

J.G. BALLARD

DREAM CARGOES

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A poor seaman forgets his past, and finds a bizarre new life on a polluted Caribbean Isle.

Across the lagoon an eager new life was forming, drawing its spectrum of colors from a palette more vivid than the sun's. Soon after dawn, when Johnson woke in Captain Galloway's cabin behind the bridge of the Prospero, he watched the lurid hues, cyanic blues and crimsons, playing against the ceiling above his bunk. Reflected in the metallic surface of the lagoon, the tropical foliage seemed to concentrate the Caribbean sunlight, painting on the warm air a screen of electric tones that Johnson had only seen on the nightclub facades of Miami and Veracruz.

He stepped onto the tilting bridge of the stranded freighter, aware that the island's vegetation had again surged forward during the night, as if it had miraculously found a means of converting darkness into these brilliant leaves and blossoms. Shielding his eyes from the glare, he searched the six hundred yards of empty beach that encircled the Prospero, disappointed that there was no sign of Dr. Chambers' rubber inflatable. For the past three mornings, when he woke after an uneasy night, he had seen the craft beached by the inlet of the lagoon. Shaking off the overlit dreams that rose from the contaminated waters, he would gulp down a cup of cold coffee, jump from the stern rail, and set off between the pools of leaking chemicals in search of the American biologist. It pleased Johnson that she was so openly impressed by this once barren island, a leftover of nature seven miles from the northeast coast of Puerto Rico. In his modest way he knew that he was responsible for the transformation of the nondescript atoll, scarcely more than a forgotten garbage dump left behind by the American Army after World War II. No one, in Johnson's short life, had ever been impressed by him, and the biologist's silent wonder gave him the first sense of achievement he had ever known.

Johnson had learned her name from the labels on the scientific stores in the inflatable. However, he had not yet approached or even spoken to her, embarrassed by his rough manners and shabby seaman's clothes, and the engrained chemical stench that banned him from sailors' bars all over the Caribbean. Now, when she failed to appear on the fourth morning, he regretted all the more that he had never worked up the courage to introduce himself.

Through the acid-streaked windows of the bridge house he stared at the terraces of flowers that hung from the forest wall. A month earlier, when he first arrived at the island, struggling with the locked helm of the listing freighter, there had been no more than a few stunted palms growing among the collapsed army huts and water tanks buried in the dunes. But already, for reasons that Johnson preferred not to consider, a wholly new vegetation had sprung to life. The

palms rose like flagpoles into the vivid Caribbean air, pennants painted with a fresh green sap. Around them the sandy floor was -thick With flowering vines and ground ivy, blue leaves like dappled metal foil, as if some midnight gardener had watered them with a secret plant elixir as Johnson lay asleep in his bunk.

He put on Galloway's peaked cap and examined himself in the greasy mirror. Stepping onto the open deck behind the wheelhouse, he inhaled the acrid chemical air of the lagoon. At least it masked the odors of the captain's cabin, a rancid bouquet of ancient sweat, cheap rum, and diesel oil. He had thought seriously of abandoning Galloway's cabin and returning to his hammock in the forecastle, but despite the stench he felt that he owed it to himself to remain in the cabin. The moment that Galloway, with a last disgusted curse, had stepped into the freighter's single lifeboat, he, Johnson, had become the captain of this doomed vessel. He had watched Galloway, the four Mexican crewmen, and the weary Portuguese engineer row off into the dusk, promising himself that he would sleep in the captain's cabin and take his meals at the captain's table. After five years at sea, working as cabin boy and deck hand on the lowest grade of chemical waste carrier, he had a command of his own, this antique freighter, even if the Prospero's course was the vertical one to the seabed of the Caribbean.

Behind the funnel the Liberian flag of convenience hung in tatters, its fabric rotted by the acid air. Johnson stepped onto the stern ladder, steadying himself against the sweating hull plates, and jumped into the shallow water. Careful to find his feet, he waded through the bilious green foam that leaked from the steel drums he had jettisoned from the freighter's deck.

When he reached the clear sand above the tide line he wiped the emerald dye from his jeans and sneakers. Leaning to starboard in the lagoon, the Prospero resembled an exploded paint box. The drums of chemical waste on the foredeck still dripped their effluent through the scuppers. The more sinister belowdecks cargonameless organic by-products that Captain Galloway had been bribed to carry and never entered into his manifest-had dissolved the rusty plates and spilled an eerie spectrum of phosphorescent blues and indigos into the lagoon below.

Frightened of these chemicals, which every port in the Caribbean had rejected, Johnson had begun to jettison the cargo after running the freighter aground. But the elderly diesels had seized and the winch had jarred to a halt, leaving only a few of the drums on the nearby sand with their death's-head warnings and eroded seams.

Johnson set off along the shore, searching the sea beyond the inlet of the lagoon for any sign of Dr. Chambers. Everywhere a deranged horticulture was running riot. Vivid new shoots pushed past the metal debris of old ammunition boxes, filing cabinets, and truck tires. Strange grasping vines clambered over the scarlet caps of giant fungi, their white stems as thick as sailors' bones. Avoiding them, Johnson walked toward an old staff car that sat in an open glade between the palms. Wheelless, its military markings obliterated by the rain of decades, it had settled into the sand, vines encircling its roof and windshield.

Deciding to rest in the car, which once perhaps had driven an American general around the training camps of Puerto Rico, he tore away the vines that had wreathed themselves around the driver's door pillar. As he sat behind the steering wheel it occurred to Johnson that he might leave the freighter and set up camp on the island. Nearby lay the galvanized iron roof of a barrack hut, enough material to build a beach house on the safer, seaward side of the island.

But Johnson was aware of an unstated bond between himself and the derelict freighter. He remembered the last desperate voyage of the Prospero, which he had joined in Veracruz, after being duped by Captain Galloway. The short voyage to Galveston, the debarkation port, would pay him enough to ship as a deck passenger on an inter-island boat heading for the Bahamas. It had been three years since he had seen his widowed mother in Nassau, living in a plywood bungalow by the airport with her in. valid boyfriend.

Needless to say, they had never berthed at Galveston, Miami, or any other of the ports where they had tried to unload their cargo. The crudely sealed cylinders of chemical waste products, supposedly en route to a reprocessing plant in southern Texas, had begun to leak before they left Veracruz. Captain Galloway's temper, like his erratic seamanship and consumption of rum and tequila, increased steadily as he realized that the Mexican shipping agent had abandoned them to the seas. Almost certainly the agent had pocketed the monies allocated for reprocessing and found it more profitable to let the ancient freighter, now refused entry to Veracruz, sail up and down the Gulf of Mexico until her corroded keel sent her conveniently to the bottom. For two months they had cruised forlornly from one port to another, boarded by hostile maritime police and customs officers, public health officials, and journalists alerted to the possibility of a major ecological disaster. At Kingston, Jamaica, a television launch trailed them to the ten-mile limit; at Santo Domingo a spotter plane of the Dominican Navy was waiting for them when they tried to slip into harbor under the cover of darkness. Greenpeace powerboats intercepted them outside Tampa, Florida, when Captain Galloway tried to dump part of his cargo. Firing flares across the bridge of the freighter, the U.S. Coast Guard dispatched them into the Gulf of Mexico in time to meet the tail of Hurricane Clara.

When at last they recovered from the storm the cargo had shifted, and the Prospero listed ten degrees to starboard. Fuming chemicals leaked across the decks from the fractured seams of the waste drums, boiled on the surface of the sea, and sent up a cloud of acrid vapor that left Johnson and the Mexican crewmen coughing through make-shift face masks, and Captain Galloway barricading himself into his cabin with his tequila bottle.

First Officer Pereira had saved the day, rigging up a hosepipe that sprayed the leaking drums with a torrent of water, but by then the Prospero was taking in the sea through its strained plates. When they sighted Puerto Rico the captain had not even bothered to set a course for port. Propping himself against the helm, a bottle in each hand, he signaled Pereira to cut the engines.

In a self-pitying monologue, he cursed the Mexican shipping agent, the U.S.

Coast Guard, the world's agrochemists, and their despicable science that had deprived him of his command. Lastly he cursed Johnson for being so foolish ever to step aboard this ill-fated ship. As the Prospero lay doomed in the water, Pereira appeared with his already packed suitcase, and the captain ordered the Mexicans to lower the lifeboat. It was then that Johnson made his decision to remain onboard. All his life he had failed to impose himself on anything-running errands as a six-year-old for the Nassau airport shoeblacks, cadging pennies for his mother from the irritated tourists, enduring the years of school where he had scarcely learned to read and write, working as a dishwasher at the beach restaurants, forever conned out of his wages by the thieving managers. He had always reacted to events, never initiated anything on his own. Now, for the first time, he could become the captain of the Prospero and master of his own fate. Long before Galloway's curses faded into the dusk, Johnson had leapt down the ladder into the engine room.

As the elderly diesels rallied themselves for the last time, Johnson returned to the bridge. He listened to the propeller's tired but steady beat against the dark ocean and slowly turned the Prospero toward the northwest. Five hundred miles away were the Bahamas and an endless archipelago of secret harbors. Somehow he would get rid of the leaking drums and even, perhaps, ply for hire between the islands, renaming the old tub after his mother, Velvet Mae. Meanwhile Captain Johnson stood proudly on the bridge, over-size cap on his head, three hundred tons of steel deck obedient beneath his feet.

By dawn the next day he was completely lost on an open sea. During the night the freighter's list had increased. Belowdecks the leaking chemicals had etched their way through the hull plates, and a phosphorescent steam enveloped the bridge. The engine room was a kneedeep vat of acid brine. a poisonous vapor rising through the ventilators and coating every rail and deck plate with a lurid slime. Then, as Johnson searched desperately for enough timber to build a raft, he saw the old World War II garbage island seven miles from the Puerto Rican coast. The lagoon inlet was unguarded by the U.S. Navy or Greenpeace speedboats. He steered the Prospero across the calm surface and let the freighter settle into the shallows. The inrush of water smothered the cargo in the hold. Able to breathe again, Johnson rolled into Captain Galloway's bunk, made a space for himself among the empty bottles, and slept his first dreamless sleep. "Hey, you! Are you all right?" A woman's hand pounded on the roof of the staff car. "What are you doing in there?"

Johnson woke with a start, lifting his head from the steering wheel. While he slept the lianas had enveloped the car, climbing up the roof and windshield pillars. Vivid green tendrils looped themselves around his left hand, tying his wrist to the rim of the wheel.

Wiping his face, he saw the American biologist peering at him through the leaves, as if he were the inmate of some bizarre zoo whose cages were the bodies of abandoned motorcars. He tried to free himself and pushed against the driver's door.

"Sit back! I'll cut you loose." She slashed at the vines with her clasp knife,

revealing her fierce and determined wrist. When Johnson stepped onto the ground she held his shoulders, looking him up and down with a thorough eye. She was no more than thirty, three years older than himself, but to Johnson she seemed as self-possessed and remote as the Nassau schoolteachers. Yet her mouth was more relaxed than those pursed lips of his childhood, as if she were genuinely concerned for Johnson. "You're all right," she informed him. "But I wouldn't go for too many rides in that car."

She strolled away from Johnson, her hands pressing the burnished copper trunks of the palms, feeling the urgent pulse of awakening life. Around her shoulders was slung a canvas bag holding a clipboard, sample jars, a camera, and reels of film. "My name's Christine Chambers," she called out to Johnson. "I'm carrying out a botanical project on this island. Have you come from the stranded ship?"

"I'm the captain," Johnson told her without deceit. He reached into the car and retrieved his peaked cap from the eager embrace of the vines, dusted it off, and placed it on his head at what he hoped was a rakish angle. "She's not a wreck-I beached her here for repairs."

"Really? For repairs?" Christine Chambers watched him archly, finding him at least as intriguing as the giant scarletcapped fungi. "So you're the captain. But where's the crew?"

"They abandoned ship." Johnson was glad that he could speak so honestly. He liked this attractive biologist and the way she took a close interest in the island. "There were certain problems with the cargo."

"I bet there were. You were lucky to get here in one piece." She took out a notebook and jotted down some observation on Johnson, glancing at his pupils and lips. "Captain, would you like a sandwich? I've brought a picnic lunch-you look as if you could use a square meal."

"Well . . ." Pleased by her use of his title, Johnson followed her to the beach, where the inflatable sat on the sand. Clearly she had been delayed by the weight of stores: a bell tent, plastic coolers, cartons of canned food, and a small office cabinet. Johnson had survived on a diet of salt beef, cola, and oatmeal biscuits he cooked on the galley stove.

For all the equipment, she was in no hurry to unload the stores, as if unsure of sharing the island with Johnson, or perhaps pondering a different approach to her project, one that involved the participation of the human population of the island. Trying to reassure her, as they divided the sandwiches, he described the last voyage of the *Prospero*, and the disaster of the leaking chemicals. She nodded while he spoke, as if she already knew something of the story. "It sounds to me like a great feat of seamanship," she complimented him. "The crew who abandoned ship-as it happens, they reported that she went down near Barbados. One of them, Galloway I think he was called, claimed they'd spent a month in an open boat."

"Galloway?" Johnson assumed the pursed lips of the Nassau schoolmarm. "One of my less reliable men. So no one is looking for the ship?"

"No. Absolutely no one."

"And they think she's gone down?"

"Right to the bottom. Everyone in Barbados is relieved there's no pollution. Those tourist beaches, you know."

"They're important. And no one in Puerto Rico thinks she's here?"

"No one except me. The island is my research project," she explained. "I teach biology at San Juan University, but I really want to work at Harvard. I can tell you, lectureships are hard to come by. Something very interesting is happening here, with a little luck . . ."

"It is interesting," Johnson agreed. There was a conspiratorial note to Dr. Christine's voice that made him uneasy. "A lot of old army equipment is buried here-I'm thinking of building a house on the beach."

"A good idea ... even if it takes you four or five months. I'll help you out with any food you need. But be careful." Dr. Christine pointed to the weal on his arm, a temporary reaction against some invading toxin in the vine sap. "There's something else that's interesting about this island, isn't there?"

"Well . . ." Johnson stared at the acid stains etching through the Prospero's hull and spreading across the lagoon. He had tried not to think of his responsibility for these dangerous and unstable chemicals. "There are a few other things going on here."

"A few other things?" Dr. Christine lowered her voice. "Look, Johnson, you're sitting in the middle of an amazing biological experiment. No one would allow it to happen anywhere in the world--if they knew, the U.S. Navy would move in this afternoon."

"Would they take away the ship?"

"They'd take it away and sink it in the nearest ocean trench, then scorch the island with flamethrowers."

"And what about me?"

"I wouldn't like to say. It might depend on how advanced . . ." She held his shoulder reassuringly, aware that her vehemence had shocked him. "But there's no reason why they should find out. Not for a while, and by then it won't matter. I'm not exaggerating when I say that you've probably created a new kind of life."

As they unloaded the stores Johnson reflected on her words. He had guessed that

the chemicals leaking from the Prospero had set off the accelerated growth, and that the toxic reagents might equally be affecting himself. In Galloway's cabin mirror he inspected the hairs on his chin and any suspicious moles. The weeks at sea, inhaling the acrid fumes, had left him with raw lungs and throat, and an erratic appetite, but he had felt better since coming ashore. He watched Christine step into a pair of thigh-length rubber boots and move into the shallow water, ladle in hand, looking at the plant and animal life of the lagoon. She filled several specimen jars with the phosphorescent water and locked them into the cabinet inside the tent. "Johnson--you couldn't let me see the cargo manifest?"

"Captain ... Galloway took it with him. He didn't list the real cargo."

"I bet he didn't." Christine pointed to the vermilion-shelled crabs that scuttled through the vivid filaments of kelp, floating like threads of blue electric cable. "Have you noticed? There are no dead fish or crabs--and you'd expect to see hundreds. That was the first thing I spotted. And it isn't just the crabs--you look pretty healthy . . ."

"Maybe I'll be stronger?" Johnson flexed his sturdy shoulder. ". . . in a complete daze, mentally, but I imagine that will change. Meanwhile, can you take me onboard? I'd like to visit the Prospero."

"Dr. Christine Johnson held her arm, trying to restrain this determined woman. He looked at her clear skin and strong legs.

"It's too dangerous, you might fall through the deck."

"Fair enough. Are the containers identified?"

"Yes, there's no secret." Johnson did his best to remember. "Organo . . ."

"Organophosphates? Right what I need to know is which containers are leaking and roughly how much. We might be able to work out the exact chemical reactions--you may not realize it, Johnson, but you've mixed a remarkably potent cocktail. A lot of people will want to learn the recipe, for all kinds of reasons....."

Sitting in the colonel's chair on the porch of the beach house, Johnson gazed contentedly at the luminous world around him, a never-realm of light and life that seemed to have sprung from his own mind. The jungle wall of cycads, giant tamarinds, and tropical creepers crowded the beach to the waterline, and the reflected colors drowned in swaths of phosphorescence that made the lagoon resemble a caldron of electric dyes.

So dense was the vegetation that almost the only free sand lay below Johnson's feet. Every morning he would spend an hour cutting back the flowering vines and wild magnolia that inundated the metal shack. Already the foliage was crushing the galvanized iron roof. However hard he worked--and he found himself too easily distracted--he had been unable to keep clear the r inspection pathways which Christine patrolled on her weekend visits, camera and specimen jars at the

ready. Hearing the sound of her inflatable as she neared the inlet of the lagoon, Johnson surveyed his domain with pride. He had found a metal card table buried in the sand and laid it with a selection of fruits he had picked for Christine that morning. To Johnson's untrained eye they seemed to be strange hybrids of pomegranate and pawpaw, cantaloupe and pineapple. There were giant tomatolike berries and clusters of purple grapes each the size of a baseball. Together they glowed through the overheated light like jewels set in the face of the sun.

By now, four months after his arrival on the Prospero, the onetime garbage island had become a unique botanical garden, generating new species of trees, vines, and flowering plants every day. A powerful life engine was driving the island. As she crossed the lagoon in her inflatable, Christine stared at the aerial terraces of vines and blossoms that had sprung up since the previous weekend. The dead hulk of the Prospero, daylight visible through its acid-etched plates, sat in the shallow water, the last of its chemical wastes leaking into the lagoon. But Johnson had forgotten the ship and the voyage that had brought him here, just as he had forgotten his past life and unhappy childhood under the screaming engines of Nassau airport. Lolling back in his canvas chair, on which was stenciled COLONEL POTTLE. U.S. ARMY ENGINEER CORPS, he felt like a plantation owner who had successfully subcontracted a corner of the original Eden. As he stood up to get Christine he thought only of the future, of his pregnant bride and the son who would soon share the island with him.

"Johnson! My God, what have you been doing?" Christine ran the inflatable onto the beach and sat back, exhausted by the buffeting waves. "It's a botanical madhouse!"

Johnson was so pleased to see her that he forgot his regret over their weekly separations. As she explained, she had her student classes to teach, her project notes and research samples to record and catalog.

"Dr. Christine . . . ! I waited all day!" He stepped into the shallow water, a carmine surf filled with glowing animalcula, and pulled the inflatable onto the sand. He helped her from the craft, his eyes avoiding her curving abdomen under the smock.

"Go on, you can stare..... Christine pressed his hand to her stomach. "How dollook, Johnson?"

"Too beautiful for me, and the island. We've all gone quiet."

"That is gallant-you've become a poet, Johnson."

Johnson never thought of other women and knew that none could be so beautiful as this lady biologist bearing his child. He spotted a plastic cooler among the scientific equipment. "Christine--you've brought me ice cream

"Of course I have. But don't eat it yet. We've a lot to do, Johnson,"

He unloaded the stores, leaving to the last the nylon nets and spring-mounted steel frames in the bottom of the boat. These bird traps were the one cargo he hated to unload. Nesting in the highest branches above the island was a flock of extravagant aerial creatures, sometimes swallows and finches whose jeweled plumage and tail fans transformed them into gaudy peacocks. He had set the traps reluctantly at Christine's insistence. He never objected to catching the phosphorescent fish with their enlarged fins and ruffs of external gills, which seemed to prepare them for life on the land, or the crabs and snails in their baroque armor. But the thought of Christine taking these rare and beautiful birds back to her laboratory made him uneasy—he guessed they would soon end their days under the dissection knife.

"Did you set the traps for me, Johnson?"

"I set all of them and put in the bait."

"Good." Christine heaped the nets onto the sand. More and more she seemed to hurry these days, as if she feared that the experiment might end. "I can't understand why we haven't caught one of them."

Johnson gave an eloquent shrug. In fact he had eaten the canned sardines and released the one bird that had strayed into the trap below the parasol of a giant cycad. The nervous creature with its silken scarlet wings and kite-like tail feathers had been a dream of flight. "Nothing yet—they're clever, those birds."

"Of course they are—they're a new species." She sat in Colonel Pottle's chair, photographing the table of fruit with her small camera. "Those grapes are huge—I wonder what sort of wine they'd make. Champagne of the gods, grand cru . . ."

Warily Johnson eyed the purple and yellow globes. He had eaten the fish and crabs from the lagoon, when asked by Christine, with no ill effects, but he was certain that these fruits were intended for the birds. He knew that Christine was using him, like everything else on the island, as part of her experiment. Even the child she had conceived after their one brief act of love, over so quickly that he was scarcely sure it had ever occurred, was part of the experiment. Perhaps the child would be the first of a new breed of man and he, Johnson, errand runner for airport shoeshine boys, would be the father of an advanced race that would one day repopulate the planet.

As if aware of his impressive physique, she said: "You look wonderfully well, Johnson. If this experiment ever needs to be justified . . ."

"I'm very strong now—I'll be able to look after you and the boy."

"It might be a girl—or something in between." She spoke in a matter-of-fact way that always surprised him. "Tell me, Johnson, what do you do while I'm away?"

"I think about you, Dr. Christine."

"And I certainly think about you, But do you sleep a lot?"

"No. I'm busy with my thoughts. The time goes very quickly."

Christine casually opened her notepad. "You mean the hours go by without you noticing?"

"Yes. After breakfast I fill the oil lamp and suddenly it's time for lunch. But it can go more slowly, too. If I look at a falling leaf in a certain way it seems to stand still."

"Good. You're learning to control time. Your mind is enlarging, Johnson."

"Maybe I'll be as clever as you, Dr. Christine."

"Ah, I think you're moving in a much more interesting direction. In fact, Johnson, I'd like you to eat some of the fruit. Don't worry, I've already analyzed it, and I'll have some myself." She was cutting slices of the melon-sized apple. "I want the baby to try some."

Johnson hesitated, but as Christine always reminded him, none of the new species had revealed a single deformity.

The fruit was pale and sweet, with a pulpy texture and a tang like alcoholic mango. It slightly numbed Johnson's mouth and left a pleasant coolness in the stomach.

A diet for those with wings. "Johnson! Are you sick?"

He woke with a start, not from sleep but from an almost too clear examination of the color patterns of a giant butterfly that had settled on his hand. He looked up from his chair at Christine's concerned eyes, and at the dense vines and flowering creepers that crowded the porch, pressing against his shoulders. The amber of her eyes was touched by the same overlit spectrum that shone through the trees and blossoms. Everything on the island was becoming a prism of itself.

"Johnson, wake up!"

"I am awake. Christine... I didn't hear you come."

"I've been here for an hour." She touched his cheeks, searching for any sign of fever and puzzled by Johnson's distracted manner. Behind her, the inflatable was beached on the few feet of sand not smothered by the vegetation. The dense wall of palms, lianas, and flowering plants had collapsed onto the shore. Engorged on the sun, the giant fruits had begun to split under their own weight, and streams of vivid juice ran across the sand, as if the forest was bleeding.

"Christine? You came back so soon. . . ?" It seemed to Johnson that she had left only a few minutes earlier. He remembered waving good-bye to her and sitting down to finish his fruit and admire the giant butterfly, its wings like the painted hands of a circus clown.

"Johnson--I've been away for a week." She held his shoulder, frowning at the unstable wall of rotting vegetation that towered a hundred feet into the air. Cathedrals of flower-decked foliage were falling into the waters of the lagoon.

"Johnson, help me to unload the stores. You don't look as if you've eaten for days. Did you trap the birds?"

"Birds? No, nothing yet." Vaguely Johnson remembered setting the traps, but he had been too distracted by the wonder of everything to pursue the birds. Graceful, feather-tipped wraiths like gaudy angels, their crimson plumage leaked its ravishing hues into the air. When he fixed his eyes onto them they seemed suspended against the sky, wings fanning slowly as if shaking the time from themselves.

He stared at Christine, aware that the colors were separating themselves from her skin and hair. Superimposed images of herself, each divided from the others by a fraction of a second, blurred the air around her, an exotic plumage that sprang from her arms and shoulders. The staid reality that had trapped them all was beginning to dissolve. Time had stopped and Christine was ready to rise into the air.... He would teach Christine and the child to fly.

"Christine, we can all learn."

"What, Johnson?"

"We can learn to fly. There's no time anymore-everything's too beautiful for time."

"Johnson, look at my watch."

"We'll go and live in the trees, Christine. We'll live with the high flowers. . . ." He took her arm, eager to show her the mystery and beauty of the sky people they would become. She tried to protest but gave in, humoring Johnson as he led her gently from the beach house to the wall of inflamed flowers. Her hand on the radio transmitter in the inflatable, she sat beside the crimson lagoon as Johnson tried to climb the flowers toward the sun. Steadying the child within her, she wept for Johnson, only calming herself two hours later when the siren of a naval cutter crossed the inlet.

"I'm glad you radioed in," the U.S. Navy lieutenant told Christine. "One of the birds reached the base at San Juan. We tried to keep it alive but it was crushed by the weight of its own wings. Like everything else on this island."

He pointed from the bridge to the jungle wall. Almost all the overcrowded canopy had collapsed into the lagoon, leaving behind only a few of the original

palms with their bird traps. The blossoms glowed through the water like thousands of drowned lanterns.

"How long has the freighter been here?" An older civilian, a government scientist holding a pair of binoculars, peered at the riddled hull of the Prospero. Below the beach house two sailors were loading the last of Christine's stores into the inflatable. "It looks as if it's been stranded there for years."

"Six months," Christine told him. She sat beside Johnson, smiling at him encouragingly. "When Captain Johnson realized what was going on he asked me to call you."

"Only six? That must be roughly the life cycle of these new species. Their cellular clocks seem to have stopped instead of reproducing, they force-fed their own tissues, like those giant fruit that contain no seeds. The life of the individual becomes the entire life of the species." He gestured toward the impassive Johnson. "That probably explains our friend's altered time sense great blocks of memory were coalescing in his mind, so that a ball thrown into the air would never appear to land..... A tide of dead fish floated past the cutter's bow, the gleaming bodies like discarded costume jewelry.

"You weren't contaminated in any way?" the lieutenant asked Christine. "I'm thinking of the baby."

"No, I didn't eat any of the fruit," Christine said firmly. "I've been here only twice, for a few hours."

"Good. Of course, the medical people will do all the tests."

"And the island?"

"We've been ordered to torch the whole place. The demolition charges are timed to go off in just under two hours, but we'll be well out of range. It's a pity, in a way."

"The birds are still here," Christine said, aware of Johnson staring at the trees.

"Luckily, you've trapped them all." The scientist offered her the binoculars. "Those organic wastes are hazardous. God knows what might happen if human beings were exposed to long-term contact. All sorts of sinister alterations to the nervous system-people might be happy to stare at a stone all day."

Johnson listened to them talking, glad to feel Christine's hand in his own. She was watching him with a quiet smile, aware that they shared the conspiracy. She would try to save the child, the last fragment of the experiment, and he knew that if it survived it would face a fierce challenge from those who feared it might replace them.

But the birds endured. His head had cleared, and he remembered the visions that had given him a brief glimpse of another, more advanced world. High above the collapsed canopy of the forest he could see the traps he had set, and the great crimson birds sitting on their wings. At least they could carry the dream forward.

Ten minutes later, when the inflatable had been winched onto the deck, the cutter set off through the inlet. As it passed the western headland the lieutenant helped Christine toward the cabin. Johnson followed them, then pushed aside the government scientist and leapt from the rail, diving cleanly into the water. He struck out for the shore a hundred feet away, knowing that he was strong enough to climb the trees and release the birds, with luck a mating pair who would take him with them in their escape from time.

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From the collection *War Fever*, to be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., in April 1991. Copyright 1991 by J. G. Ballard.