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FROM FOLKTALES FROM THE LIBRARY OF NEW PLANETS

FOR MY 12TH BIRTHDAY, I was given the gift of night. Always, we had lived where the sun was king, ruling unblinkingly, shining down upon us from its palace in the peak of sky.

It was a childhood game, this attempt to outrun the sun, trick it into making long shadows, trailing behind us like the cape of the king, our arms and legs long as tree branches or rivers. If we moved fast enough, the sun could only catch us as if in the periphery of sight, shining on our backs as we attempted our escape from perpetual noon. But, of course, the attempt was futile. Unless we left our homes, crossed the walls that bounded our cities, and found other lands that we were told were uninhabitable to our kind.

Our planet does not rotate as it circles our sun, our star. It keeps the same face always toward the sun, like a courtier backing away from the king, never turning until out of sight. And so, for each particular location on our planet, it is always the same particular time.

And so, too, on our planet, streaked by minerals, metals, life, each of us of necessity remains where we are born, as we were made of that place and its particular light. My people made of iron and of the iron red birds which we eat in quantity, of the fish in the iron red streams. Our bones are iron. Our lips and tongues. Our red lungs, our rust-red blood.

On our planet, there is no difference between who you are and where you are, no distinction between place and time. A childhood rhyme which I remember:

Who are we who are made of when?

When are who who are made of where?

Where are who who are made of when?

Who are we who are made of where?

Naturally, in our language, the rhyme is better. My people say: We are of this singular place in what we understand is a vast and uncertain universe lolling unbounded in space and time. We know who we are. We know when. It is a comfort, this certainty.

At school, and in stories related in the bright light of bedtime, we children were not told of the moons and stars, of the six other planets in our system, each with others who are alive. The long dark cape of the sky at night, studded with an infinite number of puny suns, tiny jewels from distant times and places. But I have imagined the many shadows cast by our several moons, imagined other children leaping and dodging, trying to outrun the moons' light. What might they make of our blinkless day, blind of shadow or stars or dark?

In secret, I began to draw night, to imagine dusk and dawn, to conceive of our several moons' rise and set, the luminescence of their pale dance. I began to imagine the pitiless inscrutable sun turning red as it appeared to sink and dissolve into scarlet cloud, then being born again pink and crimson as it clambered into dawn. I began to imagine being made of other times, being made of other places.

How did I draw these times, these places? How did I draw this night? I drew our always-noon and began to erase. The hot blue, the heat shimmer rising, the river's steam. The red iron of our world. When I erased the words in our language for the present time, I found the past and the future. When I erased the word for iron, I found other places. When I erased our sun, it became the cool not-sun of moon, the erased red ground behind us streaked with shadow. "Come, Alice," my father said. "I have something to show you."

Citizens from other seams of our planet were arriving in our city, their robes salt white and cobalt blue. Citizens of other whens were arriving to lead us, to become our kings and queens, eat our red grains, feast on our red meats, sleep in our red homes, marry our young. "Alice," my father said. There was a door hidden below our stairs. "Your grandfather and his father, your grandmother and her mother made this," he said. "For when there is need."

A rocket tall as me. A bucket of ash and a large spade. In our language, this rhyme too is better, but even then, it was not an impressive revelation. "Father?" I asked. "Are we to escape? Are we to destroy? What are we to do with this toy?"

“Help me,” was all my father said. We carried the rocket (robed in a blanket it resembled the stiff body of a dead elder), and we heaved the bucket and the spade to the roof of our home. Loaded with ash, we stood the rocket up and pointed it at the sky. Bent glass held before the light of our sun, and the fuse ignited.

A blast of fumes and fire and the rocket lurched above us, trailing a foul tail of smoke like a long shadow. A black raptor rising into the empty sky. When it reached the peak where the sun shone, it burst, a gurgitation of ash, fire, and smoke. The sky was dirt, the sun was extinguished. I felt my skin grow chill, my insides shiver with cold and exhilaration. With relief. Our sky turned twilight then dark. Below the band of ash, night appeared. We saw the distant sky, the distant stars, and then the moons. The four moons radiant and white, neither red nor hot. The four moons casting my shadows about the roof, over the chimneys, down into the streets of our city. Where was no longer when. Where was no longer who. For now.

“It is the morning of your twelfth birthday,” my father said. “The first birthday you have ever known. And it is night.”