

Cathadonian Odyssey

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Cathay. Caledonia. Put the words together: Cathadonia. That was what the namer of the planet, a murderer with the sensitivity of a poet, had done. He had put the two exotic words together— Cathay and Caledonia—so that the place they designated might have a name worthy of its own bewitching beauty. Cathadonia. Exotic, far-off, bewitching, incomprehensible. A world of numberless pools. A world of bizarrely constituted "orchards," a world with one great, gong-tormented sea.

Cathadonia.

And the first thing that men had done there, down on the surface, was kill as many of the exotic little tripod natives as their laser pistols could dispatch.

Squiddles, the men of the merchantship had called them. They called them other fanciful names, too, perhaps inspired by the sensitive murderer who had coined the planet's name. *Treefish*. *Porpurls*. *Pintails*. *Willowpusses*. *Tridderlings*. *Devil apes*.

The names didn't matter. The men killed the creatures wantonly, brutally, laughingly. For sport. For nothing but sport. They were off the merchantship *Golden* heading homeward from a colonized region of the galactic arm. They made planetfall because no one had really noticed Cathadonia before and because they were ready for a rest. Down on the surface, for relaxation's sake, they killed the ridiculous-looking squiddles. Or treefish. Or porpurls. Or willowpusses. Take your choice of names. The names didn't matter.

Once home, the captain of the *Golden* reported a new planet to the authorities. He used the name Cathadonia, the murderer's coinage, and Cathadonia was the name that went into the books. The captain said nothing about his crewmen's sanguinary recreation on the planet. How could he? Instead, he gave coordinates, reported that the air was breathable, and volunteered the information that Cathadonia was

beautiful. "Just beautiful, really just beautiful."

The men of the *Golden*, after all, were not savages. Hadn't one of them let the word Cathadonia roll off his lips in a moment of slaughterous ecstasy? Didn't the universe forgive its poets, its namegivers?

Later, Earth sent the survey probeship *Nobel*, on its way to the virgin milkiness of the Magellanic Clouds, in the direction of Cathadonia. The *Nobel*, in passing, dropped a descentcraft toward the planet's great ocean. The three scientists aboard that descent-craft were to establish a floating station whose purpose would be to determine the likelihood of encountering life on Cathadonia. The captain of the *Golden* had not mentioned life. The scientists did not know it existed there. Preliminary sensor scans from the *Nobel* suggested the presence of botanicals and the possibility of some sort of inchoate aquatic life. Nothing sentient, surely.

Whatever the situation down there, the scientists aboard the floating station would unravel it.

Unfortunately, something happened to the descentcraft on its way down, something that never happened to survey descentcraft and therefore something the *Nobel's* crew had made no provision for. In fact, the *Nobel*, as was usual in these cases, went on without confirming touchdown; it went on toward the Magellanic Clouds. And some odd, anomalous force wrenched the controls of the descentcraft out of the hands of its pilots and hurled it planetward thousands of kilometers from the great ocean.

It fell to the surface beside a sentinel willow on the banks of one of Cathadonia's multitudinous pools. There it crumpled, sighed, ticked with alien heat.

This, then, becomes the story of a survivor—the story of Maria Jill Ian, a woman downed on an out-of-the-way world with no hope of immediate rescue, with no companions to share her agony, with no goal but the irrational desire to reach Cathadonia's ocean. A woman who did not wholly understand what had happened to her. A woman betrayed by her own kind and ambivalently championed by a creature carrying out a larger betrayal.

—For Cathadonia.

I am standing on Cathadonia, first planet from an ugly little star that Arthur called Ogre's Heart. I am writing in a logbook that is all I have left of the materials in our descentcraft. God knows why I am writing.

Arthur is dead. Fischelson is dead. The Nobel is on its way to the Magellanic Clouds. It will be back in three months. Small comfort. I will be dead, too. Why am I not dead now?

The "landscape" about me is dotted with a thousand small pools. Over each pool a single willowlike tree droops its head. The pools are clear, I have drunk from them. And the long slender leaves of the willows—or at least of this willow—contain a kind of pulp that I have eaten. Trees at nearby pools appear to bear fruit.

But drinking and eating are painful exercises now, and I don't know why I do it. Arthur and Fischelson are dead.

The light from Ogre's Heart sits on the faces of a thousand pools as if they were mirrors. Mirrors. Mirrors wherein I might drown and rediscover the painlessness of who I was before...

Maria Jill Ian did not die. She slept by the wreck of the descentcraft. She slept two of Cathadonia's days, then part of a third. The silver lacery of the pulpwillow shaded her during the day, kept off the rains at night.

When she finally woke and began to live again, she "buried" Arthur and Fischelson by tying pieces of the descentcraft's wreckage to their mangled bodies and dragging them to the edge of the pool. Then she waded into the mirror surface and felt the slick pool weeds insinuate themselves between her toes. A strong woman well into middle age, she sank first Fischelson's body and then that of Arthur, her husband. She held the men under and maneuvered the weights on their corpses so that neither of them would float up again. She was oblivious to the smell of their decaying bodies; she knew only that it would be very easy to tie a weight about her own waist and then walk deeper into the pool.

The day after accomplishing these burials, Maria Jill Ian looked away to the western horizon and began walking toward the pools that glimmered there. Just as she had not known why she bothered to eat and drink, she did not now understand why the horizon should draw her implacably toward the twilight baths of Ogre's Heart.

Later she would rediscover her reasons, but now she simply did what she must.

Today I walked a distance I can't accurately determine. My feet fell on the pliant verges of at least a hundred ponds.

A small thing has happened to keep me going.

The trees over the pools have begun to change. Although their long branches still waterfall to the pools' surfaces, not all these trees are the pulpwillows that stand sentinel in the region where Arthur, Fischelson, and I crashed. Some have brilliant scarlet blossoms; some have trunks that grow in gnarled configurations right out of the pools' centers; some are heavy with globular fruit; some are naked of all adornment and trail their boughs in the water like skeletal hands.

But I've eaten of the trees that bear fruit, and this fruit has been sweet and bursting with flavor, invariably. It's strange that I don't really care for any of it. Still, it's nourishment.

The sky turns first blazing white at twilight, then yellow like lemons, then a brutal pink. And at night the trees stand in stark tableaux that hail me onward.

I still hurt. I still hurt terribly, from the crash, from my loss—but I'm beginning to heal. After sleeping, I'll continue to walk away from Arthur and Fischelson—in the direction of falling, ever-falling Ogre's Heart...

One morning Maria Jill Ian came to a pond beside which grew a huge umbrellalike tree of gold and scarlet. The tree bore a kind of large thick-shelled mahogany-colored nut rather than the commonplace varieties of fruit she had been living on for the past two or three days.

She decided to stop and eat.

The nuts, however, hung high in the branches of the tree. Its twisted bole looked as if it might allow her to climb to the higher entanglements where she could gather food as she liked. Her simple foil jumpsuit did not impede her climbing. Leaves rustled and flashed. She gained a place where she could rest, and stopped.

All about her the pools of Cathadonia lay brilliant and blinding beneath their long-fingered sentinel trees.

Ogre's Heart was moving up the sky.

Maria Jill Ian turned her head to follow the sun's squat ascent. In the whiteness cascading through the branches overhead, she saw a shape—a shape at least as large as a small man, a form swaying over her, eclipsing the falling light, a thing more frightening than the realization that she was light-years from Earth, stranded.

Not thinking, merely reacting, she stepped to the branch below her and then swung out from the willow. She landed on the marshy ground beside the pond, caught herself up, and scrabbled away.

Something vaguely tentacular plunged from the scarlet-and-gold umbrella of the tree and disappeared noiselessly into the pool.

Maria Jill Ian began to run. She ran westward, inevitably toward another pool, struggling in ground that squelched around her boots, looking back now and again in an effort to see the thing that had plunged.

She saw the silver water pearl-up, part, and stream down the creature's narrow head. It was going to pursue her, she knew. Although it came on comically, it flailed with a deftness that demolished the impulse to laugh. Maria Jill Ian did not look back again.

All of Cathadonia breathed with her as, desperately, she ran.

I call him Eracero. It's a joke. He has no arms; he swims like the much-maligned "wetbacks" of another time. I don't know what sort of creature he is.

A description?

Very well. To begin: Eracero has no arms, but in other respects he resembles a man-sized spider monkey—except his body is absolutely hairless, smooth as the hide of a porpoise, a whitish-blue like the surfaces of Cathadonia's pools.

To continue: He is arboreal and aquatic at once. He uses his feet and his sleek prehensile tail to climb to the uppermost branches of any

poolside willow. Conversely, his armlessness has streamlined his upper torso to such an extent that he can slide through the water like a cephalopod. Indeed, he moves with the liquid grace of an octopus, although one who is five times over an amputee.

To conclude: What disarms even me is Eracero's face. It is small, expressive, curious, and winning. The eyes are an old man's (sometimes), the mouth a baby's, the ears a young girl's. The trauma of our first meeting has slipped out of our memories, just as Ogre's Heart plunges deathward at twilight.

We are friends, Bracero and I.

The creature had caught up with her when she could run no more. Halfway between two of the planet's glimmering pools Maria Jill Ian collapsed and waited for the thing to fall upon her.

Instead, it stopped at a small distance and regarded her almost sympathetically, she thought. Its body put her in mind of a small boy sitting on a three-legged stool, his arms clasped behind his back as if desirous of looking penitent. She lay unmoving on the marshy earth, staring at the creature over one muddied forearm.

Blinking occasionally, it stared back.

Finally she got up and went on to the next pool, where she leaned against the trunk of an especially blasted-looking tree. The naked creature with two supple legs and a lithe tail—or another leg— followed her, almost casually. It made a wide arc away from Maria Jill Ian and came in behind the willow she was leaning upon. Stoic now, she didn't even look to see what it was doing.

To join Arthur, to join Fischelson, to join the centuries' countless dead, would not be unpleasant, she thought.

The eel-beast hoisted itself into the willow and climbed silently to the highest branches. Then it hung there, looking down at her like a suddenly sullen child swinging by his knees.

That evening, her fear gone, she named the creature Bracero. On the second day beside this pond she saw how it fed.

Ogre's Heart gave them a characteristically magnesium-bright dawn. Sentinel trees cast shadows like carefully penned lines of indigo ink. A thousand mirror pools turned from slate to silver. Lying on her back, Maria opened her eyes and witnessed something she didn't entirely believe.

Bracero was still high in the tree. He clutched a narrow branch with his "tail" and both "feet," his head and torso swaying gently, freely, like a live pendulum.

Clusters of mahogany-colored nuts swayed, too, in the dawn wind.

Then, looking up, Maria Jill Ian saw one of the oversized nuts snap away from the others and float directly up to the creature that had pursued her. Bracero took one foot away from the limb, grasped the willownut, expertly shelled it, and fed himself.

Several times he repeated this procedure, on each occasion the willownut floating within his reach seemingly of its own volition.

The Earth woman stood up and watched in astonishment. Bracero paid her no mind until she moved as if to obtain her own breakfast. Then he shifted in the uppermost branches, descended a little, and made *screeing* noises with his teeth. Maria decided not to go after the mahogany-colored shells that split, so easily it seemed, into meat-filled hemispheres. Did Bracero intend to deny her access to food? Would she have to fight?

Then a willownut fell toward her. But it broke its own fall in midair, bobbed sideways, and floated just beyond her startled hands—a miniature planet, brown and crustily wrinkled, halted in its orbit just at eye level. Bracero had stopped making *screeing* sounds.

Maria Jill Ian looked up. Then she gratefully took the gift and ate.

For the next several weeks she did not have to clamber into a tree again to obtain her food, nor search among the sodden grasses where the fruits and nuts sometimes fell. Bracero saw to her wants. When these were filled, he plunged out of the sentinel willows and rippled the mirror pools. Blithely he swam—until the woman made a move to continue her odyssey westward. Then he again followed.

Maria supposed that the only payment Bracero wanted for serving her was the pleasure of her company. She didn't mind, but she couldn't stay her urge to march relentlessly on Cathadonia's western horizon. Something there pulled her, compelled her onward.

Bracero has telekinetic abilities. He's been with me for almost twelve days now, as best as I'm able to reckon days—and I've been trying very hard to mark the successive risings and settings of Ogre's Heart since it is impossible to determine time by distances covered or landmarks passed.

But for slight variations in the willows, the terrain of Cathadonia is beautifully self-repeating. Looking at it, I can't understand why Bracero is the only native of the planet I have so far encountered; he is so meticulously adapted to this environment that there must be others like him. Can it be that the men of the Golden were unfortunate enough to miss seeing even one creature like Bracero?

A word about telekinesis, Bracero's uncanny skill at manipulating objects at a distance.

He does it for me every day, several times a day, and does so for himself as well; afterward, he appears no worse for this not inconsiderable psychic strain than during times of simple physical activity. His mind is as sleek as his body.

Just today, for instance, I have seen him move the casabalike melons of an unusual willow that we passed this morning. He moved them, in fact, all the way to the pool where we're now loitering. This is no mean distance. It indicates that Bracero can extend his psychic aura to far locations, fix upon a specific object, and draw it toward him at will. Without noticeable aftereffects.

Ordinarily, though, he puts under his influence only those foodstuffs in the trees by which we stop. The casabas (if I can call them that) were a rare exception, a treat that he lovingly tendered to both of us. And although I seldom think about what I eat, I enjoyed these melons, and Bracero seemed to appreciate the delight I took in them.

He has an intelligence that is both animal and human. I have begun to talk to him as if he were a close friend, or a small child, or (I hesitate to

write this) a new incarnation of Arthur. Bracero watches me when I talk, and listens—truly listens.

But I'm off the subject.

I'm still amazed at the placidity with which Bracero accomplishes his psychokinetic feats, the childish nonchalance of this supra-normal juggling. Does it cost him nothing?

Aboard the Nobel, of course, we have two PK mediums: Langland Smart and Margaret Riva. Langland is the older, and his abilities are more fully developed than Margaret's. In free-fall he can maneuver an unresisting hypnotized subject in any direction he wants, can make the subject raise an arm and scratch his nose, can settle him gently into a padded lift-seat.

But afterward, and even during, Langland pays. He loses weight, suffers dizziness, has nightmares and insomnia later—and his heartbeat does not fall back into a steady, safe rhythm for hours, sometimes two or three days, after such activity.

It's the same with Margaret, although she can move only small objects and these only across relatively smooth surfaces. She has no ability to levitate things, as do Langland and, more impressively, Bracero. And only Bracero does not pay for the mental forces that he so astonishingly commands over the inert.

The Nobel, meanwhile, expected us to find this watery orchard of a planet uninhabited. Did the men off that merchantship see only pools and trees when they set down here? Arthur and I talked to its captain before we left. He was a nervous ferret of a man...

Ogre's Heart has set. I'm going to stop writing. In the morning we'll be off again. I wonder how much longer it will be before we're there. The willows to the west, the pools limning the horizon— these things call me.

But for tonight it would be nice if Cathadonia had a moon...

For the next two days Maria Jill Ian kept up her compulsive journeying, through terrain that did not alter.

She began to suspect that Bracero was observing her for others of his

own kind, that he followed her and fed her not merely to enjoy her company but to maintain a keen and critical surveillance of her movements. She was not an unintelligent woman, by any means, and she was as susceptible to doubts as any healthy paranoid human being.

She believed that she had evidence of Bracero's communicating telepathically with other members of his species. Her evidence consisted of the fact that she still hadn't stumbled across a single one of Bracero's brethren. Before the two of them approached each new willow, each new pool, her sleek friend undoubtedly "wired" ahead an imperative to stay out of sight. The recipient of this communication undoubtedly dove into the water and remained there, nearly insensate, until they departed. Undoubtedly.

That was what Maria Jill Ian believed, and once, as they approached, she saw rings on the surface of a pool. Bracero had been careless, she surmised, and wired his warning later than usual. The slowly fading rings on the surface of the pond corroborated her suspicions. But, of course, she saw nothing but the tree and the water when they had fully arrived. Little corroboration, very little indeed.

Her affection for Bracero did not dwindle because of these suspicions; surely, he did only what he must. Also, none of his brethren had made any hostile move against her. There had been no assaults on her person, nor even any attempts to impede their trek westward.

Maybe Bracero's people had decided jointly to save both her and them the confusion, the upheaval, of further contact. Because he'd seen her first, Bracero had necessarily assumed the combined role of his people's roving watchman and Maria Jill Ian's solicitous escort. She was sure that he returned at least a small portion of the affection she felt for him. His attitude, his expressive face, conveyed as much.

One evening (the evening after she had written the last log entry) they stopped for the night, and Bracero moved as if to clamber up into the inevitable willow. Involuntarily, Maria held up her hand.

"Don't go up there," she said. "There'll be plenty of time to eat. Stay down here." She patted the ground beside her. "We'll talk."

Bracero responded as if he understood her.

His bluish porpoise's skin gleaming in the twilight, he faced her and assumed his comical tripod stance about two meters away. He appeared quite ready to converse—as clinically receptive, Maria thought, as a probeship psychiatrist. His smooth brow was slightly wrinkled, his eyes looked upon her with the estranging narrowness of a devilfish's eyes. Still, his posture suggested no hostility.

Maria Jill Ian talked: "I'm not a dependent woman, Bracero. I know what I'm about. Even now I realize that what draws me on isn't entirely rational. Maybe not rational at all. I know that my loss of Arthur and my idea of home may not be redeemed by following Ogre's Heart to the horizon every day—but because I understand my irrationality, I know what I'm doing. Do you see that, Bracero? One day I'll explain myself to you with more certainty, much more."

Bracero shifted his position. His expression allowed her to think that he did see her point, intuitively.

"Arthur and I used to talk, Bracero. Sometimes without words. Neither of us was dependent on the other, though we were somehow wordlessly interdependent. I know. That sounds like a contradiction—but it's not, not really.

"We had an affinity—a love, you have to call it—that synchronized our feelings and moods in a way not at all mechanical, a spiritual meshing. This was our interdependence, Bracero.

"But we could function with the same rigorous smoothness while apart. He worked his work, I mine; and our shared independence only bound us that much more closely in our love. I miss him, Bracero, I wish he were here beside me now—so that we could talk again, even wordlessly. As before."

She paused. The far ponds twinkled with the day's last light.

"Did you know that I didn't even weep when I buried Fischelson and my husband, when I sank them to the bottom of the pool two weeks behind us? I still can't weep, Bracero. The memory of Arthur's total *aliveness* is still too powerful.

"So different from other men," she concluded. "So different from the cruel ones, the petty ones, the men with stupid hates and overbearing

passions. Fischelson, too. Both of them so different."

Maria Jill Ian fell silent. It had done her good to talk, especially to a listener who seemed so congenial. She wished that Bracero could talk. Since he couldn't, she said, "I think Arthur would approve of what we're doing."

A moment later she said, "You don't have to sit there anymore, Bracero. You can climb up into the willow if you like."

Bracero didn't move immediately. He waited as if refraining from the subtle rudeness of leaving too quickly. Then he gracefully swung himself aloft. He hung by his tail from a low limb.

More than on any other similar occasion, Maria Jill Ian was grateful for the Cathadonian's seemingly intentional courtesy. If he were deceiving her, she didn't care.

My hands are trembling almost too violently to write this.

The night before last, I engaged in a long monologue and made Bracero listen to me hold forth on independence, communication, spiritual meshing, love, et cetera.

We haven't moved from this pool, this willow, since that night. The reasons are astounding, they're out of the pale of credibility— but my heart, my head, my trembling hands, all attest to their realness. I have to put it down here. I have to set it down as everything happened—even if my scrawl is ultimately illegible even to me.

On the morning after our "conversation," I awoke and looked up to find Bracero. He was there, his legs and tail wrapped around a branch. When I stood, I could almost look him squarely in his topsy-turvy eyes, eyes that were open but glazed over as if with cataracts.

"Wake up," I said.

He didn't move. His cephalopod's clouded eyes looked as removed from me as two useless, tarnished Earth coins.

"It's morning, it's time to get going again, Bracero."

He didn't move, still didn't move, and a kind of subdued panic gripped me. I thought that I would try a feint, a bluff, to see if that wouldn't set the good warm blood circulating through him again.

"I'm going," I said. "You can join me if you like."

That said, I set off briskly and had slogged through a good half a kilometer of unending marshland before I actually convinced myself that Bracero wasn't going to follow and that it was wrong to leave him there: a sort of Cathadonian possum who had never before put on the stiff, frightening mask of Death.

I went back.

Bracero wasn't dead. I could tell that by putting my hand against his gimlet-hole nostrils and feeling the rapid but quiet warmth of his breathing. He was in a trance, a coma, a state of suspended animation—but not really any of these things, though, because his breathing was hurried, his sleek body feverish, his pulse (which I found in his throat) telegraphically insistent. Only in his relation to the ground was Bracero suspended; otherwise, his stupor—though deep—was very animate.

I felt I had to stay by him even if it meant losing a day to our assault on the horizon; I was morally obligated. Morally obligated. Too, my affection for Bracero has deepened to a point that embarrasses me. Even the horrible manner in which he chose to demonstrate his feeling for me has not turned me against him— though my hands shake, my head swims.

All of yesterday I stayed by him. Bracero didn't improve; his condition altered not at all.

Occasionally I fetched water in a bag made of my overtunic and then moistened Bracero's face. I tried to put food in his mouth— pulp from the willow's leaves, some nutmeat I had saved, a piece of fruit—but his mouth wouldn't accept these gifts; they dribbled from his lips.

I went to sleep when Ogre's Heart set. I had nightmares. Shapes moved, voices sang, eerie winds hissed. The awful clamminess of Cathadonia seeped into my bones.

Then, before this ugly little sun had come up again, in the haggard

predawn glimmering of the pool, I saw a shape of genuine substance. A shape that wasn't Bracero. A shape floating over the pool.

It was a medieval vision, a fever picture out of Dante.

I screamed into the haggard silence. Inside, I am still screaming; the horrible no-sound of this inward screaming deafens my mind to my heart. Otherwise I couldn't even write this down.

Over the pool, stretched out there as if asleep on his back, a piece of our mangled descentcraft pulling his left leg down into the water, floated Arthur's corpse—horrible, horrible, horrible.

Mercilessly, Ogre's Heart came up to light this fever picture. And nothing I could do would stay its coming.

Maria Jill Ian calmed herself. For the second time in two weeks she waded into one of Cathadonia's pools and laid her husband to rest. She caught Arthur's beautiful, hideous body in her arms. The force that had been holding him in state above the water flicked off and shifted Arthur's melancholy weight entirely to her.

A strong woman, Maria Jill Ian accepted this weight. She lowered her no-longer-human, plundered-of-dignity husband gently into the pool. The anchor she had tied to him two weeks ago pulled him down, but she refused to let him sink away. She supported him. Strangely, it seemed that invisible hands in the water helped her steady Arthur's body and slide him with precision into the silt below.

But Bracero still hung from the branch where he had remained during the whole of his "illness." Weeping quietly, Maria waded toward him.

"You did that for me, didn't you, Bracero? You brought me my husband because I said I wanted him beside me again."

A bitter gift. Over an incredible distance, a distance that it had taken them fourteen of Cathadonia's days to walk, Bracero had exerted his will upon the dead Arthur Ian and reeled him in with his mind—in the space of two nights and one waking period.

The Earth woman could not bring herself to condemn the eel-beast, the agent of her horror. Although her heart still beat savagely, and her eyes

were raw with the sting of salt, she couldn't condemn him.

"No matter what I wish about my husband now, Bracero, let him sleep in peace," she said. "But understand me now: I can respect you for this, I can respect you for your sacrifice."

And Bracero was looking at her again, she saw, with eyes more like a feeble old man's than a devilfish's. His breathing had slowed, too. His limbs and tail appeared less rigid. Three hours later he rippled out of the tree's golden umbrella and took up his expectant tripod stance only a meter away from her.

The Earth woman pulled on her boots and looked back toward the east, at Ogre's Heart climbing the pale yellow sky.

"You're right," she said. "It's time to go again. We've got to forget this place. Arthur wouldn't want us to linger here."

They ate—Bracero ravenously, she only a little—and set off again. Toward the horizon, the western horizon.

We were able to walk, to slog westward, only a half day today—because of Bracero's most recent telekinetic exploit and its aftermath. I've resolved never to think of Arthur as I saw him this morning, but to remember him as he was when I met him, and as he grew to be over the years of our marriage.

I don't know why, but I haven't written here how wearying it is to trek across Cathadonia. The ground sucks at your feet, the marshy soil betrays your sense of balance, the lack of firmness tortures your knees. The muscles in my calves have become extremely hard, my upper thighs like supple marble. Even so, it's sometimes difficult to keep going.

Today, amazingly, I kept going by talking to Bracero. (I still haven't learned my lesson.) I told him everything I could remember about Arthur. Even quotes.

"I'm as hardy as you are," I told Bracero. "Men are hardy creatures. Arthur used to say, 'Men are the ultimate vermin, Maria, as indefatigable as cockroaches, capable of outlasting the universe.' I guess that's why I can keep up with you—go beyond you even."

Even though I can't really go beyond Bracero.

He doesn't have the same trouble with Cathadonia's marshiness that I do. His body is less heavy; his slender limbs are capable of skimming the ground almost without touching it. Usually he swims each of the pools that we come to and reemerges at the western shore, where he lets me catch up with him. But this afternoon, seeing that I wanted to talk, he stayed beside me every step and listened to my schoolgirl's chatter, my woman's wisdom, with the diplomacy of a probeship captain.

Once or twice he immersed himself in a pond, but he always came back, his glistening face radiating a depth of awareness about me, Maria Jill Ian, that I've seen before only in Arthur's face. And so I talked to him of Arthur, fed on Bracero's sympathy, and didn't tire—even though so much talking ought to have made me short of breath.

Once, when we rested and ate, I told him how important it was that we continue pursuing the horizon. I even recited to him from Arthur's favorite poem. And Bracero seemed to respond to the lines as if he understood and even approved the sentiment.

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

More than I ever thought I could lose has been taken from me, but Bracero's companionship and my own strength remain. These things abide. They make it possible to go on with free hearts, free foreheads, toward the westering sun of Cathadonia.

So be it, Arthur, so be it...

And so they went on, day after day, seeing no one, encountering terrain that repeated itself over and over again—though the fact that they now and again came across a tree that bore different kinds of fruit, or blossoms, or nut capsules, convinced Maria Jill Ian that they were actually

making progress.

At last Maria remembered that Cathadonia had an ocean, that eventually these endlessly recurring pools would send out tentacles, link arms, and spill into one another like countless telepathic beings sharing a single liquid mind.

Fischelson, Arthur, and she had made one complete orbit of the planet in their descentcraft before attempting to land, and, she remembered, they had seen the great ocean from the air. How had they fallen so short of their goal? Indeed, what force had so cruelly wrenched the descentcraft from them and sped it raging planetward?

Such things never happened.

Now all Maria Jill Ian had to live for was her march upon that ocean. The ocean. The Sea of Stagnation, Fischelson had suggested before something unprecedented wiped out the two men's lives and her own memory. But now, but now, it couldn't be far, that ocean.

Day by day, Bracero kept pace with her—loping, swimming, outdistancing her when he wished, sometimes lagging playfully behind.

Then he began to lag behind more often, and there was nothing playful in it. Frequently Maria had to call him, almost scold, in order to summon him on.

He came, but he came reluctantly. At each new pool he plunged in and made her wait while he swam five or six more turns than he had taken in the early days of their journeying.

But Maria Jill Ian always waited for him. To leave Bracero now would be to default on a trust. The two of them, after all, still belonged together. Despite his now chronic straggling, even Bracero seemed to recognize this.

One evening, as they prepared for sleep, Maria looked out over their pond and was struck by its size. It was several times larger than the one beside which their descentcraft had crashed. In fact, it had the dimensions of a small lake.

The sentinel tree that bordered this pool trailed its long leaves only in the shallows of the pool's margin, not out over the center.

Why hadn't she noticed before? All of the pools they had passed recently were at least of this size, the trees all as proportionately dwindled in stature as the one she leaned against now. Looking westward, she saw the silhouettes of far fewer trees etched into the lavender sky, than she had seen at twilight only a few days past. The change had occurred so gradually, so imperceptibly, that it was only now apparent to her.

"Bracero!" she called.

The lithe Cathadonian, who had long since learned his name, dropped gracefully from the tree and sat inches away from her.

"We're approaching the ocean, aren't we? Is that why you've been lagging? Does that have something to do with it?"

Bracero looked at her. His stare attempted both to answer her and to comprehend whatever it was compelling her toward the sea. Maria Jill Ian could read these things in the creature's face.

"Let me try to explain," she said. "I'm going toward your great ocean because Arthur, Nathan Fischelson, and I were trying to reach it when something happened to us. Second, I'm going there because all life on Earth, my own planet, arose in the seas. Do you understand, Bracero? That cellular memory is all I have left of home, a little planet in this spiral arm, ninety light-years distant.

"To me, your ocean represents ours.

"That must be how it is. And our oceans whisper to me across the light-years—with the surf noises of Earth, the seething of our species's spawning place."

Maria Jill Ian put her hand to her face. What she had just spoken filled her with an indefinable fear of the cosmos—of its infinite capacity to awe, to stagger, to overwhelm.

"And third," she said finally, "your ocean draws me on because it lies there, to the west..."

I'm afraid. This time is like the other, when I awoke and saw Arthur floating above the dawnlit pool.

But it isn't dawn, it's late afternoon, and in our slender willow Bracero hangs suspended with the glazed look and the catatonic rigidity of that last time. But this, this is the fifth day, and he hasn't eaten or drunk since this violent trance began. His body is incredibly hot.

I'm afraid because the planet seems to be in sympathy with Bracero's efforts, whatever they are.

Two days ago I deserted Bracero and began walking again, in hopes that he would come out of his trance and follow. Instead, when I reached the one semifirm passageway between the two lakes west of here, their surfaces were suddenly riven with roaring waterspouts that reared up taller than the sentinel willows on their banks. The waterspouts rained torrents on the isthmus where I hoped to pass.

I had to turn back. When I reached Bracero, he was swinging more violently than ever, rocking feverishly.

I'm afraid because even though he calmed a little after my departure-and-return, all of Cathadonia still seems a part of his effort.

Several times a day a waterspout forms on this lake and on all the lakes that I can see from here. These funnels snarl and pirouette, flashing light and color like giant prisms.

I think perhaps Bracero has enlisted, telepathically, the aid of all his people. From all their individual pools they strain with him in this new enterprise, working through Bracero as if he were the principal unit in their mind link.

I'm afraid because the skies have several times clouded over during the middle of the day, eclipsing Ogre's Heart and suffusing the world in indigo blackness.

Then the rains fall.

Then the clouds strip themselves away, as in time-lapse sequences, and shred themselves into thin wisps that let the glaring light of Ogre's Heart pour down again.

Even now I can feel the wind rising, the planet trembling. Bracero seems vexed to nightmare by his own rocking, metronomic ecstasy. I'm

afraid, I'm afraid...

On the sixth day the wind was of hurricane force, and Maria Jill Ian heard the voices of Cathadonia's great ocean calling to her through the gale. She could scarcely hear herself think, but she heard these phantom voices as if they were siren-crooning from the inside of her head.

Astonishingly, Bracero clung with uncanny strength to his branch. Although his head and torso lifted and fell with every gust, it seemed that nothing could shake him loose.

Maria held on to the bole of their willow and kept her eyes closed. Was the world ending? At last she risked being blown to her death; she let go of the tree, pulled off her foil overtunic, stripped it into ragged pieces. With these, she lashed herself to the willow and waited for the storm to end, or for her life to go out of her.

All that day and all that night Cathadonia was riven by merciless tempests.

The great ocean to the west sang hauntingly. Maria Jill Ian had fever visions of gigantic creatures several times Bracero's size, but otherwise just like him, boiling the seas with their prodigious minds and feeding limitless power into the receptacle and conductor that Bracero had become.

A psychic umbilical from the seas fed the poor creature, kept him alive, channeled energy into his every brain cell.

And all through the sixth day and night the voices persisted.

The seventh day broke clear and cold. Ogre's Heart showed its wan, sickly crest on the eastern horizon, and the lake surfaces twinkled with muted light.

Maria unlashed herself and slid down the tree to the wet ground. She slept. She awoke to find Bracero in her lap, the first time he had permitted her to touch him—although he had often come aching close. His body was rubbery and frail. His eyes were narrow and strange. Nothing about him seemed familiar. Still, she stroked his dry flesh and spoke to him a string of soothing nonsense words.

Together they waited.

At last, far away to the west, she saw a rounded shape rising over the horizon, looming up as if to intercept Ogre's Heart on its afternoon descent. The shape, a planet, cleared Cathadonia's edge and floated up into the sky like a brown and crustily wrinkled balloon.

It was Earth.

She knew at once it was Earth. She knew despite the fact that its atmosphere had been heated up, boiled off, and ripped away in the colossal psychokinetic furnace of Bracero's people's minds. It was a lifeless, battered shell that floated out there now, not an ocean upon it.

Maybe they had brought it to her in hopes that she would rest satisfied with the gift and leave off her assault on the great ocean. They had dislodged Earth from its orbit, hurled it into the continuum of probeships and nothingness, and drawn it through that surreal vacancy to Cathadonia.

Now, for the first time since the creation of its solar system, Cathadonia had a moon.

Bracero is dead. He brought me my planet out of love, I'm sure of it. How do I bear up under this guilt? Tomorrow I walk west again...

Love or vengeance. Which of these prompted Bracero to carry out the will of his people? Maria Jill Ian felt sure it was love. But we, you and I, aware of more substantive factors than this poor Earth woman had at hand, you and I may reach a different conclusion.

The answer, of course, is implicit in the story. Perhaps I ought to stop. Imprudently, I choose to add a sort of epilogue. All stories have sequels, written or unwritten, and I don't want you going away from this one believing it solely a love story with a monstrously ironic conclusion. I'm interested in human as well as alien motivation, and you don't want to believe that all of humankind died as the result of an incomprehensible force, a force superior in kind and in quality to our own technological achievements.

Very well. It wasn't so.

Although Earth was still officially the homeworld of our species, men had not lived there in great numbers for several centuries. The entire planet had become a sanctuary, a preserve seeded back into wilderness, and perhaps only a thousand human beings lived there as wardens, keepers, physicians, gardeners, biologists, ecological experts. Men and women of goodwill.

All of them died, every one of them. Nearly twice as many human beings as (if you'll pardon the expression) squiddles who were slaughtered by the crewmen of the *Golden*.

It didn't take men long to discover what had happened to their world, the home of the primeval oceans in which we had spawned. The probeship *Nobel* returned from the Magellanic Clouds and found a double planet where there had once been only Cathadonia. They attempted radio contact with Fischelson and the Ians. Nothing. Well away from this puzzling twin system they hovered, mulling over ludicrous stratagems. After a time, they left.

In other vessels men came back.

They bombarded Cathadonia with nukes of every variety, concentrating on "The Sea of Stagnation." Then they swept the atmosphere clean of radiation and permitted men to go down to the surface.

Of course, they never found Maria Jill Ian, nor the apocryphal log from which you have just read.

How could they? Cathadonia now had tides—colossal, remorseless tides—that swept back and forth across her watery surface with cruel, eroding regularity. To find Maria would have required a miracle. But a legend grew up around her and the two men aboard her descentcraft, the legend you have just read, and almost everyone believed this legend to be true.

Worldshapers came.

In a hundred years they turned our runaway Earth into a paradise; restored to it an atmosphere, mountains, streams, lakes, greenery, everything but oceans; stocked it with every manner of beautiful and awesome beast from the colony worlds. Cathadonia and Earth, the most breathtaking double planet in the universe. When visitors began coming,

hotels were built amid the landscaped gardens of our erstwhile spawning place, and people rose early in the morning to watch Ogre's Heart turn the seas of Cathadonia— across three hundred thousand kilometers of space—into mother-of-pearl mirrors.

Eventually, on Cathadonia, the downed descentcraft was recovered.

Men speculated. The legend surrounding Fischelson and the Ians took on a mystical quality.

This could not last.

Someone, some enterprising soul, developed the idea of retracing the route Maria Jill Ian had traversed during her abortive "odyssey" and of flying tourists over it in a skimmercraft piloted by a glib well-briefed guide. The idea caught on. Recorded voices now detailed every step of Maria and her Cathadonian sidekick.

" *'Men are hardy creatures,'* " the recordings mimicked in their never-varying commentary. " *'Men are the ultimate vermin, Maria, as indefatigable as cockroaches.'* "

Everyone aboard the skimmercrafts nodded sagely at the profundity of these observations.

No one ever asked for his money back.