

the island of the immortals

URSULA K. LE GUIN

Ursula K. Le Guin is one of the best-known and most universally respected SF writers in the world today. Her famous novel The Left Hand of Darkness may have been the most influential SF novel of its decade, and shows every sign of becoming one of the enduring classics of the genre—even ignoring the rest of Le Guin’s work, the impact of this one novel alone on future SF and future SF writers would be incalculably strong. (Her 1968 fantasy novel, A Wizard of Earthsea, would be almost as influential on future generations of high fantasy writers.) The Left Hand of Darkness won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards, as did Le Guin’s monumental novel The Dispossessed a few years later. Her novel Tehanu won her another Nebula in 1990, and she has also won three other Hugo Awards and two Nebula Awards for her short fiction, as well as the National Book Award for children’s literature for her novel The Farthest Shore, part of her acclaimed Earthsea trilogy. Her other novels include Planet of Exile, The Lathe of Heaven, City of Illusions, Rocannon’s World, The Beginning Place, The Eye of the Heron, The Tombs of Atuan, Searoad, and the controversial multimedia novel Always Coming Home. She has had seven collections: The Wind’s Twelve Quarters, Orsinian Tales, The Compass Rose, Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences, A Fisherman of the Inland Sea, Four Ways to Forgiveness, and most recently, Unlocking the Air. Last year she published Steering the Craft, a slim book on the craft of writing fiction. Her stories have appeared in our Second, Fifth, Eighth, Twelfth, and Thirteenth Annual Collections. She lives with her husband in Portland, Oregon.

In the quiet little story that follows, as sharply, exquisitely, and perfectly drawn as a miniature on tortoiseshell, she shows us that everything has a price...and that the more valuable the object of desire is, the higher that price is likely to be. . . .

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Somebody asked me if I’d heard that there were immortal people on the Yendian Plane, and somebody else told me that there were, so when I go there, I asked about them. The travel agent rather reluctantly showed me a place called the Island of the Immortals on her map. “You don’t want to go there,” she said.

“I don’t?”

“Well, it’s dangerous,” she said, looking at me as if she thought I was not the danger-loving type, in which she was entirely correct. She was a rather unpolished local agent, not an employee of the Interplanary Service. Yendi is not a popular destination. In many ways it’s so like our own plane that it seems hardly worth the trouble of visiting. There are differences, but they’re subtle.

“Why is it called the Island of the Immortals?”

“Because some of the people there are immortal.”

“They don’t die?” I asked, never quite sure of the accuracy of my translomat.

“They don’t die,” she said indifferently. “Now, the Prinjo Archipelago is a lovely place for a restful fortnight.” Her pencil moved southward across the map of the Great Sea of Yendi. My gaze remained on the large, lonely Island of the Immortals. I pointed to it.

“Is there a hotel—there?”

“There are no tourist facilities. Just cabins for the diamond hunters.”

“There are diamond mines?”

“Probably,” she said. She had become dismissive.

“What makes it dangerous?”

“The flies.”

“Biting flies? Do they carry disease?”

“No.” She was downright sullen by now.

“I’d like to try it for a few days,” I said, as winningly as I could. “Just to find out if I’m brave. If I get scared, I’ll come right back. Give me an open flight back.”

“No airport.”

“Ah,” said I, more winningly than ever. “So how would I get there?”

“Ship,” she said, unwon. “Once a week.”

Nothing rouses an attitude like an attitude. “Fine!” I said.

At least, I thought as I left the travel agency, it won’t be anything like Laputa. I had read *Gulliver’s Travels* as a child, in a slightly abridged and probably greatly expurgated version. My memory of it was like all my childhood memories, immediate, broken, vivid—bits of bright particularity in a vast drift of oblivion. I remembered that Laputa floated in the air, so you had to use an airship to get to it. And really I remembered little else, except that the Laputans were immortal, and that I had liked it the least of Gulliver’s four Travels, deciding it was *for grown-ups*, a damning quality at the time. Did the Laputans have spots, moles, something like that, which distinguished them? And were they scholars? But they grew senile, and lived on and on in incontinent idiocy—or did I imagine that? There was something nasty about them, something like that, something for grown-ups.

But I was on Yendi, where Swift’s works are not in the library. I could not look it up. Instead, since I had a whole day before the ship sailed, I went to the library and looked up the Island of the Immortals.

The Central Library of Undund is a noble old building full of modern conveniences, including book-translomat. I asked a librarian for assistance and he brought me Postwand’s *Explorations*, written about a hundred and sixty years earlier, from which I copied what follows. At the time Postwand wrote, the port city where I was staying, An Ria, had not been founded; the great wave of settlers from the east had not begun; the peoples of the coast were scattered tribes of shepherds and farmers. Postwand took a rather patronizing but intelligent interest in their stories.

“Among the legends of the peoples of the West Coast,” he writes, “one concerned a large island two or three days west from Undund Bay, where live *the people who never die*. All whom I asked about it were familiar with the reputation of the Island of the Immortals, and some even told me that members of their tribe had

visited the place. Impressed with the unanimity of this tale, I determined to test its veracity. When at length Vong had finished making repairs to my boat, I sailed out of the Bay and due west over the Great Sea. A following wind favored my expedition.

“About noon on the fifth day, I raised the island. Low-lying, it appeared to be at least fifty miles long from north to south.

“In the region in which I first brought the boat close to the land, the shores were entirely salt marsh. It being low tide, and the weather unbearably sultry, the putrid smell of the mud kept us well away, until at length sighting sand beaches I sailed into a shallow bay and soon saw the roofs of a small town at the mouth of a creek. We tied up at a crude and decrepit jetty and with indescribable emotion, on my part at least, set foot on this isle reputed to hold the secret of ETERNAL LIFE.”

I think I shall abbreviate Postwand; he’s long-winded, and besides, he’s always sneering at Vong, who seems to do most of the work and have none of the indescribable emotions. So he and Vong trudged around the town, finding it all very shabby and nothing out of the way, except that there were dreadful swarms of flies. Everyone went about in gauze clothing from head to toe, and all the doors and windows had screens. Postwand assumed the flies would bite savagely, but found they didn’t; they were annoying, he says, but one scarcely felt their bites, which didn’t swell up or itch. He wondered if they carried some disease. He asked the islanders, who disclaimed all knowledge of disease, saying nobody ever got sick except mainlanders.

At this, Postwand got excited, naturally, and asked them if they ever died. “Of course,” they said.

He does not say what else they said, but one gathers they treated him as yet another idiot from the mainland asking stupid questions. He becomes quite testy, and makes comments on their backwardness, bad manners, and execrable cookery. After a disagreeable night in a hut of some kind, he explored inland for several miles, on foot since there was no other way to get about. In a tiny village near a marsh he saw a sight that was, in his words, “proof positive that the islanders’ claim of being free from disease was mere boastfulness, or something yet more sinister: for a more dreadful example of the ravages of udreba I have never seen, even in the wilds of Rotogo. The sex of the poor victim was indistinguishable; of the legs, nothing remained but stumps; the whole body was as if it had been melted in fire; only the hair, which was quite white, grew luxuriantly, long, tangled, and filthy—a crowning horror to this sad spectacle.”

I looked up udreba. It’s a disease the Yendians dread as we dread leprosy, which it resembles, though it is far more immediately dangerous; a single contact with saliva or any exudation can cause infection. There is no vaccine and no cure. Postwand was horrified to see children playing close by the udreb. He apparently lectured a woman of the village on hygiene, at which she took offense and lectured him back, telling him not to stare at people. She picked up the poor udreb “as if it were a child of five,” he says, and took it into her hut. She came out with a bowl full of something, muttering loudly. At this point Vong, with whom I sympathize, suggested that it was time to leave. “I acceded to my companion’s ground-less

apprehensions,” Postwand says. In fact, they sailed away that evening.

I can't say that this account raised my enthusiasm for visiting the island. I sought some more modern information. My librarian had drifted off, the way Yendians always seemed to do. I didn't know how to use the subject catalogues, or it was even more incomprehensibly organized than our electronic subject catalogues, or there was singularly little information concerning the Island of the Immortals in the library. All I found was a treatise on the *Diamonds of Aya*—a name sometimes given the island. The article was too technical for the translomat. I couldn't understand much except that apparently there were no mines; the diamonds did not occur deep in the earth but were to be found lying on the surface of it, as I think is the case in a southern African desert. As the island of Aya was forested and swampy, its diamonds were exposed by heavy rains or mudslides in the wet season. People went and wandered around looking for them. A big one turned up just often enough to keep people coming. The islanders apparently never joined in the search. In fact, some baffled diamond hunters claimed that the natives buried diamonds when they found them. If I understood the treatise, some that had been found were immense by our standards: they were described as shapeless lumps, usually black or dark, occasionally clear, and weighing up to five pounds. Nothing was said about cutting these huge stones, what they were used for, or their market price. Evidently the Yendi didn't prize diamonds as we do. There was a lifeless, almost furtive tone to the treatise, as if it concerned something vaguely shameful.

Surely if the islanders actually knew anything about “the secret of ETERNAL LIFE,” there'd be a bit more about them, and it, in the library?

It was mere stubbornness, or reluctance to go back to the sullen travel agent and admit my mistake, that impelled me to the docks the next morning.

I cheered up no end when I saw my ship, a charming miniliner with about thirty pleasant staterooms. Its fortnightly round took it to several islands farther west than Aya. Its sister ship, stopping by on the homeward leg, would bring me back to the mainland at the end of my week. Or perhaps I would simply stay aboard and have a two-week cruise? That was fine with the ship's staff. They were informal, even lackadaisical, about arrangements. I had the impression that low energy and a short attention span were quite common among Yendians. But my companions on the ship were undemanding, and the cold fish salads were excel-lent. I spent two days on the top deck watching sea-birds swoop, great red fish leap, and translucent vane-wings hover over the sea. We sighted Aya very early in the morning of the third day. At the mouth of the bay the smell of the marshes was truly discouraging; but a conversation with the ship's captain had decided me to visit Aya after all, and I disembarked

The captain, a man of sixty or so, had assured me that there were indeed immortals on the island. They were not born immortal, but contracted immortality from the bite of the island flies. It was, he thought, a virus. “You'll want to take precautions,” he said. “It's rare. I don't think there's been a new case in the last hundred years—longer, maybe. But you don't want to take chances.”

After pondering awhile I inquired, as delicately as possible, though delicacy is hard to achieve on the translomat, whether there weren't people who *wanted* to escape death—people who came to the island *hoping* to be bitten by one of these

lively flies. Was there a drawback I did not know about, some price too high to pay even for immortality?

The captain considered my question for a while. He was slow-spoken, unexcitable, verging on the lugubrious. "I think so," he said. He looked at me. "You can judge," he said. "After you've been there."

He would say no more. A ship's captain is a person who has that privilege.

The ship did not put into the bay, but was met out beyond the bar by a boat that took passengers ashore. The other passengers were still in their cabins. Nobody but the captain and a couple of sailors watched me (all rigged out head to foot in a suit of strong but gauzy mesh which I had rented from the ship) clamber down into the boat and wave goodbye. The captain nodded. One of the sailors waved. I was extremely frightened. It was no help at all that I didn't know what I was frightened of.

Putting the captain and Postwand together, it sounded as if the price of immortality was the horrible disease, *udreba*. But I really had very little evidence, and my curiosity was intense. If a virus that made you immortal turned up in my country, vast sums of money would be poured into studying it, and if it had bad effects they'd alter it genetically to get rid of the bad effects, and the talk shows would yatter on about it, and news anchors would pontificate about it, and the Pope would do some pontificating too, and so would all the other holy men, and meanwhile the very rich would be cornering not only the market, but the supplies. And then the very rich would be even more different from you and me.

What I was really curious about was the fact that none of this had happened. The Yendians were apparently so uninterested in their chance to be immortal that there was scarcely anything about it in the library.

But I could see, as the boat drew close to the town, that the travel agent had been a bit disingenuous. There had been hotels here—big ones, six or eight stories. They were all visibly derelict, signs askew, windows boarded or blank.

The boatman, a shy young man, rather nice-looking as well as I could tell through my gauzy envelope, said, "Hunters' lodge, ma'am?" into my translomat. I nodded and he sailed us neatly to a small jetty at the north end of the docks. The waterfront too had seen better days. It was now sagging and forlorn, no ships, only a couple of trawlers or crabbers. I stepped up onto the dock, looking about nervously for flies; but there were none at the moment. I tipped the boatman a couple of radio, and he was so grateful he took me up the street, a sad little street, to the diamond hunters' lodge. It consisted of eight or nine decrepit cabins managed by a dispirited woman who, speaking slowly but without any commas or periods, said to take Number Four because the screens were the best ones breakfast at eight dinner at seven eighteen radio and did I want a lunch packed a radio fifty extra.

All the other cabins were unoccupied. The toilet had a little, internal, eternal leak, *tink...tink*, which I could not find the source of. Dinner and breakfast arrived on trays, and were edible. The flies arrived with the heat of the day, plenty of them, but not the thick fearsome swarms I had expected. The screens kept them out, and the gauze suit kept them from biting. They were small, weak-looking, brownish flies.

That day and the next morning, walking about the town, the name of which I could not find written anywhere, I felt that the Yendian tendency to depression had

bottomed out here, attained nadir. The islanders were a sad people. They were listless. They were lifeless. My mind turned up that word and stared at it.

I realized I'd waste my whole week just getting depressed if I didn't rouse up my courage and ask some questions. I saw my young boatman fishing off the jetty and went to talk to him.

"Will you tell me about the immortals?" I asked him, after some halting amenities.

"Well, most people just walk around and look for them. In the woods," he said.

"No, not the diamonds," I said, checking the translomat. "I'm not really very interested in diamonds."

"Nobody much is any more," he said. "There used to be a lot of tourists and diamond hunters. I guess they do something else now."

"But I read in a book that there are people here who live very, very long lives—who actually don't die."

"Yes," he said, placidly.

"Are there any immortal people in town? Do you know any of them?"

He checked his fishing line. "Well, no," he said. "There was a new one, way back in my grandpa's time, but it went to the mainland. It was a woman. I guess there's an old one in the village." He nodded toward the island. "Mother saw it once."

"If you could, would you like to live a long time?"

"Sure!" he said, with as much enthusiasm as a Yendian is capable of. "You know."

"But you don't want to be immortal. You wear the fly-gauze."

He nodded. He saw nothing to discuss in all this. He was fishing with gauze gloves, seeing the world through a mesh veil. That was life.

The storekeeper told me that you could walk to the village in a day and showed me the path. My dispirited landlady packed me a lunch. I set out next morning, attended at first by thin, persistent swarms of flies. It was a dull walk across a low, damp landscape, but the sun was mild and pleasant, and the flies finally gave up. To my surprise, I got to the village before I was even hungry for lunch. The Islanders must walk slowly and seldom. It had to be the right village, though, because they spoke of only one, "the village," again no name.

It was small and poor and sad: six or seven wooden huts, rather like Russian izbas, stilted up a bit to keep them from the mud. Poultry, something like guinea fowl but mud-brown, scuttled about everywhere, making soft, raucous noises. A couple of children ran away and hid as I approached.

And there, propped up next to the village well, was the figure Postwand had described, just as he had described it—legless, sexless, the face almost featureless, blind, with skin like badly burned bread, and thick, matted, filthy white hair.

I stopped, appalled.

A woman came out of the hut to which the children had run. She came down the rickety steps and walked up to me. She gestured at my translomat, and I automatically held it out to her so she could speak into it.

"You came to see the Immortal," she said.

I nodded.

“Two radio fifty,” she said.

I got out the money and handed it to her.

“Come this way,” she said. She was poorly dressed and not clean, but was a fine-looking woman, thirty-five or so, with unusual decisiveness and vigor in her voice and movements.

She led me straight to the well and stopped in front of the being propped up in a legless canvas fisherman’s chair next to it. I could not look at the face, nor the horribly maimed hand. The other arm ended in a black crust above the elbow. I looked away from that.

“You are looking at the Immortal of our village,” the woman said in the practiced singsong of the tour guide. “It has been with us for many many centuries. For over one thousand years it has belonged to the Roya family. In this family it is our duty and pride to look after the Immortal. Feeding hours are six in the morning and six in the evening. It lives on milk and barley broth. It has a good appetite and enjoys good health with no sicknesses. It does not have udreba. Its legs were lost when there was an earthquake one thousand years ago. It was also damaged by fire and other accidents before it came into the care of the Roya family. The legend of my family says that the Immortal was once a handsome young man who made his living for many lifetimes of normal people by hunting in the marshes. This was two or three thousand years ago, it is believed. The Immortal cannot hear what you say or see you, but is glad to accept your prayers for its wellbeing and any offerings for its support, as it is entirely dependent on the Roya family for food and shelter. Thank you very much. I will answer questions.”

After a while I said, “It can’t die.”

She shook her head. Her face was impassive; not unfeeling, but closed.

“You aren’t wearing gauze,” I said, suddenly realizing this. “The children weren’t. Aren’t you—“

She shook her head again. “Too much trouble,” she said, in a quiet, unofficial voice. “The children always tear the gauze. Anyhow, we don’t have many flies. And there’s only one.”

It was true that the flies seemed to have stayed behind, in the town and the heavily manicured fields near it.

“You mean there’s only one immortal at a time?”

“Oh, no,” she said. “There are others all around. In the ground. Sometimes people find them. Souvenirs. The really old ones. Ours is young, you know.” She looked at the Immortal with a weary but proprietary eye, the way a mother looks at an unpromising infant.

“The diamonds?” I said. “The diamonds are immortals?”

She nodded. “After a really long time,” she said. She looked away, across the marshy plain that surrounded the village, and then back at me. “A man came from the mainland, last year, a scientist. He said we ought to bury our Immortal. So it could turn to diamond, you know. But then he said it takes thousands of years to turn. All that time it would be starving and thirsty in the ground and nobody would look after it. It is wrong to bury a person alive. It is our family duty to look after it. And no tourists would come.”

It was my turn to nod. The ethics of this situation were beyond me. I accepted her choice.

“Would you like to feed it?” she asked, apparently liking something about me, for she smiled at me.

“No,” I said, and I have to admit that I burst into tears.

She came closer and patted my shoulder.

“It is very, very sad,” she said. She smiled again. “But the children like to feed it,” she said. “And the money helps.”

“Thank you for being so kind,” I said, wiping my eyes, and I gave her another five radio, which she took gratefully. I turned around and walked back across the marshy plains to the town, where I waited four more days until the sister ship came by from the west, and the nice young man took me out in the boat, and I left the Island of the Immortals, and soon after that I left the Yendian Plane.

We are a carbon-based life form, as the scientists say, but how a human body could turn to diamond I do not know, unless through some spiritual factor, perhaps the result of genuinely endless suffering.

Perhaps “diamond” is only a name the Yendians give these lumps of ruin, a kind of euphemism.

I am still not certain what the woman in the village meant when she said, “There’s only one.” She was not referring to the immortals. She was explaining why she didn’t protect herself or her children from the flies, why she found the risk not worth the bother. It is possible that she meant that among the swarms of flies in the island marshes there is only one fly, one immortal fly, whose bite infects its victim with eternal life.