

ECHO

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They began to know he was landing.

For uncounted seasons there had been only plants, and the sameness, the susurrus of wind, the drumming pressures of rain, the cold of snow, and the deep baking sunshine of the hot season, always no sound except the rumble of summer thunder in the ground, and the silver shimmering Vibration of running streams.

Then suddenly they were somewhere strange and new, a different being, looking with its eyes, surrounded by metal echoing walls, moving in a heavy unfamiliar body, looking out of odd uncave openings.

There was no way to understand. Then the thoughts were gone, and they did not understand what it had been. Wind blew quietly across the grass, across the planet. They bent, and straightened, unfolded leaves, pushed roots a little further through the damp earth.

Suddenly again, the Thing, its feelings louder. The heavy self-body that could move by wishing, looking out through a hole at something. The hole not a hole, something else, understood by the being and understood in the flash, the understanding incomprehensible and for-gotten when the connection ended.

It had ended; they were aware only of themselves again. What to do—Nothing: the hole memory was confused, forgotten, for it answered no questions. Re-remembering became: the belt of warmth drifting (as it always had) across the world—days longer and hotter where it drifted, snow melting from hillsides, ground-water rising to thirsty roots, brown floodwater rising along streams and rivers, a different flavor of water . . .

Suddenly again not themselves, not aware of water, but feeling only as the Being, moving a weighty body: stop and start: the sound of motions echoing back from metal walls again. Fear and thought growing louder, louder—

They all knew when he landed.

It was a wind shriek, a spinning. Terror. A flash of pain—

It had been too loud, too possessing. When it stopped it left a feeling like deep silence. Across the world all feeling was blank and bleached. On the high slopes, things like pines felt the drumming of rain as faint and unimportant.

Should the small plants of the foothills put out buds, expecting the groundwater to reach and feed them? Memory came from the western continent, on the other side of the world. *On the foothills and plains in the wet season we budded; the rains were short; they stopped and dry winds came, and the buds and shoots died, and branches dried and cracked.* The massed memory was weaker than earlier memories, for many lives were missing and produced no memory. Memory of drying and its pain was felt at the tips of growing shoots, and slowed the growth of the soft green. Doubt. The cloud pattern, the night cold, the warm wind, and the pressure of snow blankets still over the bushes of high cold slopes . . . would it be safe to grow, expecting water?

A crash of sensation. Wrong, unplant sensation! All the world became the feeling of being in a heavy body press-ing on smooth surfaces, pressure against the face. Bells! loud, ringing alarm bells.

Fear and effort, quickly down the ladder, moving too fast, (uprooted!) falling. Pain—pain, blinding sunlight, sharp-focus violet shadows, green underfoot, odd smell of air—move faster!

Plants were blinded and confused by the wave of in-tensity. Forest fire? Blinding broken sensation, hot but no, not fire, broken stem, and the effort to move *from dry-earth toward water-safety?* effort *stretching tendrils, extending vine,* to start and stop *the inert self in sudden growth* across the grass. *No, not growth, roots do not remain rooted or stay behind; all-self moves together with a heavy thudding swing like wind: gusting and swaying branches in a storm; AND pain, brokenness coming through into them, a wave of the same message striking outward with every thudding step. Broken, broken.*

The world of plants writhed with his pain, the grating conviction of being broken. Suddenly there was a flare of light across the grassland, a vast metallic crash, and the man pitched forward on his face, cradling his head protectively in his arms. The pain and brightness turned dark and vanished.

The whispery, almost silent voices of the plants conferred, barely able to share each other's unobtrusive re-sponses and memories after the blare of the new being's experiences.

"It died."

"It died."

"We are glad it died. Its living hurt."

"It should have died sooner."

"We once hurt with the pain of a place scorched by fire. The scorched plants hurt us. We thought of drying and a dry wind, of closing and not growing . . . when we thought to them, and they dried and were silent. Then we did not feel their pain. It was gone."

"Did we do that again?"

"Did we think *dry* and make the loud thing stop?"

"When we do not feel sick things, we feel only health and growing, the rain and sun and sweet taste of air froth-ing in the juice."

The man began to awake. Darkness and the pressure of ground against his length, the pressure of ground and grass against his face.

"Don't return," the plants thought, willing strongly together. "Stay dark." And they feared together the re-turn of pain.

"Darkness," thought the man. "Sleep, avoid returning to pain." He sank back into nothingness and nonbroad-cast.

The plants felt pleasure and health, and the warm com-fort of spring winds, and the new reassurance of silence.

Suddenly the man awoke, an explosion of thought. *Don't need sleep. Must splint my arm. Must signal for help. Pain pain!* coming in intense waves, mastered and made unimportant by the decision to act.

"Pain," thought the plant world, deciding. "Pain will be ended by making dryness, non-growth, death. Death ends pain." Pain reached around the world in surges, throbbing, flowing into the channels of that thought, making it huge and powerful, making memory of how to think pain into death into huge amplified images. The hysterical thought-voice of the plant world screamed: *"Die! You hurt. Die!"*

"Die!" screamed the bushes. *"Die, wither, whiten, let your sap not rise to your twigs. Dry up, cease to know and feel."*

"Die," screamed the flowers. *"You are hurting us with your broken stem!"*

The man lifted his eyes from fastening a telescope splint to his wrist.

"Die!" silently screamed the grass, waving hatefully in the wind. *"Whither! Cease to feel! Stop hurting!"*

"Going crazy," muttered the man. "I hate that—what is it?—grass? How can I hate grass?"

His shoulder was already circled by the loop at the other end of the splint. Sitting, the man bent both legs, set a boot against the hook at the end of the wrist splint, and pushed outward, stretching the arm until the bones slipped back into a straight line as if they were unbroken. The splint clicked and remained at its stretched length as his boot slipped out of the hook. He fell back against the grass and looked at the sky. He did not faint, but the waves of pain oddly surged and changed into hate and a great decision to act, to do something about his pain.

Do what? Something alive was making this pain, he must make the thing stop. Crazy thought—a broken arm was just a broken arm—no *thing* could . . .

Pain wiped out the thought. The plain seemed still to heave like a rolling surf, but he staggered to his feet and glared defiantly around in a circle.

"Die!" screamed the grass.

"Die!" screamed the flowers.

"Die—death," remembered bushes and trees. "Drought ... broken branches ... forest fires."

"Strange idea," muttered the man "Hate that grass. Hate that forest over there. Wish it would burn up. Hate this whole planet. Making my arm hurt. Looking at them makes my arm hurt."

He put his good hand over his eyes, shutting out the view. "Must stay rational. Can't go crazy. Must signal for help. They'll rescue me soon."

Concentrating, he searched inside himself for rational-ity, for philosophy, for calm and peace.

"Yes—*peace and silence—we want it!*" screamed the flowers. "*Die, hateful brother, and there will be peace.*"

"Die. Kill." When the man lifted his head and looked around, his eyes were despairing and mad. He pulled out a laser pistol clumsily with his good hand, set it to WIDE and pointed it at the nearest grass.

"Wither," screamed the grass. "*Stop hurting sentience with your broken stem.*"

"Die," muttered the man. He pressed the trigger and a spray of fire took the grass. "Stop hurting my arm," he muttered. He spun and burned a swath across the grassy growths on the other side and walked onto the black charred ground while it still smoked.

"That'll show you, you rats," he said, swaying drunkenly.

"Hurt, stop, hurt. Die. Stop," screamed the planet of plants. And, slowly aroused and awake, the deep and ancient things like pines added their memories of the death of trees. "Fire . . . avalanche . . . lightning ... thirst . . ." they remembered in slow thunder across the mothlike thoughts of the smaller plants.

The man swayed under the impact. He took another step toward the distant forest, widened the setting of the laser pistol still further and held the trigger down.

When the rescue ship arrived they traced him easily by the black trail across the green new world, and the red and smoky forest fires rolling away from his black highway of ashes.

They set the ship down in the char, and manhandled him aboard. Once they had him under heavy sedation, plant-thoughts came through again: *die . . . stop ... hurt . . .*

He pounded his image in the mirror until the sap ran from his wrists and jugular, quite a lot of it, and the plant-thoughts stilled.