realized that for his patient Miller this was New Guinea, and more particularly Black Papua, the stark mountain land full of somber spooky people. It was night; the area seemed to be about fifty yards from the surf, but every boom and sigh was audible. And there was something else: the tide was booming underground; the ocean permeated the land. Guinea, the mountain that is an island, was a mountain full of water. The roots of the mountain move and sigh; the great boulders squeak when the hammer of the tide hits them; and on the inside of the cliffs, the water level rises. There is the feeling of being on a very large ship, a ship a thousand miles long.

“He has captured the Earth-Basic well,” the analyst Rouse said. Then the basic faded back a bit, and the precursor dream began.

It was in a flat-bottomed rowboat from some old camping trip. He was lying on his back in the bottom of the boat, and it was roped to a stump or tree and was rocking just a little in the current. And here was another mountain full of water, but an inland one of much less bulk, and the ice-cold springs ran out of its sides and down its piney shoulders to the shingle of the creek bank. Fish jumped in the dark, and blacksnakes slid down the hill to drink. Bullfrogs echoed, and hoot owls made themselves known; and far away dogs and men were out possuming, with the baying carrying over the miles. Then the boy remembered what he must do, and in his dream he unroped the boat and shoved into the stream and ran his trot line. From

every hook he took a fish as long as his arm till the boat was full and nearly swamped.

And from the last hook of all, he took a turtle as big as a wagon wheel. He would not have been able to get it into the boat had not the turtle helped by throwing a booted leg over the side and heaving himself in. For by this time it was not so much a turtle but more like someone the boy knew. Then he talked for a while with the turtle that was not exactly a turtle anymore. The turtle had a sack of Bull Durham and the boy had papers, so they rolled and smoked and watched the night clouds slide overhead. One of them was named Thinesta and one was named Shonge, which chased the first and would soon have him treed or caught, if they did not run into the mountain or the moon first.

“Boy, this is the life!” said the turtle. “Boy, this is the life!” said the boy.

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“He’s a poet,” said Rousse, and this puzzled him. He knew himself to be a cultured man, and he knew that Miller wasn’t.

Then the little precursor dream slid away, and there began the tortuous and exhilarating journey to the North Shore. It was coming around a point in an old windjammer on which all the men were dead except the dreamer. The dead men were grinning and were happy enough in their own way. They had lashed themselves to rails and davits and such before they had died. “They didn’t want it bad enough,” the dreamer said, “but they won’t mind me going ahead with it.” But the point was devil-ish hard to turn. There came on wind and driving spray so that the ship shuddered. There was only ashen light as of false dawn. There was great strain. The dreamer struggled, and Rousse (caught up in the emotion of it) became quite involved and would have been in despair if it were not for the ultimate hope that took hold of him.

A porpoise whistled loudly, and at that moment they rounded the point. But it was a false point, and the true point was still up ahead. Yet the goal was now more exciting than ever. Yet both the current and the wind were against them. Rousse was a practical man. “We will not make it tonight,” he said. “We had better heave to in this little cove and hold onto what advantage we have gained. We can make it the next time from here.” “Aye, we’ll tie up in the little cove,” one of the dead men said, “we’ll make it on the next sortie.” “We will make it *now*,” the dreamer swore. He jammed the windjammer and refused to give up.

It was very long and painful, and they did not make it that night, or that afternoon in the analyst's office. When the dream finally broke, both Miller and Rousse were trembling with the effort—and the high hope was set again into the future.

"That's it," Miller said. "Sometimes I come closer. There is something in it that makes it worthwhile. I have to get there."

"We should have tied up in the cove," Rousse said. "We'll have blown backwards some ways, but it can't be helped. I seem to be a little too much in empathy with this thing, Miller. I can see how it is quite real to you. Analysis, as you may not know, has analogs in many of the sciences. In Moral Theology, which I count a science, the analog is Ultimate Com-pensation. I am sure that I can help you. I have already helped you, Miller. Tomorrow we will go much further with it."

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The tomorrow session began very much the same. It was Guinea again, the Earth Basic, the Mountain Spook Land, the Fundament permeated with Chaos which is the Sea. It boomed and sighed and trembled to indicate that there are black and sea-green spirits in the basic itself. Then the basic adjusted itself into the background, and the precursor dream slid in.

The boy, the dreamer was in a canoe. It was night, but the park lights were on, and the lights of the restaurants and little beer gardens along the way. The girl was with him in the canoe; she had green eyes and a pleas-antly crooked mouth. Well, it was San Antonio on the little river that runs through the parkways and under the bridges. Then they were beyond the parkway and out of town. There were live-oak trees overhanging the water, and beards of Spanish moss dragged the surface as though they were drifting through a cloud made up of gossamer and strands of old burlap.

"We've come a thousand miles," the girl said, "and it costs a dollar a mile for the canoe. If you don't have that much money we'll have to keep the canoe; the man won't take it back unless we pay him." "I have the money, but we might want to save it to buy breakfast when we cross the Missis-sippi," the boy said. The girl's name was Ginger, and she strummed on a stringed instrument that was spheroid; it revolved as she played and changed colors like a jukebox. The end of the canoe paddle shone like a star and left streaks of cosmic dust on the night water as the boy dipped it.

They crossed the Mississippi, and were in a world that smelled of wet

sweet clover and very young catfish. The boy threw away the paddle and kissed Ginger. It felt as though she were turning him inside out, drawing him into her completely. And suddenly she bit him hard and deep with terrible teeth, and he could smell the blood running down his face when he pushed her away. He pushed her out of the canoe and she sank down and down. The underwater was filled with green light and he watched her as she sank. She waved to him and called up in a burst of bubbles. "That's all right. I was tired of the canoe anyhow. I'll walk back." "Damn you, Ginger, why didn't you tell me you weren't people?" the dreamer asked.

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"It is ritual, it is offering, the little precursor dreams that he makes," Rousse said.

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Then the precursor dream glided away like the canoe itself, and the main thing gathered once more to mount the big effort. It was toward the North Shore once more, but not in a windjammer. It was in a high hooting steamship that rode with nine other ships in splendid array through one of the straits out of what, in concession to the world, they had let be called the Banda Sea.

"We come to the edge of the world now," the dreamer said, "and only I will know the way here." "It is *not* the edge of the world," one of the sea-men said. "See, here is the map, and here we are on it. As you can see, it is a long way to the edge of the world." "The map is wrong," the dreamer said, "let me fix it." He tore the map in two. "Look now," the dreamer pointed, "are we not now at the edge of the world?" All saw that they were; whereupon all the seamen began to jump off the ship, and tried to swim back to safety. And the other ships of the array, one by one, up-ended themselves and plunged into the abyss at the edge of the water. This really was the edge of the world, and the waters rushed over it.

But the dreamer knew the secret of this place, and he had faith. Just in time he saw it, right where he knew it must be, a narrow wedge of high water extending beyond the edge of the world. The ship sailed out on this narrow wedge, very precariously. "For the love of God be careful!" Rousse gasped. "Oh hell, I'm becoming too involved in a patient's dream." Well, it was a pretty nervous go there. So narrow was the wedge that the ship seemed to be riding on nothing; and on both sides was bottomless space and the sound of water rushing into it and falling forever. The sky also had ended—it does not extend beyond the world. There was no light, but only

ashen darkness. And the heavy wind came up from below on both sides.

Nevertheless, the dreamer continued on and on until the wedge became too narrow to balance the ship. "I will get out and walk," the dreamer said, and he did. The ship upended itself and plunged down into bottomless space; and the dreamer was walking, as it were, on a rope of water, narrower than his boots, narrow as a rope indeed. It was, moreover, very slippery, and the sense of depth below was sickening. Even Rousse trembled and broke into cold sweat from the surrogate danger of it.

But the dreamer still knew the secret. He saw, far ahead, where the sky began again, and there is no sky over a void. And after continuing some further distance on the dangerous way, he saw where the land began again, a true land mass looming up ahead.

What was dimly seen, of course, was the back side of the land mass, and a stranger coming onto it would not guess its importance. But the dreamer knew that one had only to reach it and turn the point to be on the North Shore itself.

The excitement of the thing to come communicated itself, and at that very moment the watery rope widened to a path. It was still slippery and dangerous, it still had on each side of it depths so deep that a thousand miles would be only an inch. And then for the first time the dreamer re-alized the fearsomeness of the thing he was doing. "But I always knew I could walk on water if things got bad enough," he said. It was a tricky path, but it was a path that a man could walk on.

"Keep on! Keep on!" Rousse shouted. "We're almost there!" "There's a break in the path," said Miller the dreamer, and there was. It wasn't a hundred feet from the land mass, it wasn't a thousand feet to the turning of the point and the arrival at the North Shore itself. But there was a total break. Opposite them, on the dim land mass, was an emperor penguin.

"You have to wait till we get it fixed," the penguin said. "My brothers have gone to get more water to fix it with. It will be tomorrow before we get it fixed." "I'll wait," the dreamer shouted.

But Rousse saw something that the dreamer did not see, that nobody else had ever seen before. He looked at the shape of the new sky that is always above the world and is not above the abyss. From the configuration of the sky he read the Configuration of the Northern Shore. He gasped with unbelief. Then the dream broke.

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“It may be only the quest-in-itself motif,” Rouse lied, trying to control himself and to bring his breathing back to normal. “And then, there might, indeed, be something at the end of it. I told you, Miller, that analysis has its parallels in other sciences. Well, it can borrow devices from them also. We will borrow the second-stage platform from the science of rocketry.”

“You’ve turned into a sly man, Rouse,” Miller said. “What’s taken hold of you suddenly? What is it that you’re not saying?”

“What I am saying, Miller, is that we will use it tomorrow. When the dream has reached its crest and just before it breaks up, we’ll cut in a second-stage booster. I’ve done it before with lesser dreams. We are going to see this thing to the end tomorrow.”

“All right.”

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“It will take some special rigging,” Rouse told himself when Miller was gone. “And I’ll have to gather a fair amount of information and shape it up. But it will be worth it. I am thinking of the second stage shot in another sense, and I might just be able to pull it off. This isn’t the quest-in-itself at all. I’ve seen plenty of them. I’ve seen the false a thousand times. Let me not now fumble the real! This is the Ultimate Arrival Nexus that takes a man clean out of himself. It is the Compensation. If it were not achieved in one life in a million, then none of the other lives would have been worthwhile. Somebody has to win to keep the gamble going. There has to be a grand prize behind it all. I’ve seen the shape of it in that second sky. I’m the one to win it.”

Then Rouse busied himself against the following day. He managed some special rigging. He gathered a mass of information and shaped it up. He incorporated these things into the shadow booth. He canceled a number of appointments. He was arranging that he could take some time off, a day, a month, a year, a lifetime if necessary.

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The tomorrow session began very much the same, except for some doubts on the part of the patient Miller. “I said it yesterday, and I say it again,” Miller grumbled. “You’ve turned sly on me, man. What is it?” “All analysts are sly,

Miller, it's the name of our trade. Get with it now. I promise that we will get you past the verge today. We are going to see this dream through to its end."

There was the Earth Basic again. There was the Mountain booming full of water, the groaning of the rocks, and the constant adjusting and readjusting of the world on its uneasy foundation. There was the salt spray, the salt of the Earth that leavens the lump. There were the crabs hanging onto the wet edge of the world.

Then the Basic muted itself, and the precursor dream slid in, the ritual fish.

It was a rendezvous of ships and boats in an immensity of green islands scattered in a purple-blue sea. It was a staging area for both ships and is-lands; thence they would travel in convoys to their proper positions, but here they were all in a jumble. There were LST's and Jay Boats, cargo ships and little packets. There were old sailing clippers with topgallants and moonscrapers full of wind, though they were at anchor. There was much moving around, and it was easy to step from the ships to the little green islands (if they were islands, some of them were no more than rugs of floating moss, but they did not sink) and back again onto the ships. There were sailors and seamen and pirates shooting craps together on the little islands. Bluejackets and bandits would keep jumping from the ships down to join the games, and then others would leave them and hop to other islands.

Piles of money of rainbow colors and of all sizes were everywhere. There were pesos and pesetas and pesarones. There were crowns and coronets and rix-dollars. There were gold certificates that read "Redeemable only at Joe's Marine Bar Panama City." There were guilders with the Queen's picture on them, and half-guilders with the Jack's picture on them. There were round coins with square holes in them, and square coins with round holes. There was stage money and invasion money, and comic money from the Empires of Texas and Louisiana. And there were bales of real frogskins, green and sticky, which were also current.

"Commodore," one of the pirates said, "get that boat out of the way or I'll ram it down your throat" "I don't have any boat," said the dreamer. "I'm not a commodore; I'm an army sergeant; I'm supposed to guard this box for the lieutenant." Oh hell, he didn't even have a box. What had happened to the box? "Commodore," said the pirate, "get that boat out of the way or I'll cut off your feet."

He did cut off his feet. And this worried the boy, the dreamer, since he did not know whether it was in the line of duty or if he would be paid for his feet. "I don't know which boat you mean," he told the pirate. "Tell me which boat you mean and I'll try to move it. "Commodore," the pi-rate said, "move this boat or I'll cut your hands off." He did cut his hands off. "This isn't getting us anywhere," the dreamer said, "tell me which boat you want moved." "If you don't know your own boat by now, I ought to slit your gullet," the pirate said. He did slit his gullet. It was harder to breathe after that, and the boy worried more. "Sir, you're not even a pi-rate in my own outfit. You ought to get one of the sailors to move the boat for you. I'm an army sergeant and I don't even know how to move a boat."

The pirate pushed him down in a grave on one of the green islands and covered him up. He was dead now and it scared him. This was not at all like he thought it would be. But the green dirt was transparent and he could still see the salty dogs playing cards and shooting craps all around him. "If that boat isn't moved," the pirate said, "you're going to be in real trouble." "Oh, let him alone," one of the dice players said. So he let him alone.

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"It's ritual sacrifice he offers," Rousse said. "He brings the finest gift he can make every time. I will have to select a top one from the files for my own Precursor."

Then it was toward the North Shore again as the Precursor Dream faded.

It was with a big motor launch now, as big as a yacht, half as big as a ship. The craft was very fast when called on to be. It would have to be, for it was going through passes that weren't there all the time. Here was a seacliff, solid and without a break. But to one who knows the secret there *is* a way through. Taken at morning half-light and from a certain angle there was a passage through. The launch made it, but barely. It was a very close thing, and the cliffs ground together again behind it. And there be-hind was the other face of the seacliff, solid and sheer. But the ocean ahead was different, for they had broken with the map and with convention in finding a passage where there was none. There were now great group-ings of islands and almost-islands. But some of them were merely sargasso-type weed islands, floating clumps; and some of then were only floating heaps of pumice and ash from a volcano that was now erupting.

How to tell the true land from the false? The dreamer threw rocks at all the islands. If the islands were of weed or pumice or ash they would give

but a dull sound. But if they were real land they would give a solid ringing sound to the thrown rock. Most of them were false islands, but now one rang like iron.

“It is a true island,” said the dreamer, “it is named Pulo Bakal.” And after the launch had gone a great way through the conglomerate, one of the islands rang like solid wood to the thrown rock. “It is a true island,” said the dreamer, “it is named Pulo Kaparangan.”

And finally there was a land that rang like gold, or almost like it (like cracked gold really) to the thrown rock. “It is true land, I think it is,” said the dreamer. “It is named Pulo Ginto, I think it is. It should be the land itself, and its North Shore should be the Shore Itself. But it is spoiled this day. The sound was cracked. I don’t want it as much as I thought I did. It’s been tampered with.”

“This is it,” Rouse urged the dreamer. “Quickly now, right around the point and you are there. We can make it this time.”

“No, there’s something wrong with it. I don’t want it the way it is. I’ll just wake up and try it some other time.”

“Second stage called for,” Rouse cried. He did certain things with electrodes and with a needle into Miller’s left rump, and sent him reeling back into the dream. “We’ll make it,” Rouse encouraged. “We’re there. It’s everything you’ve sought.”

“No, no, the light’s all wrong. The sound was cracked. What we are coming to—oh no no, it’s ruined, it’s ruined forever. You robbed me of it.”

What they came to was that little canal off the River and into the Sixth Street Slip to the little wharf where barges used to tie up by the Consoli-dated Warehouse. And it was there that Miller stormed angrily onto the rotten wooden wharf, past the old warehouse, up the bill three blocks and past his own apartment house, to the left three blocks and up and into the analyst’s office, and there the dream and the reality came together.

“You’ve robbed me, you filthy fool,” Miller sputtered, waking up in blithering anger. “You’ve spoiled it forever. I’ll not go back to it. It isn’t there anymore. What a crass thing to do.”

“Easy, easy, Miller. You’re cured now, you know. You can enter onto your own full life again. Have you never heard the most beautiful para-ble ever, about the boy who went around the world in search of the strangest

thing of all, and came to his own home at the end, and it so trans-figured that he hardly knew it?”

“It’s a lie, is what it is. Oh, you’ve cured me, and you get your fee. And slyness is the name of your game. May somebody someday rob you of the ultimate thing!”

“I hope not, Miller.”

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Rousse had been making his preparations for a full twenty-four hours. He had canceled appointments and phased out and transferred patients. He would not be available to anyone for some time, he did not know for how long a time.

He had his hideout, an isolated point on a wind-ruffled lake. He needed no instrumentation. He believed he knew the direct way into it.

“It’s the real thing,” he told himself. “I’ve seen the shape of it, accidentally in the dream sky that hung over it. Billions of people have been on the earth, and not a dozen have been to it; and not one would bother to put it into words. ‘I have seen such things—’ said Aquinas. ‘I have seen such things—’ said John of the Cross. ‘I have seen such things—’ said Plato. And they all lived out the rest of their lives in a glorious daze.

“It is too good for a peasant like Miller. I’ll grab it myself.”

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It came easy. An old leather couch is as good a craft as any to go there. First the Earth Basic and the Permeating Ocean, that came natural on the wind-ruffled point of the lake. Then the ritual offering, the Precursor Dream. Rousse had thrown a number of things into this: a tonal piece by Gideon Styles, an old seascape by Grobin that had a comic and dream-like quality, Lyall’s curious sculpture “Moon Crabs,” a funny sea tale by McVey and a poignant one by Gironella. It was pretty good. Rousse understood this dream business.

Then the Precursor Dream was allowed to fade back. And it was off toward the North Shore by a man in the finest craft ever dreamed up, by a man who knew just what he wanted, “The Thing Itself,” by a man who would give all the days of his life to arrive at it.

Rousse understood the approaches and the shoals now; he had studied them thoroughly. He knew that, however different they had seemed each time in the dreams of Miller, they were always essentially the same. He took the land right at the first rounding of the point, leaping clear and letting his launch smash on the rocks.

“There will be no going back now,” he said, “it was the going back that always worried Miller, that caused him to fail.” The cliffs here appeared forbidding, but Rousse had seen again and again the little notch in the high purple of them, the path over. He followed the path with high excitement and cleared the crest.

“Here Basho walked, here Aquin, here John de Yepes,” he proclaimed, and he came down toward the North Shore itself, with the fog over it beginning to lift.

“You be false captain with a stolen launch,” said a small leviathan off shore.

“No, no, I dreamed the launch myself,” Rousse maintained. “I’ll not be stopped.”

“I will not stop you,” said the small leviathan. “The launch is smashed, and none but I know that you are false captain.”

Why, it was clearing now! The land began to leap out in its richness, and somewhere ahead was a glorious throng. In the throat of a pass was a monokeros, sleek and brindled.

“None passes here and lives,” said the monokeros.

“I pass,” said Rousse.

He passed through, and there was a small moan behind him.

“What was that?” he asked.

“You died,” said the monokeros.

“Oh, so I’m dead on my couch, am I? It won’t matter. I hadn’t wanted to go back.”

He went forward over the ensorceled and pinnacled land, hearing the rakish and happy throng somewhere ahead.

“I must not lose my way now,” said Rousse. And there was a stele, standing up and telling him the way with happy carved words.

Rousse read it, and he entered the shore itself.

And all may read and enter.

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The stele, the final marker, was headed:

Which None May Read and Return

And the words on it—

And the words—

And the words—

* * * *

Let go! You’re holding on! You’re afraid! Read it and take it. It is *not* blank!

It’s carved clear and bright.

Read it and enter.

* * * *

You’re afraid.

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