



**THE BIRTHDAY
OF THE WORLD**

and Other Stories

Author of *The Other Wind*

**URSULA
K. LE GUIN**

THE BIRTHDAY OF THE WORLD

AND OTHER STORIES

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 HarperCollins e-books

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Inventing a universe is tough work. Jehovah took a sabbatical. Vishnu takes naps. Science-fiction universes are only tiny bits of word-worlds, but even so they take some thinking; and rather than thin out a new universe for every story, a writer may keep coming back and using the same universe, sometimes till it gets a bit worn at the seams, softens up, feels natural, like an old shirt.

Though I've put a good deal of work into my fictional universe, I don't exactly feel that I invented it. I blundered into it, and have been blundering around in it unsystematically ever since — dropping a millennium here, forgetting a planet there. Honest and earnest people, calling it the Hainish Universe, have tried to plot its history onto Time Lines. I call it the Ekumen, and I say it's hopeless. Its Time Line is like something the kitten pulled out of the knitting basket, and its history consists largely of gaps.

There are reasons for this incoherence, other than authorial carelessness, forgetfulness, and impatience. Space, after all, is essentially gap. Inhabited worlds are a long, long way apart. Einstein said people couldn't travel faster than light, so I generally let my people travel only nearly as fast as light. This means that whenever they cross space, they scarcely age, thanks to Einsteinian time dilation, but they do end up decades or centuries after they set out, and can only find out what happened meanwhile back on the farm by using my handy device, the ansible. (It's interesting to think that the ansible is older than the Internet, and faster — I do let information travel instantaneously.) So in my universe, as in this one, now here is then there, and vice versa, which is a good way to keep history from being either clear or useful.

Of course you can ask the Hainish, who have been around for a long time, and whose historians not only know a lot of what happened, but also know that it keeps happening and will happen again. . . . They're somewhat like Ecclesiastes, seeing no new thing under the, or any, sun; but they're much more cheerful about it than he was.

The people on all the other worlds, who all descended from the Hainish, naturally don't want to believe what the old folks say, so they start making history; and so it all happens again.

I did not plan these worlds and people. I found them, gradually, piecemeal, while writing stories. I'm still finding them.

In my first three science-fiction novels there is a League of Worlds, vaguely embracing known planets in our local bit of the local galaxy, including Earth. This rather suddenly morphs into the Ekumen, a non-directive, information-gathering consortium of worlds, which occasionally disobeys its own directive to be non-directive. I had met the Greek word meaning household, *oikumene*, as in ecumenical, in one of my father's anthropology books, and remembered it when I needed a word that

might imply a still wider humanity spread out from one original hearth. I spelled it “Ekumen.” If you write science fiction you can spell things the way you like, sometimes.

The first six of these eight stories take place on worlds of the Ekumen, in my pseudo-coherent universe with holes in the elbows.

In my 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* the first voice is that of a Mobile of the Ekumen, a traveller, making a report back to the Stabiles, who stay put on Hain. This vocabulary came to me along with the narrator. He said his name was Genly Ai. He began telling the story, and I wrote it.

Gradually, and not easily, he and I found out where we were. He had not been on Gethen before, but I had, in a short story, “Winter’s King.” That first visit was so hurried I hadn’t even noticed there was something a bit weird about Gethenian gender. Just like a tourist. Androgynes? Were there androgynes?

During the writing of *Left Hand*, pieces of myth and legend came to me as needed, when I didn’t understand where the story was going; and a second voice, a Gethenian one, took over the story from time to time. But Estraven was a deeply reserved person. And the plot led both my narrators so quickly into so much trouble that many questions didn’t get answered or even asked.

Writing the first story in this book, “Coming of Age in Karhide,” I came back to Gethen after twenty five or thirty years. This time I didn’t have an honest but bewildered male Terran alongside to confuse my perceptions. I could listen to an open-hearted Gethenian who, unlike Estraven, had nothing to hide. This time I didn’t have a damned plot. I could ask questions. I could see how the sex works. I could finally get into a kemmerhouse. I could really have fun.

“The Matter of Seggri” is a compendium of reports on the society of a world called Seggri written by various observers over a period of many years. These documents are from the archives of the Historians of Hain, who are to reports as squirrels are to nuts.

The germ of the story was in an article I read about the gender imbalance that persistent abortion and infanticide of female fetuses and babies are causing in parts of the world — our world, Earth — where only males are considered worth the bother. Out of irrational and insatiable curiosity, in a thought experiment that became the story, I reversed and increased the imbalance and made it permanent. Though I liked the people I met on Seggri, and very much enjoyed channeling their various voices, the experiment was not a happy one.

(I do not really mean channeling. The word is just shorthand for my relation with characters in my fiction. *Fiction* — right? Please do not write me any letters about other lives. I have quite as many as can handle.)

In the title story of the collection *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*, I invented some social rules for the people of the world called O, which is quite near Hain, as worlds go. The world, as usual, seemed to be something I just found myself on and had to explore; but I did spend genuine thought, respectable, *systematic* thought, on the marriage and kinship customs of the people of O. I drew charts, with male

and female symbols, and lines with arrows, very scientific. I needed those charts. I kept getting confused. ~~The blessed editor of the magazine in which the story first appeared saved me from a~~ horrible blunder, worse than incest. I had gotten my moieties mixed up. She caught it, we fixed it.

Since it took a while to work out these complexities, it may be mere conservation of energy that has brought me back twice to O; but I think it's because I like it. I like thinking about being married to three other people only two of whom you can have sex with (one of each gender but both of the other moiety). I like thinking about complex social relationships which produce and frustrate highly charged emotional relationships.

In this sense, you could say that “Unchosen Love” and “Mountain Ways” are comedies of manners, odd as that may sound to those who think science fiction is written ray-gun in hand. The society of O is different than ours here now, but not very much more different than that of Jane Austen's England, perhaps less different than that of *The Tale of Genji*.

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In “Solitude” I went out on the fringes of the Ekumen, to a place somewhat like the Earth we used to write about in the sixties and seventies when we believed in Atomic Holocaust and the End of the World as We Know It and mutants in the glowing ruins of Peoria. I still believe in Atomic Holocaust, you betcha, but the time for writing stories about it is not now; and the world as I knew it has already ended several times.

Whatever caused the population crash in “Solitude” — probably the population itself — it was long ago, and is not the concern of the story, which is about survival, loyalty, and introversion. Hardly anybody ever writes anything nice about introverts. Extraverts rule. This is really rather odd when you realise that about nineteen writers out of twenty are introverts.

We have been taught to be ashamed of not being “outgoing.” But a writer's job is ingoing.

The people, the survivors, in this story, like most people in these stories, have some peculiar arrangements of gender and sexuality; but they have no arrangements at all for marriage. Marriage is too extraverted for real introverts. They just see each other sometimes. For a while. Then they go off and be alone again and be happy.

“Old Music and the Slave Women” is a fifth wheel.

My book *Four Ways to Forgiveness* consists of four connected stories. Once more I plead for a name and thus recognition, for this fictional form (which goes back as least as far as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and has become increasingly frequent and interesting): a book of stories linked by place, characters, theme, and movement, so as to form not a novel but a whole. There's a sneering British term “fix-up” for books by authors who, told that collections “don't sell,” patch unconnected stories together with verbal duct tape. But the real thing is not a random collection, any more than a Bach cello suite is. It does things a novel doesn't do. It is a real form, and deserves a real name.

Maybe we could call it a story suite? I think I will.

So the story suite *Four Ways* gives a view of the recent history of two worlds, Werel and Yeowe. (The Werel is not the Werel of the early novel *Planet of Exile*. It's a different one. I told you already, I forget whole planets.) The slave-based society and economy of these worlds is in process of revolutionary change. One critic scoffed at me for treating slavery as an issue worth writing about. I wonder what planet he lives on?

“Old Music” is the translated name of a Hainishman, Esdardon Aya, who turns up in three of the stories in the suite. Chronologically, this new story follows the suite, a fifth movement, telling an incident of the civil war on Werel. But it's also its own piece. Its origin was a visit to one of the great slave plantations upriver from Charleston, South Carolina. Readers who have seen that beautiful, terrible place may recognise the garden, the house, the haunted ground.

The title story, “The Birthday of the World,” may or may not take place on a world of the Ekumen. I honestly don't know. Does it matter? It's not Earth; its people are physically a little different from us but the model I used for their society is in some respects clearly that of the Inca. As in the great ancient societies of Egypt or India or Peru, king and god are one, and the sacred is as close and common as bread or breath. And as easy to lose.

These seven stories share a pattern: they exhibit in one way or another, from inside or through an observer (who is liable to go native), people whose society differs from ours, even whose physiology may differ from ours, but who feel the way we do. First to create difference — to establish strangeness — then to let the fiery arc of human emotion leap and close the gap: this acrobatics of the imagination fascinates and satisfies me as almost no other.

The last, long story, “Paradises Lost,” is not of this pattern, and is definitely not an Ekumen story. It takes place in another universe, also a well-used one: the generic, shared, science-fiction “future.” In this version of it, Earth sends forth ships to the stars at speeds that are, according to our present knowledge, more or less realistic, at least potentially attainable. Such a ship takes decades, centuries, to get where it's going. No Warp Nine, no time-dilation — just real time.

In other words, this is a generation-ship story. Two remarkable books, Martinson's *Aniara* and Glossop's *The Dazzle of Day*, and many short stories have used the theme. Most of the short stories put the crew/colonists into some kind of deepfreeze so that the people who left Earth wake up at the destination. I always wanted to write about people who truly lived out the journey, the middle generations knowing neither departure nor arrival. I tried several times. I never could get the story, until a religious theme began to entwine itself with the idea of the sealed ship in the dead vacuum of space, like a cocoon, full of transformation, transmutation, invisible life: the pupa body, the winged soul.

Ursula K. Le Guin

2001

By Sov Thade Tage em Ereb, of Rer, in Karhide, on Gethen.

I live in the oldest city in the world. Long before there were kings in Karhide, Rer was a city, the marketplace and meeting ground for all the Northeast, the Plains, and Kerm Land. The Fastness of Rer was a center of learning, a refuge, a judgment seat fifteen thousand years ago. Karhide became a nation here, under the Geger kings, who ruled for a thousand years. In the thousandth year Sedern Geger, the Unking, cast the crown into the River Arre from the palace towers, proclaiming an end to dominion. The time they call the Flowering of Rer, the Summer Century, began then. It ended when the Hearth of Harge took power and moved their capital across the mountains to Erhenrang. The Old Palace has been empty for centuries. But it stands. Nothing in Rer falls down. The Arre floods through the street-tunnels every year in the Thaw, winter blizzards may bring thirty feet of snow, but the city stands. Nobody knows how old the houses are, because they have been rebuilt forever. Each one sits in its gardens without respect to the position of any of the others, as vast and random and ancient as hills. The roofed streets and canals angle about among them. Rer is all corners. We say that the Harges left because they were afraid of what might be around the corner.

Time is different here. I learned in school how the Orgota, the Ekumen, and most other people count years. They call the year of some portentous event Year One and number forward from it. Here it's always Year One. On Getheny Thern, New Year's Day, the Year One becomes one-ago, one-to-come becomes One, and so on. It's like Rer, everything always changing but the city never changing.

When I was fourteen (in the Year One, or fifty-ago) I came of age. I have been thinking about that a good deal recently.

It was a different world. Most of us had never seen an Alien, as we called them then. We might have heard the Mobile talk on the radio, and at school we saw pictures of Aliens — the ones with hair around their mouths were the most pleasingly savage and repulsive. Most of the pictures were disappointing. They looked too much like us. You couldn't even tell that they were always in kemme. The female Aliens were supposed to have enormous breasts, but my mothersib Dory had bigger breasts than the ones in the pictures.

When the Defenders of the Faith kicked them out of Orgoreyn, when King Emran got into the Border War and lost Erhenrang, even when their Mobiles were outlawed and forced into hiding at Estre in Kerm, the Ekumen did nothing much but wait. They had waited for two hundred years, as patient as Handdara. They did one thing: they took our young king offworld to foil a plot, and then brought the

same king back sixty years later to end her wombchild's disastrous reign. Argaven XVII is the only king who ever ruled four years before her heir and forty years after.

The year I was born (the Year One, or sixty-four-ago) was the year Argaven's second reign began. By the time I was noticing anything beyond my own toes, the war was over, the West Fall was part of Karhide again, the capital was back in Erhenrang, and most of the damage done to Rer during the Overthrow of Emran had been repaired. The old houses had been rebuilt again. The Old Palace had been patched again. Argaven XVII was miraculously back on the throne again. Everything was the way it used to be, ought to be, back to normal, just like the old days — everybody said so.

Indeed those were quiet years, an interval of recovery before Argaven, the first Gethenian who ever left our planet, brought us at last fully into the Ekumen; before we, not they, became the Aliens; before we came of age. When I was a child we lived the way people had lived in Rer forever. It is that way, that timeless world, that world around the corner, I have been thinking about, and trying to describe for people who never knew it. Yet as I write I see how also nothing changes, that it is truly the Year One always, for each child that comes of age, each lover who falls in love.

There were a couple of thousand people in the Ereb Hearths, and a hundred and forty of them lived in my Hearth, Ereb Tage. My name is Sov Thade Tage em Ereb, after the old way of naming we still use in Rer. The first thing I remember is a huge dark place full of shouting and shadows, and I am falling upward through a golden light into the darkness. In thrilling terror, I scream. I am caught in my fall, held, held close; I weep; a voice so close to me that it seems to speak through my body says softly, "Sov, Sov, Sov." And then I am given something wonderful to eat, something so sweet, so delicate that never again will I eat anything quite so good. . . .

I imagine that some of my wild elder hearthsibs had been throwing me about, and that my mother comforted me with a bit of festival cake. Later on when I was a wild elder sib we used to play catch with babies for balls; they always screamed, with terror or with delight, or both. It's the nearest to flying anyone of my generation knew. We had dozens of different words for the way snow falls, descends, glides, blows, for the way clouds move, the way ice floats, the way boats sail; but not that word. Not yet. And so I don't remember "flying." I remember falling upward through the golden light.

Family houses in Rer are built around a big central hall. Each story has an inner balcony clear round that space, and we call the whole story, rooms and all, a balcony. My family occupied the whole second balcony of Ereb Tage. There were a lot of us. My grandmother had borne four children, and all of them had children, so I had a bunch of cousins as well as a younger and an older wombsib. "The Thades always kemmer as women and always get pregnant," I heard neighbors say, variously enviously disapproving, admiring. "And they never keep kemmer," somebody would add. The former was an exaggeration, but the latter was true. Not one of us kids had a father. I didn't know for years who my getter was, and never gave it a thought. Clannish, the Thades preferred not to bring outsiders, even other members of our own Hearth, into the family. If young people fell in love and started talking about keeping kemmer or making vows, Grandmother and the mothers were ruthless. "Vowing kemmer, what do you think you are, some kind of noble? some kind of fancy person? The kemmerhouse was good enough for me and it's good enough for you," the mothers said to their lovelorn children, and sent them away, clear off to the old Ereb Domain in the country, to hoe braties till they got over being in love.

So as a child I was a member of a flock, a school, a swarm, in and out of our warren of rooms, tearing up and down the staircases, working together and learning together and looking after the babies — in our own fashion — and terrorising quieter hearthmates by our numbers and our noise. As far as I know we did no real harm. Our escapades were well within the rules and limits of the sedate, ancient Hearth which we felt not as constraints but as protection, the walls that kept us safe. The only time we got punished was when my cousin Sether decided it would be exciting if we tied a long rope we'd found to the second-floor balcony railing, tied a big knot in the rope, held onto the knot, and jumped. "I'll go first," Sether said. Another misguided attempt at flight. The railing and Sether's broken leg were mended, and the rest of us had to clean the privies, all the privies of the Hearth, for a month. I think the rest of the Hearth had decided it was time the young Thades observed some discipline.

Although I really don't know what I was like as a child, I think that if I'd had any choice I might have been less noisy than my playmates, though just as unruly. I used to love to listen to the radio, and while the rest of them were racketing around the balconies or the centerhall in winter, or out in the streets and gardens in summer, I would crouch for hours in my mother's room behind the bed, playing her old serem-wood radio very softly so that my sibs wouldn't know I was there. I listened to anything, lays and plays and hearth-tales, the Palace news, the analyses of grain harvests and the detailed weather-reports; I listened every day all one winter to an ancient saga from the Pering Storm Border about snowghouls, perfidious traitors, and bloody ax-murders, which haunted me at night so that I couldn't sleep and would crawl into bed with my mother for comfort. Often my younger sib was already there in the warm, soft, breathing dark. We would sleep all entangled and curled up together like a nest of pesthry.

My mother, Guyr Thade Tage em Ereb, was impatient, warm-hearted, and impartial, not exerting much control over us three wombchildren, but keeping watch. The Thades were all tradespeople working in Ereb shops and masteries, with little or no cash to spend; but when I was ten Guyr bought me a radio, a new one, and said where my sibs could hear, "You don't have to share it." I treasured it for years and finally shared it with my own wombchild.

So the years went along and I went along in the warmth and density and certainty of a family and a Hearth embedded in tradition, threads on the quick ever-repeating shuttle weaving the timeless web of custom and act and work and relationship, and at this distance I can hardly tell one year from the other or myself from the other children: until I turned fourteen.

The reason most people in my Hearth would remember that year is for the big party known as Dory's Somer-Forever Celebration. My mothersib Dory had stopped going into kemmer that winter. Some people didn't do anything when they stopped going into kemmer; others went to the Fastness for a ritual; some stayed on at the Fastness for months after, or even moved there. Dory, who wasn't spiritually inclined, said, "If I can't have kids and can't have sex any more and have to get old and die, at least I can have a party."

I have already had some trouble trying to tell this story in a language that has no somer pronouns, only gendered pronouns. In their last years of kemmer, as the hormone balance changes, most people mostly go into kemmer as men. Dory's kemmers had been male for over a year, so I'll call Dory "he," although of course the point was that he would never be either he or she again.

In any event, his party was tremendous. He invited everyone in our Hearth and the two neighboring Ereb Hearths, and it went on for three days. It had been a long winter and the spring was late and cold.

people were ready for something new, something hot to happen. We cooked for a week, and a whole storeroom was packed full of beerkegs. A lot of people who were in the middle of going out of kemmer, or had already and hadn't done anything about it, came and joined in the ritual. That's what I remember vividly: in the firelit three-story centerhall of our Hearth, a circle of thirty or forty people, all middle-aged or old, singing and dancing, stamping the drumbeats. There was a fierce energy in them, their grey hair was loose and wild, they stamped as if their feet would go through the floor, the voices were deep and strong, they were laughing. The younger people watching them seemed pallid and shadowy. I looked at the dancers and wondered, why are they happy? Aren't they old? Why do they act like they'd got free? What's it like, then, kemmer?

No, I hadn't thought much about kemmer before. What would be the use? Until we come of age we have no gender and no sexuality, our hormones don't give us any trouble at all. And in a city Hearth we never see adults in kemmer. They kiss and go. Where's Maba? In the kemmerhouse, love, now eat your porridge. When's Maba coming back? Soon, love. — And in a couple of days Maba comes back looking sleepy and shiny and refreshed and exhausted. Is it like having a bath, Maba? Yes, a bit, love and what have you been up to while I was away?

Of course we played kemmer, when we were seven or eight. This here's the kemmerhouse and I get to be the woman. No, *I* do. No, *I* do, I thought of it! — And we rubbed our bodies together and rolled around laughing, and then maybe we stuffed a ball under our shirt and were pregnant, and then we gave birth, and then we played catch with the ball. Children will play whatever adults do; but the kemmer game wasn't much of a game. It often ended in a tickling match. And most children aren't even very ticklish, till they come of age.

After Dory's party, I was on duty in the Hearth creche all through Tuwa, the last month of spring; come summer I began my first apprenticeship, in a furniture workshop in the Third Ward. I loved getting up early and running across the city on the wayroofs and up on the curbs of the open ways; after the late Thaw some of the ways were still full of water, deep enough for kayaks and poleboats. The air would be still and cold and clear; the sun would come up behind the old towers of the Unpalace, red as blood, and all the waters and the windows of the city would flash scarlet and gold. In the workshop there was the piercing sweet smell of fresh-cut wood and the company of grown people hard-working, patient, and demanding, taking me seriously. I wasn't a child any more, I said to myself. I was an adult, a working person.

But why did I want to cry all the time? Why did I want to sleep all the time? Why did I get angry at Sether? Why did Sether keep bumping into me and saying "Oh sorry" in that stupid husky voice? Why was I so clumsy with the big electric lathe that I ruined six chair-legs one after the other? "Get that k off the lathe," shouted old Marth, and I slunk away in a fury of humiliation. I would never be a carpenter, I would never be adult, who gave a shit for chair-legs anyway?

"I want to work in the gardens," I told my mother and grandmother. "Finish your training and you can work in the gardens next summer," Grand said, and Mother nodded. This sensible counsel appeared to me as a heartless injustice, a failure of love, a condemnation to despair. I sulked. I raged.

"What's wrong with the furniture shop?" my elders asked after several days of sulk and rage.

"Why does stupid Sether have to be there!" I shouted. Dory, who was Sether's mother, raised an eyebrow and smiled.

“Are you all right?” my mother asked me as I slouched into the balcony after work, and I snarled, “I’m fine,” and rushed to the privies and vomited.

I was sick. My back ached all the time. My head ached and got dizzy and heavy. Something I could not locate anywhere, some part of my soul, hurt with a keen, desolate, ceaseless pain. I was afraid of myself: of my tears, my rage, my sickness, my clumsy body. It did not feel like my body, like me. It felt like something else, an ill-fitting garment, a smelly, heavy overcoat that belonged to some old person, some dead person. It wasn’t mine, it wasn’t me. Tiny needles of agony shot through my nipples, hot as fire. When I winced and held my arms across my chest, I knew that everybody could see what was happening. Anybody could smell me. I smelled sour, strong, like blood, like raw pelts of animals. My clitopenis was swollen hugely and stuck out from between my labia, and then shrank nearly to nothing, so that it hurt to piss. My labia itched and reddened as with loathsome insect-bites. Deep in my belly something moved, some monstrous growth. I was utterly ashamed. I was dying.

“Sov,” my mother said, sitting down beside me on my bed, with a curious, tender, complicitous smile. “shall we choose your kemmerday?”

“I’m not in kemmer,” I said passionately.

“No,” Guyr said. “But next month I think you will be.”

“I *won’t!*”

My mother stroked my hair and face and arm. *We shape each other to be human*, old people used to say as they stroked babies or children or one another with those long, slow, soft caresses.

After a while my mother said, “Sether’s coming in, too. But a month or so later than you, I think. Do you want to have a kemmerday? I can say let’s have a double kemmerday, but I think you should have your own day in your own time.”

I burst into tears and cried, “I don’t want one, I don’t want to, I just want, I just want to go away. . . .”

“Sov,” my mother said, “if you want to, you can go to the kemmerhouse at Gerodda Erebb, where you won’t know anybody. But I think it would be better here, where people do know you. They’d like it. They’ll be so glad for you. Oh, your Grand’s so proud of you! ‘Have you seen that grandchild of mine? Sov, have you seen what a beauty, what a *mahad!*’ Everybody’s bored to tears hearing about you. . . .”

Mahad is a dialect word, a Rer word; it means a strong, handsome, generous, upright person, a reliable person. My mother’s stern mother, who commanded and thanked but never praised, said I was a mahad? A terrifying idea that dried my tears.

“All right,” I said desperately. “Here. But not next month! It isn’t. I’m not.”

“Let me see,” my mother said. Fiercely embarrassed yet relieved to obey, I stood up and undid my trousers.

My mother took a very brief and delicate look, hugged me, and said, “Next month, yes, I’m sure. You’ll feel much better in a day or two. And next month it’ll be different. It really will.”

Sure enough, the next day the headache and the hot itching were gone, and though I was still tired and

sleepy a lot of the time, I wasn't quite so stupid and clumsy at work. After a few more days I felt pretty much myself, light and easy in my limbs. Only if I thought about it there was still that queer feeling that wasn't quite in any part of my body, and that was sometimes very painful and sometimes only strange, almost something I wanted to feel again.

My cousin Sether and I had been apprenticed together at the furniture shop. We didn't go to work together because Sether was still slightly lame from that rope trick a couple of years earlier, and got a lift to work in a poleboat so long as there was water in the streets. When they closed the Arre Watergate and the ways went dry, Sether had to walk. So we walked together. The first couple of days we didn't talk much. I still felt angry at Sether. Because I couldn't run through the dawn any more but had to walk at a lame-leg pace. And because Sether was always around. Always there. Taller than me and quicker at the lathe, and with that long, heavy, shining hair. Why did anybody want to wear their hair so long, anyhow? I felt as if Sether's hair was in front of my own eyes.

We were walking home, tired, on a hot evening of Ockre, the first month of summer. I could see that Sether was limping and trying to hide or ignore it, trying to swing right along at my quick pace, very erect, scowling. A great wave of pity and admiration overwhelmed me, and that thing, that growth, that new being, whatever it was in my bowels and in the ground of my soul moved and turned again, turned towards Sether, aching, yearning.

"Are you coming into kemmer?" I said in a hoarse, husky voice I had never heard come out of my mouth.

"In a couple of months," Sether said in a mumble, not looking at me, still very stiff and frowning.

"I guess I have to have this, do this, you know, this stuff, pretty soon."

"I wish I could," Sether said. "Get it over with."

We did not look at each other. Very gradually, unnoticeably, I was slowing my pace till we were going along side by side at an easy walk.

"Sometimes do you feel like your tits are on fire?" I asked without knowing that I was going to say anything.

Sether nodded.

After a while, Sether said, "Listen, does your piss get. . . ."

I nodded.

"It must be what the Aliens look like," Sether said with revulsion. "This, this thing sticking out, it gets so *big* . . . it gets in the way."

We exchanged and compared symptoms for a mile or so. It was a relief to talk about it, to find company in misery, but it was also frightening to hear our misery confirmed by the other. Sether burst out, "I'll tell you what I hate, what I really *hate* about it — it's dehumanising. To get jerked around like that by your own body, to lose control, I can't stand the idea. Of being just a sex machine. And everybody just turns into something to have sex with. You know that people in kemmer go crazy and

die if there isn't anybody else in kemmer? That they'll even attack people in somer? Their own mothers?"

"They can't," I said, shocked.

"Yes they can. Tharry told me. This truck driver up in the High Kargav went into kemmer as a male while their caravan was stuck in the snow, and he was big and strong, and he went crazy and he, he did it to his cabmate, and his cabmate was in somer and got hurt, really hurt, trying to fight him off. And then the driver came out of kemmer and committed suicide."

This horrible story brought the sickness back up from the pit of my stomach, and I could say nothing.

Sether went on, "People in kemmer aren't even human any more! And we have to do that — to be that way!"

Now that awful, desolate fear was out in the open. But it was not a relief to speak it. It was even larger and more terrible, spoken.

"It's stupid," Sether said. "It's a primitive device for continuing the species. There's no need for civilised people to undergo it. People who want to get pregnant could do it with injections. It would be genetically sound. You could choose your child's getter. There wouldn't be all this inbreeding, people fucking with their sibs, like animals. Why do we have to be animals?"

Sether's rage stirred me. I shared it. I also felt shocked and excited by the word "fucking," which I had never heard spoken. I looked again at my cousin, the thin, ruddy face, the heavy, long, shining hair. My age, Sether looked older. A half year in pain from a shattered leg had darkened and matured the adventurous, mischievous child, teaching anger, pride, endurance. "Sether," I said, "listen, it doesn't matter, you're human, even if you have to do that stuff, that fucking. You're a mahad."

"Getheny Kus," Grand said: the first day of the month of Kus, midsummer day.

"I won't be ready," I said.

"You'll be ready."

"I want to go into kemmer with Sether."

"Sether's got a month or two yet to go. Soon enough. It looks like you might be on the same moontime, though. Dark-of-the-mooners, eh? That's what I used to be. So, just stay on the same wavelength, you and Sether. . . ." Grand had never grinned at me this way, an inclusive grin, as if I were an equal.

My mother's mother was sixty years old, short, brawny, broad-hipped, with keen clear eyes, a stonemason by trade, an unquestioned autocrat in the Hearth. I, equal to this formidable person? It was my first intimation that I might be becoming more, rather than less, human.

"I'd like it," said Grand, "if you spent this halfmonth at the Fastness. But it's up to you."

“At the Fastness?” I said, taken by surprise. We Thades were all Handdara, but very inert Handdara, keeping only the great festivals, muttering the grace all in one garbled word, practising none of the disciplines. None of my older hearthsibs had been sent off to the Fastness before their kemmerday. Was there something wrong with me?

“You’ve got a good brain,” said Grand. “You and Sether. I’d like to see some of you lot casting some shadows, some day. We Thades sit here in our Hearth and breed like pesthry. Is that enough? It’d be a good thing if some of you got your heads out of the bedding.”

“What do they do in the Fastness?” I asked, and Grand answered frankly, “I don’t know. Go find out. They teach you. They can teach you how to control kemmer.”

“All right,” I said promptly. I would tell Sether that the Indwellers could control kemmer. Maybe I could learn how to do it and come home and teach it to Sether.

Grand looked at me with approval. I had taken up the challenge.

Of course I didn’t learn how to control kemmer, in a halfmonth in the Fastness. The first couple of days there, I thought I wouldn’t even be able to control my homesickness. From our warm, dark warren of rooms full of people talking, sleeping, eating, cooking, washing, playing remma, playing music, kids running around, noise, family, I went across the city to a huge, clean, cold, quiet house of strangers. They were courteous, they treated me with respect. I was terrified. Why should a person of forty, who knew magic disciplines of superhuman strength and fortitude, who could walk barefoot through blizzards, who could Foretell, whose eyes were the wisest and calmest I had ever seen, why should an Adept of the Handdara respect me?

“Because you are so ignorant,” Ranharrer the Adept said, smiling, with great tenderness.

Having me only for a halfmonth, they didn’t try to influence the nature of my ignorance very much. I practised the Untrance several hours a day, and came to like it: that was quite enough for them, and they praised me. “At fourteen, most people go crazy moving slowly,” my teacher said.

During my last six or seven days in the Fastness certain symptoms began to show up again, the headache, the swellings and shooting pains, the irritability. One morning the sheet of my cot in my bare, peaceful little room was bloodstained. I looked at the smear with horror and loathing. I thought I had scratched my itching labia to bleeding in my sleep, but I knew also what the blood was. I began to cry. I had to wash the sheet somehow. I had fouled, defiled this place where everything was clean, austere, and beautiful.

An old Indweller, finding me scrubbing desperately at the sheet in the washrooms, said nothing, but brought me some soap that bleached away the stain. I went back to my room, which I had come to love with the passion of one who had never before known any actual privacy, and crouched on the sheetless bed, miserable, checking every few minutes to be sure I was not bleeding again. I missed my Untrance practice time. The immense house was very quiet. Its peace sank into me. Again I felt that strangeness in my soul, but it was not pain now; it was a desolation like the air at evening, like the peaks of the Kargav seen far in the west in the clarity of winter. It was an immense enlargement.

Ranharrer the Adept knocked and entered at my word, looked at me for a minute, and asked gently,

“What is it?”

“Everything is strange,” I said.

The Adept smiled radiantly and said, “Yes.”

I know now how Ranharrer cherished and honored my ignorance, in the Handdara sense. Then I knew only that somehow or other I had said the right thing and so pleased a person I wanted very much to please.

“We’re doing some singing,” Ranharrer said, “you might like to hear it.”

They were in fact singing the Midsummer Chant, which goes on for the four days before Getheny Ku night and day. Singers and drummers drop in and out at will, most of them singing on certain syllables in an endless group improvisation guided only by the drums and by melodic cues in the Chantbook, and falling into harmony with the soloist if one is present. At first I heard only a pleasantly thick-textured, droning sound over a quiet and subtle beat. I listened till I got bored and decided I could do too. So I opened my mouth and sang “Aah” and heard all the other voices singing “Aah” above and with and below mine until I lost mine and heard only all the voices, and then only the music itself, and then suddenly the startling silvery rush of a single voice running across the weaving, against the current, and sinking into it and vanishing, and rising out of it again. . . . Ranharrer touched my arm. It was time for dinner, I had been singing since Third Hour. I went back to the chantry after dinner, and after supper. I spent the next three days there. I would have spent the nights there if they had let me. I wasn’t sleepy at all any more. I had sudden, endless energy, and couldn’t sleep. In my little room I sang to myself, or read the strange Handdara poetry which was the only book they had given me, and practised the Untrance, trying to ignore the heat and cold, the fire and ice in my body, till dawn came and I could go sing again.

And then it was Ottormenbod, midsummer’s eve, and I had to go home to my Hearth and the kemmerhouse.

To my surprise, my mother and grandmother and all the elders came to the Fastness to fetch me, wearing ceremonial hiebs and looking solemn. Ranharrer handed me over to them, saying to me only “Come back to us.” My family paraded me through the streets in the hot summer morning; all the vines were in flower, perfuming the air, all the gardens were blooming, bearing, fruiting. “This is an excellent time,” Grand said judiciously, “to come into kemmer.”

The Hearth looked very dark to me after the Fastness, and somehow shrunken. I looked around for Sether, but it was a workday, Sether was at the shop. That gave me a sense of holiday, which was not unpleasant. And then up in the hearthroom of our balcony, Grand and the Hearth elders formally presented me with a whole set of new clothes, new everything, from the boots up, topped by a magnificently embroidered hieb. There was a spoken ritual that went with the clothes, not Handdara, I think, but a tradition of our Hearth; the words were all old and strange, the language of a thousand years ago. Grand rattled them out like somebody spitting rocks, and put the hieb on my shoulders. Everybody said, “Haya!”

All the elders, and a lot of younger kids, hung around helping me put on the new clothes as if I was a king or a baby, and some of the elders wanted to give me advice — “last advice,” they called it, since

you gain shifgrethor when you go into kemmer, and once you have shifgrethor advice is insulting. “Now you just keep away from that old Ebbeche,” one of them told me shrilly. My mother took offense, snapping, “Keep your shadow to yourself, Tadsh!” And to me, “Don’t listen to the old fish. Flapmouth Tadsh! But now listen, Sov.”

I listened. Guyr had drawn me a little away from the others, and spoke gravely, with some embarrassment. “Remember, it will matter who you’re with first.”

I nodded. “I understand,” I said.

“No, you don’t,” my mother snapped, forgetting to be embarrassed. “Just keep it in mind!”

“What, ah,” I said. My mother waited. “If I, if I go into, as a, as female,” I said. “Don’t I, shouldn’t I — ?”

“Ah,” Guyr said. “Don’t worry. It’ll be a year or more before you can conceive. Or get. Don’t worry, this time. The other people will see to it, just in case. They all know it’s your first kemmer. But do keep it in mind, who you’re with first! Around, oh, around Karrid, and Ebbeche, and some of them.”

“Come on!” Dory shouted, and we all got into a procession again to go downstairs and across the centerhall, where everybody cheered “Haya Sov! Haya Sov!” and the cooks beat on their saucepans. I wanted to die. But they all seemed so cheerful, so happy about me, wishing me well; I wanted also to live.

We went out the west door and across the sunny gardens and came to the kemmerhouse. Tage Ereb shares a kemmerhouse with two other Ereb Hearths; it’s a beautiful building, all carved with deep-figure friezes in the Old Dynasty style, terribly worn by the weather of a couple of thousand years. On the red stone steps my family all kissed me, murmuring, “Praise then Darkness,” or “In the act of Creation praise,” and my mother gave me a hard push on my shoulders, what they call the sledge-push, for good luck, as I turned away from them and went in the door.

The Doorkeeper was waiting for me; a queer-looking, rather stooped person, with coarse, pale skin.

Now I realised who this “Ebbeche” they’d been talking about was. I’d never met him, but I’d heard about him. He was the Doorkeeper of our kemmerhouse, a halfdead — that is, a person in permanent kemmer, like the Aliens.

There are always a few people born that way here. Some of them can be cured; those who can’t or choose not to be usually live in a Fastness and learn the disciplines, or they become Doorkeepers. It’s convenient for them, and for normal people too. After all, who else would want to *live* in a kemmerhouse? But there are drawbacks. If you come to the kemmerhouse in thorharmen, ready to gender, and the first person you meet is fully male, his pheromones are likely to gender you female right then, whether that’s what you had in mind this month or not. Responsible Doorkeepers, of course, keep well away from anybody who doesn’t invite them to come close. But permanent kemmer may not lead to responsibility of character; nor does being called *halfdead* and *pervert* all your life, I imagine. Obviously my family didn’t trust Ebbeche to keep his hands and his pheromones off me. But they were unjust. He honored a first kemmer as much as anyone else. He greeted me by name and showed me where to take off my new boots. Then he began to speak the ancient ritual welcome,

backing down the hall before me; the first time I ever heard the words I would hear so many times again for so many years.

You cross earth now.

You cross water now.

You cross the Ice now. . . .

And the exulting ending, as we came into the centerhall:

Together we have crossed the Ice.

Together we come into the Hearthplace,

Into life, bringing life!

In the act of creation, praise!

The solemnity of the words moved me and distracted me somewhat from my intense self-consciousness. As I had in the Fastness, I felt the familiar reassurance of being part of something immensely older and larger than myself, even if it was strange and new to me. I must entrust myself to it and be what it made me. At the same time I was intensely alert. All my senses were extraordinarily keen, as they had been all morning. I was aware of everything, the beautiful blue color of the walls, the lightness and vigor of my steps as I walked, the texture of the wood under my bare feet, the sound and meaning of the ritual words, the Doorkeeper himself. He fascinated me. Ebbeche was certainly not handsome, and yet I noticed how musical his rather deep voice was; and pale skin was more attractive than I had ever thought it. I felt that he had been maligned, that his life must be a strange one. I wanted to talk to him. But as he finished the welcome, standing aside for me at the doorway of the centerhall, a tall person strode forward eagerly to meet me.

I was glad to see a familiar face: it was the head cook of my Hearth, Karrid Arrage. Like many cooks rather fierce and temperamental person, Karrid had often taken notice of me, singling me out in a joking, challenging way, tossing me some delicacy — “Here, youngun! Get some meat on your bones!” As I saw Karrid now I went through the most extraordinary multiplicity of awarenenses: that Karrid was naked and that this nakedness was not like the nakedness of people in the Hearth, but a significant nakedness — that he was not the Karrid I had seen before but transfigured into great beauty — that he was *he* — that my mother had warned me about him — that I wanted to touch him — that I was afraid of him.

He picked me right up in his arms and pressed me against him. I felt his clitopenis like a fist between my legs. “Easy, now,” the Doorkeeper said to him, and some other people came forward from the room, which I could see only as large, dimly glowing, full of shadows and mist.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry,” Karrid said to me and them, with his hard laugh. “I won’t hurt my own get, will I? I just want to be the one that gives her kemmer. As a woman, like a proper Thade. I want to give you that joy, little Sov.” He was undressing me as he spoke, slipping off my hieb and shirt with big, hot, hasty hands. The Doorkeeper and the others kept close watch, but did not interfere. I felt

totally defenseless, helpless, humiliated. I struggled to get free, broke loose, and tried to pick up and put on my shirt. I was shaking and felt terribly weak, I could hardly stand up. Karrid helped me clumsily; his big arm supported me. I leaned against him, feeling his hot, vibrant skin against mine, a wonderful feeling, like sunlight, like firelight. I leaned more heavily against him, raising my arms so that our sides slid together. "Hey, now," he said. "Oh, you beauty, oh, you Sov, here, take her away, this won't do!" And he backed right away from me, laughing and yet really alarmed, his clitopenis standing up amazingly. I stood there half-dressed, on my rubbery legs, bewildered. My eyes were full of mist, I could see nothing clearly.

"Come on," somebody said, and took my hand, a soft, cool touch totally different from the fire of Karrid's skin. It was a person from one of the other Hearths, I didn't know her name. She seemed to me to shine like gold in the dim, misty place. "Oh, you're going so fast," she said, laughing and admiring and consoling. "Come on, come into the pool, take it easy for a while. Karrid shouldn't have come on to you like that! But you're lucky, first kemmer as a woman, there's nothing like it. I kemmered as a man three times before I got to kemmer as a woman, it made me so mad, every time I got into thorcharmen all my damn friends would all be women already. Don't worry about me — I'd say Karrid's influence was decisive," and she laughed again. "Oh, you are so pretty!" and she bent her head and licked my nipples before I knew what she was doing.

It was wonderful, it cooled that stinging fire in them that nothing else could cool. She helped me finish undressing, and we stepped together into the warm water of the big, shallow pool that filled the whole center of this room. That was why it was so misty, why the echoes were so strange. The water lapped on my thighs, on my sex, on my belly. I turned to my friend and leaned forward to kiss her. It was a perfectly natural thing to do, it was what she wanted and I wanted, and I wanted her to lick and suck my nipples again, and she did. For a long time we lay in the shallow water playing, and I could have played forever. But then somebody else joined us, taking hold of my friend from behind, and she arched her body in the water like a golden fish leaping, threw her head back, and began to play with him.

I got out of the water and dried myself, feeling sad and shy and forsaken, and yet extremely interested in what had happened to my body. It felt wonderfully alive and electric, so that the roughness of the towel made me shiver with pleasure. Somebody had come closer to me, somebody that had been watching me play with my friend in the water. He sat down by me now.

It was a hearthmate a few years older than I, Arrad Tehemmy. I had worked in the gardens with Arrad all last summer, and liked him. He looked like Sether, I now thought, with heavy black hair and a long thin face, but in him was that shining, that glory they all had here — all the kemmerers, the *women*, the *men* — such vivid beauty as I had never seen in any human beings. "Sov," he said, "I'd like — Your first — Will you — " His hands were already on me, and mine on him. "Come," he said, and I went with him. He took me into a beautiful little room, in which there was nothing but a fire burning in a fireplace, and a wide bed. There Arrad took me into his arms and I took Arrad into my arms, and then between my legs, and fell upward, upward through the golden light.

Arrad and I were together all that first night, and besides fucking a great deal, we ate a great deal. It had not occurred to me that there would be food at a kemmerhouse; I had thought you weren't allowed to do anything but fuck. There was a lot of food, very good, too, set out so that you could eat whenever you wanted. Drink was more limited; the person in charge, an old woman-halfdead, kept her canny eye

on you, and wouldn't give you any more beer if you showed signs of getting wild or stupid. I didn't need any more beer. I didn't need any more fucking. I was complete. I was in love forever for all time all my life to eternity with Arrad. But Arrad (who was a day farther into kemmer than I) fell asleep and wouldn't wake up, and an extraordinary person named Hama sat down by me and began talking and also running his hand up and down my back in the most delicious way, so that before long we got further entangled, and began fucking, and it was entirely different with Hama than it had been with Arrad, so that I realised that I must be in love with Hama, until Gehardar joined us. After that I think began to understand that I loved them all and they all loved me and that that was the secret of the kemmerhouse.

It's been nearly fifty years, and I have to admit I do not recall everyone from my first kemmer; only Karrid and Arrad, Hama and Gehardar, old Tubanny, the most exquisitely skillful lover as a male that I ever knew — I met him often in later kemmers — and Berre, my golden fish, with whom I ended up in drowsy, peaceful, blissful lovemaking in front of the great hearth till we both fell asleep. And when we woke we were not women. We were not men. We were not in kemmer. We were very tired young adults.

"You're still beautiful," I said to Berre.

"So are you," Berre said. "Where do you work?"

"Furniture shop, Third Ward."

I tried licking Berre's nipple, but it didn't work; Berre flinched a little, and I said "Sorry," and we both laughed.

"I'm in the radio trade," Berre said. "Did you ever think of trying that?"

"Making radios?"

"No. Broadcasting. I do the Fourth Hour news and weather."

"That's you?" I said, awed.

"Come over to the tower some time, I'll show you around," said Berre.

Which is how I found my lifelong trade and a lifelong friend. As I tried to tell Sether when I came back to the Hearth, kemmer isn't exactly what we thought it was; it's much more complicated.

Sether's first kemmer was on Getheny Gor, the first day of the first month of autumn, at the dark of the moon. One of the family brought Sether into kemmer as a woman, and then Sether brought me in. That was the first time I kemmered as a man. And we stayed on the same wavelength, as Grand put it. We never conceived together, being cousins and having some modern scruples, but we made love in every combination, every dark of the moon, for years. And Sether brought my child, Tamor, into first kemmer — as a woman, like a proper Thade.

Later on Sether went into the Handdara, and became an Indweller in the old Fastness, and now is an Adept. I go over there often to join in one of the Chants or practise the Untrance or just to visit, and every few days Sether comes back to the Hearth. And we talk. The old days or the new times, some of

kemmer, love is love.

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