

## DEBATABLE LANDS

by Liz Williams

**Liz Williams's forthcoming books include *Precious Dragon* and *The Shadow Pavilion* (both from *Night Shade*). One of her most recent novels, *Banner of Souls* (Bantam Spectra, 2006), is currently nominated for the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award. It was also a finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke award. The author's contribution to our annual slightly spooky October/ November issue may look a little like fantasy and a little like horror, but it's all science fiction.**

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He chased it through the rushes at the water's edge, late spring, with the dark-mist twilight coming down around him. It was as though he had been chasing it lifelong, all through the racing years of childhood, past the time when he was initiated as a warrior and warlord's man, past the battles of Cadon and Burn, the years of love and the years of war. He knew that it was barely a short span since the hounds had put up the scent and begun the chase, but that was what it felt like. And already he was exhausted by it, bone weary, as though the day was already at its end. The thing he was chasing had sapped him: he could feel it sipping at his strength, leaching into marrow and sinew, spooling him out like the thread from a dropped spindle. Then it raised its unnatural head and gave a pealing cry and the sound brought him to his knees.

He was somewhere else. There were towers all around, made of red stone, higher than any building he had ever seen before. They reached up into cloudy greyness, rain on the way, and he felt dizzy and disconnected. Hastily he looked down and around. He stood on a grassy circle but the grass was not green, as it should be, but yellow and sere, as though the summer had been hot and long. It did not feel like summer to him, but there were no trees to show him the season.

There was, however, a plank of wood on a ball, tilted so that one end of the plank rested on the ground. A smaller plank hung from a frame, creaking in the rising wind. He blinked. A child was sitting on the plank, swinging to and fro. The child was staring at him, her face as blank as an egg.

"Where am I?" he cried. "What is this place?"

But the child's face cracked and she laughed and laughed, not kind laughter but cold, and he knew her for one of the Changing, or thought he

did. Then the child and the towers were gone and there were only the rushes and the marsh's edge, with the wind whistling through the reeds.

That night, he dreamed of Less Britain.

He had been born there, on the sea's edge. First memories were of the salt wind whipping his face, the ocean thundering in and lashing against the granite cliffs until exhausted into froth. His father had died young, in Broceliande, but Broceliande was too often a word they used when they did not want you to know how a man had died, the magic in the name weaving a spell over blood and shattered bone, making death into music. A forest code, and he had never found out how his father had met his end.

His mother had gone under the protection of his uncle shortly afterward—not willingly, but she had little choice and he had rejoiced, seeing his uncle's fort as a safe place, true, but also the court in which he would become a man. He had been made welcome, his mother less so, and as she faded and sank in the shadows of the tower, he was trained in arms. There was little doubt as to what kind of man he would be: a warrior, but silent-souled, loving the woods and marshes, the sea's edge, solitude. When he took his totem, it was not raven or gull, but curlew, the sad cry in the dark, always at the edge of things. The other boys, and, later, men, recognized this: he was left alone.

When he was thirteen, he killed his first man, a raider from the northeast. By the time he was seventeen, he had killed more, a man for every year of his age. Shortly after that, the call came from the High Court and he left the sea-churned shores and the cold cliffs for the milder, wetter marshlands around the island kingdoms, in Britain-the-More.

He was initiated, all the same. They sent him out into the lake villages, the lands that had belonged to the king's queen Whiteshadow, that she had brought with her as dowry. He saw the marsh homes of the small dark people, the ones who had been there since time began and the moon was set on its track. He did not understand them, and they did not trust him, although they admired the iron spear he carried and he saw them looking at it with longing. They were covered in blue markings, allowing them to disappear against the reeds and the coiling mist. He painted himself with the same, and went out into the marsh when the early sun was a brass circle in the east.

That was when he saw the thing, but that came later. When he first took the coracle out into the rushes that marked the channel, a curlew flew across his path, calling its ghost-cry, and he knew it would be a good killing

day. He speared a heron shortly after that, laying its striped corpse on the slats of the coracle, admiring the beauty of it. Then a crested duck, but never the totem he was seeking: hunting was a pastime, nothing more, but it was preparation for the initiation feast. He had no intention of being unsuccessful.

He heard it before he saw it. At first he thought it was one of the booming birds that rose like reeds, with their necks stretched up from the marsh. It was a long, belling cry, similar to bird or hound, but with a strange pattern to it, like someone crying out in a language that he did not understand. Maybe it was one of the lake people themselves, come stealing after him to take the iron spear, and he jolted round in the coracle. No one was there.

It came again and it was desolate, a spirit's cry. He reached for the charm around his neck, hazel bound with bronze to keep him safe from fire and water, and he thought it had worked because the cry was cut off, suddenly, as if choked. Then he swung the oar, took the coracle around a bend in the channel into a wide flat pool, and saw it.

It looked like death. It was all sinew and bone, with more legs than a natural beast, and a face made of spines, that as he stared, aghast, shifted to become something else, something human and ancient and sad. Then it bounded high in the air. He saw a twisting tail, ending in a spiked club, and all of it was the color of summer roses, or the inside of a dead man on the battlefield's earth. It was gone and he was left gaping after it.

He knew then that his initiation was complete: he had seen what he was supposed to see, yet he did not know what that was. He could not take this for his totem; it was no natural thing. And so, wondering, he paddled the coracle back through the channel of reeds, to the banks of alder through which a white sun was rising.

It was early, but he had seen enough. There was a bursting pressure in his head, the sense of a summer storm. He put his hands to his ears to block out thunder, then realized that it was within. It was not until he stumbled back into the alder groves that the pressure lessened and even then his head rang to the end of the day.

The high king's oak-man was silent, when he spoke of what he had seen. At first, Curlew thought that he was not believed. But yarrow thrown smoldering into the fire sent smoke into the oak-man's rafters and the oak-man passed a knife across the palm of Curlew's hand and proclaimed him a man of the high court.

That night, the high king asked him to tell the court what he had seen. He did so grudgingly, but the warriors did not laugh; something about his quietness, perhaps, or the black haunt in his eyes. The thing he had seen had left a scar on his soul, something he did not want to tell the other warriors, but perhaps they saw it in him all the same.

His account of the creature, his quest beast, excited them. Knives were stuck into the tabletop; toasts were made. The king watched with guarded interest; by his side, Whiteshadow's face was avid. They wanted to set out that night, run the beast to ground in the marshes, capture it and bring it back—living or dead, or so the head of the king's warriors boasted. Curlew did not think that was as easy a choice as it might seem, but he said nothing.

The king was indulgent, but held them back. Curlew, watching the king's face closely, thought he saw something pass across it, a shadow like the knowledge of a man's death, but he was not sure. The king was a young man, who looked old, and Curlew did not know what the king had or had not seen.

That night, he dreamed he was back in the marshes. It was afternoon, the day glowing, but when he looked up he could see the stars and he knew that the glow was not coming from the sun. The beast came out of the light, walking on two legs like a man, but the rest of its legs were coiled around it, drifting like seaweed in the shining air. Curlew reached for the iron spear but it was no longer by his side and anyway, there was no need. His fear had drained into the light, leaving him empty and calm.

"What are you?" he said, and the beast replied with that belling cry that seemed to be made of words. He had the sudden glimpse of a great plain, grey and shivering with grasses, mountains in the distance that were the color of old ale. Home, but not his. Then it was gone and the beast and the dream with it.

Next morning, nine warriors rode to the marsh, leaving their rough-coated ponies restless at the water's edge. Curlew went with them, but did not follow them into the reeds. Instead, he waited, standing alongside the oak-man as the sun came up through the alder groves.

"That boy, the one they call Lamb," the oak-man said. "You know him?"

Curlew nodded. "I've seen him at the court."

“He is older than he looks. Lamb is his child-name; he has not yet seen his totem.”

“Perhaps this will be it,” Curlew said, with an idleness that he did not feel, for suddenly the back of his neck prickled like nettle-sting. The oak-man gave him a sharp glance.

“I will be surprised if he comes back.”

“Do you know of this thing, this quest beast?” Curlew asked, echoing the previous day.

“No. I told you truth,” the oak-man said. “But I have heard of things like the thing you have seen. They come after dark stars; war comes in their wake, and famine. They love the blood of men. There were a lot of things like that, in the wake of the great comet that swept the land a hundred years ago, bringing iron cold, disease. This is why I will be surprised if Lamb comes back on his own two feet.”

“I will be sorry,” Curlew murmured.

“If Lamb dies, it could lead to war.”

“Why so? Is he a warlord’s son?”

The oak-man nodded. “Bennek of the north marshes, beyond Broceliande. Your country.”

“I know Bennek. Not an easy man.” Curlew chose words carefully.

“Lamb is the only one left; he was fostered here. Bennek thinks it will bring advantage, that there will be the possibility of a land-claim.”

“But not if the boy dies.”

“Oh no. Not then. I told you. War comes in the wake of such beasts, and famine.”

They fell silent, gazing out over the marsh. Curlew could barely see the rushes through the mist. One of the horses shifted, uneasy, and then the cry came, belling out over the water. Curlew looked at the oak-man and saw that his face had grown strained and old.

“I have not—” he started to say. Curlew put a hand on the man’s arm, felt the trembling, did not answer.

Lamb did not come back. He had gone down into the water, along with four of the others. The ones who remained spoke of horror, their faces twisting with a lack of understanding, but Curlew had seen the thing in the marsh and knew how it crept into the head. He remembered his glowing dream and nearly smiled, but the slack, terrified faces before him drove the smile away and he could only think of the dead.

They rode back to the high court in silence and Curlew went straight to the chamber in the tower, leaving the oak-man to tell the king of what had taken place. He was bone-tired, as if the heat had been leached from his marrow, leaving him a thin dry stick. He thought that they might blame him for the tragedy, but they did not. The king said only, “We must find it. Find it and kill it.” Curlew agreed, but the thought of going after the belling thing was a dreadful one.

Not long after that, word came from Lamb’s father Bennek, demanding reparation.

“He wants land,” the oak-man said, as they walked together on the ridge of the fort.

“Of course he does,” Curlew said, surprised. “What else would he want?”

The oak-man shrugged. “A woman, perhaps.”

“No woman is worth a son,” Curlew said. “Unless she brings land with her.”

“Well, that is the way of it, isn’t it?” the oak-man said. “The lands he wants are not the ones that fostering might have brought. They are the swamplands, the ones that belonged to the queen, to Whiteshadow.”

“That makes no sense. Half of that is swamp,” Curlew said.

“And half is fertile water meadow. Good grazing.”

“Her father took those lands in war, reparation in turn.”

The oak-man gave Curlew a glance that was filled with amusement as well as curiosity. “You have learned a lot since you came here, and not just

of war.”

“Land is part of war,” Curlew said. “What use is war else, if not for land?”

“What use indeed? But the lands that Lamb’s father wants have always been debatable lands in consequence, subject to constant dispute.”

“And now, more dispute. Will Bennek come here, do you think?”

“Almost certainly,” the oak-man said. “The king will want you near, I think. You speak the language, and you know him. Ordinarily, he would not come; he would send warriors.”

“And they would be sent back to him. Or their hands would.” Curlew thought of the limed heads that marked the doorway of the fort, set into the lintel so that the voices of their spirits might carry the message out through all the worlds, that this was not a place to dishonor.

“Of course. But this is a matter of pride; the boy was the only son, the heir. He was in the high king’s charge.”

“I hold myself responsible,” Curlew said, after a pause. “I was the one who saw the beast, whatever it is. I was the one who started things.”

The oak-man sighed. “Who is to say who starts things? You did not make the creature. You did not summon it. Unless there is something you’re not telling me.”

Curlew laughed. “A quick enough head and my sword arm, that’s the kind of power I’ve got. Not the sort of power that brings nightmares to life. The land is full enough of nightmares as it is. Keeps that come and go, spirits who pass between human and animal, warriors conjured from the trees....”

“But nothing like the thing in the marshes.”

“No. Nothing like that.”

After that, there seemed little else to say. Three days later, Lamb’s father arrived from Less Britain.

Curlew was the one designated to take the warlord out to the debatable lands. He did so without reluctance, glad to get away from the

stifling fright of the court. Four deaths, bad enough, but since then the tale had grown until it was as though the cold clamminess of the marshes had crept into the stone of the fort, and into the bones and minds of men.

But when they reached the borders of Whiteshadow's lands, beyond the lake villages, Curlew realized that it was no better. At this time of the year, with the mist rising up from the stagnant water, black and slow between the reed-beds, there was more marsh than water meadow. The willows were straggling and rotten, and the alders, which otherwise would have gone to make good shields, seemed stunted. Yet Bennek slapped Curlew on the back, handed him a swig of Breton mead from his own leather flask, declared himself well pleased.

"Sure, now?" Curlew said. "It's a bit wet. No good for growing, if you ask me, whatever the summer grazing might be like."

"No matter," Bennek replied. He seemed remarkably cheerful, given his recent loss. "I have plans."

Curlew waited, but he didn't say any more. They rode around the bounds, then back to the court, arriving half a day later.

"What did you think?" the oak-man asked Curlew, that night.

"Of Bennek? Or of the lands?"

"Both."

"I think Bennek must be a madman or a fool and yet I know him to be neither. Nor does he seem so deeply grieved, for one who has lost his only son, and that recently. I think the lands are a wasteland, and Whiteshadow would do well to get rid of them."

"Whiteshadow does not think so, and nor does her husband. I heard her say that she wished Bennek had chosen almost anywhere else."

"They were her dowry," Curlew said. "I always wondered why."

Next day, he was given another chance to find out.

The high king asked him to ride through the lands, assess damage to the meadows, and the number of sheep and pigs still present. He was to talk to shepherd and swineherd. Bennek trusted him, it seemed, because he was his uncle's man: a good intermediary between the warlord and the



high king.

He was halfway across the marsh, riding hock-high through dark water with the willows whipping in the wind, when he heard it, the same dreadful, belling cry. He felt his guts turn watery, his head begin to pound. He did not want to see it again. He drove the pony on but the pony needed no urging: it screamed as the cry rang out again. And then, somehow, the thing was ahead of him, standing under the willows, beckoning. It threw its cry over his head and around his shoulders, roping him in. The pony reared, throwing him backward into the water, then bolted. He stumbled to his feet and followed the thing, which was loping through the swamp but leaving no ripples in its wake. It is a spirit, he thought, but he could smell it, a sweet rankness like rotting roses.

Then it was gone and he was among towers and a child's cold laughter, ending in dreams.

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Back at the fort, he was summoned to the king's own chamber to tell his story. Bennek watched him all the while, with little light eyes, as though sipping the story from him. The king was summoned briefly away, to take a message, and, as soon as he was out of the room, Curlew said to Bennek, swiftly, in their own language:

"Have nothing to do with this place. Ask for any other lands; he will give them to you. This is an ill totem, and it has already taken your son."

"You are a good man," Bennek said, in the same tongue. "Loyal to your countrymen. I won't forget that. But it is none of your concern."

Curlew knew when he was being dismissed and he was only a warrior, no statesman. It was Bennek's business, not his own. He turned to the narrow window of the fort and looked out across the hearth fires, waiting until the high king returned. Bennek was due to depart on the following day, having secured his lands. Curlew hoped that was the last of it.

"It is a temporary thing only," the king said, once Bennek had gone. "He has asked for you, by name and by oath."

"I am no steward, lord," Curlew said. His sinews ached, as though his body was drawing in on itself. "And—I have a horror of the place." It was not a confession he would have made to anyone else.

“His son was slain,” the high king said. “It is an honor bond. He trusts you.”

“I wish he did not.” But he knew he would be going, all the same.

Whiteshadow’s lands—now Bennek’s—did not have a fort to secure them and the people would not have accepted him into the lake villages. Curlew took up his stewardship in a shepherd’s broch, a circle of old stone on a slight rise. This was foul land, he thought as he surveyed his new domain: the waters brackish, seeping in from the estuary of the great river, winter flooded and too low for frost to whiten and crack and kill any marsh-breeding thing. It was no wonder to him that the creature had taken up residence there: that was foul, too, unnatural. And he wondered whether Whiteshadow had kept it because of her dowry, simply because it was her own land, or whether there was some other purpose. The high king was surrounded by witches—Whiteshadow herself, his sister Sea, her mother Grain, all of them prone to jealousies and silences, spinning endless spell webs between them, sometimes to weave them together, sometimes to separate. Curlew had no time for women, apart from the usual thing. Whiteshadow’s motives in keeping the land were suspect, and so was her release of it. He thought of the place of the great red towers and of the child, laughing as it swung, and shivered.

The day after that he rode around the bounds, with a dutiful reluctance that felt echoed in the pony’s nervous, plodding steps. He saw nothing worse than ducks. The day after that, he did the same thing, and the day after. On that third day, he saw a white swan drifting across a mere like a cloud and next moment it was gone. Only a white feather spiraled down to show where it had been, but there were no ripples in the water. Curlew watched the spot for a long time, but the bird did not reappear and as twilight drew on, he went back to the broch.

The broch was clammy and damp. He longed to light a fire, or a lamp, anything to keep the encroaching darkness at bay, but instinct told him not to do so, because once he did that, it would separate him from the night, creating a barrier that something might long to cross. He crouched by the small window of the broch, his sword across his knees, looking outward.

A blink. The red tower was back, blazing with light, a caer. He looked out onto a world of stone. There was a rushing sound as a sudden wind hurled something past, scaled, gleaming. Curlew jerked back. Blue light glowed high in the windows of the caer; Curlew knew magic when he saw it. He made a sign, hoping the blue light would go away, but it flickered and changed, grew brighter. That was when he knew he was doomed.

And soon after that, it came. It moved quickly through the stone world, standing upright on two legs, like a warrior. It was carrying something, a small form. Perhaps the child he had seen, or perhaps a lamb. Curlew could not tell. But it had the unmistakable scent of a hunter: blood and metal, he could smell it from inside the broch. It came up to the window of the broch and stared in: Curlew looked into eyes the color of bloody fire.

That was all he remembered. He woke the next morning to find himself lying by the window. He had pissed himself in the night and the earth stank of it. That was when he decided to ride back to court—to Less Britain if necessary—and tell the king to find another man. But he did not have to. On that day, Bennek came back.

Curlew glimpsed them riding through the reeds and for a moment, in the early morning mist, he thought they were the beast. He flinched back against the wall of the broch, but then the ring of metal harness across the water reassured him and he went out to meet them. Bennek had the self-satisfied look of a man who has pulled off a great trick.

“My Lord?” Curlew said.

Bennek dismounted and clapped him on the shoulder. “None of that, boy. You’re one of us and you’ve played your part. You deserve a share of what’s to come.” A grey gaze, opaque as mist, Curlew thought. But he could not fail to deliver the warning. Devious Bennek may be, but he was still a fellow countryman and the friend of kindred; there had been foster ties in the past and that made him almost blood-kin.

“I have seen the beast,” he told Bennek now. “And there is something else, something you should know. This is a gateway to the otherworld, a great red caer. I have seen it. It is set in a wasteland.”

He expected fear to fill Bennek’s face, anxiety at the least of it, but the warlord only laughed and again struck Curlew on the shoulder.

“Why, so it is as I had hoped.”

“Hoped?” Curlew said.

“You think I wanted the land for *this*?” Bennek’s sweeping hand indicated the rustling reeds, the glistening peaty waters of the mere. “There’s nothing here except sallie willow and eels. The pasture Whiteshadow speaks about is as much of a myth as one of old Myrddin’s

stories. What I want is what you saw.”

Curlew stared at him, disbelieving. “The wasteland?”

“The *key* to the wasteland, boy. The questing beast.”

“The beast is a horror,” Curlew said. He felt unreal, as though the world was drifting away from him, diminishing through the mists. “What can you possibly want with it? It killed your son.”

“This is worth even a son,” Bennek said and that cold grey glaze crept even further across his eyes, like ice in winter, and that was when Curlew knew he was mad. “The beast opens the lock of time, it unlocks the gateway to all the times that are, in this place and maybe more. That caer you saw is what will come, perhaps centuries from now when the water has drawn back toward the estuary and this has become solid ground. My oak-man has seen the past—a great swamp, with dragons moving through it. Imagine the riches that lie even in this meager place, that the beast can lead us to.”

“Bennek,” said Curlew, despairingly. “What *is* the beast?”

“A monster. A god. Who can say? My oak-man has looked into a dark glass and tells me that it is a spirit from the skies, but he does not know for certain. Help me capture it, now that these lands are mine, and perhaps we will find out.”

“My lord—Bennek—I do not think it will be easily captured.” *If at all*, but Curlew did not want to say that. You had to be careful when speaking with the mad; they could take your words and turn them against you, and Bennek was his lord, with armed men at his back. Curlew wondered what they thought, but did not look at them.

“But you agree with me, don’t you, you do see that it *can* be captured, can be taken? All that is needed is the right kind of net and I have such a net, made out of bronze, fashioned with golden threads from the fire islands far to the south, my oak-man had it made for me. See? Do you see?” He reached into a fold of his tunic and took out something that glittered and sparked, only for a moment, before thrusting it back. Curlew did not have time to see if it was really a net, but the forge-smell of spell work hung about it and he felt his scalp prickle. One of the horses stirred uneasily and blew a cloud of breath into the freezing air.

“And you can take us to it,” Bennek said.

Curlew was sure, then, that this would be the day on which his death would come. He had known it ever since the beast had looked in through the window with its red eyes and its voice of a thousand hounds. Perhaps he had known it even before that, but he could not turn back. To run from your death is a shameful thing, postpones the inevitable, makes things worse. So he nodded only, mounted the pony and led Bennek and his men into the marsh.

A dark day, with the mist and the cloud seeming to meet at the tops of the reeds and brush them with wet. Nothing moved in the water under the pony's feet, except the black swirls of peat as the sudden boom of a bittern caused the pony to shy. They rode for a morning and the sun rose no higher, then more than half a day and still the cloud hung low over the land and there was little light behind it. That was when Curlew knew that they had crossed into the Otherworld and left time behind. He also knew that the beast would be close.

When it came, it was without warning. There was a stifled cry from the last man in the group. His pony stumbled, he went down into the water and did not rise, even though the water was not deep at that point. Curlew's spear was in his hand as the beast rose from the mere, bloody water streaming from its red sinew sides. It gave its belling cry as it saw the warriors, and sprang backward into the marsh like an acrobat.

“After it!” Bennek cried and Curlew shouted, “No, it wants you to follow!” But it was too late. Bennek was racing ahead, driving his pony through the mist with the spell-net drifting after him like a swarm of golden bees. Curlew caught a last glimpse of the questing beast, a red spiny form hurtling through the reeds, and of the warriors in pursuit. The eight men, with Bennek at their head, seemed already insubstantial, the mist coiling through their bodies and swallowing them whole. Curlew hesitated for only a moment before bolting after them. If this was to be the day of his death, then best it came quickly.

He did not die. He did not find Bennek or the warriors, either, although a long way ahead there was a dusting of gold on the fleecy heads of the bulrushes and a bloody curl in the waters around. Curlew broke off one of the rush heads and rode on, not knowing what else to do, and gradually the light grew brighter. The reeds thinned and the channels opened out to a great shallow pool.

In the middle of the pool lay an iron boat. At least, this was what

Curlew thought it must be: it lay overturned, with the hull upward, and it was made of a black-gleaming metal, tinged with green. Like a dragonfly's armor, perhaps, or the dragon of which mad Bennek had spoken. The metal surface was covered with knots and coils, spirals and signs, and Curlew knew it for magic even before he saw the beast.

It was crouching in the lee of the hull, in an opening. It held a human hand in its fist and was gnawing at the stump. It looked at Curlew from quiet red eyes and grinned at him with long curving teeth. Curlew stared at it, while the pony quivered beneath him, but the beast made no move. Then, it set the hand carefully on the metal beside it and opened its mouth, wider and wider, and Curlew hauled the pony's head around and kicked it crashing through the reeds while the baying of a thousand hounds tumbled through the air around him and opened up the worlds.

He did not look back. He rode on as the light rose and did not look right or left, although he thought he heard a child's cold laughter as he rode, and a strange splitting wail. He rode straight past the broch and over the willow border of Whiteshadow's lands, and into the long reaches of water meadow that sloped to the small snaking rivers. He rode all the way back to the high court and did not stop until the gates slammed shut behind him.

The high king was not there, but Whiteshadow was, sitting in her own carved chair at the table's head. She looked the same as ever, sad blue gaze and asphodel hair, but when he dropped the golden fleece of the bulrush head onto the table in front of her, saying not a word, she smiled.

"He failed," she said.

"He died," said Curlew.

"And the beast?"

"It lives yet. I think it will always live."

Whiteshadow shrugged, but with an effort. "It came with the comet, my father thought. Those were rich enough lands before then, if wet. Perhaps one day it will go back where it came from."

"Perhaps," Curlew said, and he sat down beside her, staring at the gilded rush until the heat from the fire reached his bones and the last of the golden dust rose into the smoking air and was gone.

