

THE BOOK
OF NOTHING



HJ ALDEN

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For Nora

SECTION 1

Chapter 1

In a quiet valley where the roses swayed, I met a man on a dusty road. Though the man was old, his eyes were bright. I asked him to walk with me and tell me what he knew.

This is what he said:

“From the nothing we arrive. To the nothing we return. In between, the nothing teaches us, and we become, if we work, the shining forms of its potential.”

“Once I woke up with a rose in my heart. I have never been so happy as I was that day. This rose is a great privilege. As it bloomed it burned away everything that kept me from seeing clearly.”

“In that clarity trees laugh. Clouds sigh, and mountains breathe. Air is the only thing that does not divide.”

“What we call the world is actually quite small. It is able to fit entirely into a human head.”

“Things are distractions until you learn how to use them. Until that moment, they are using you.”

“Life is supremely valuable, but only if you know what it’s for.”

“Fear is the greatest enemy. Division is it’s way.”

“To be alone is to be happy with whatever lives inside you.”

“To be lonely is to be anxious about whatever lives inside you.”

“This world is a story written by those who have forgotten their origins. Underneath their dead words is a truth so radiant no one who experiences it is ever the same.”

“Nothing isolates like the judgement that the gap between you and those around you is real.”

“If you wish to understand yourself, pass through your fears and unsatisfied desires until you reach the other side. Those fears will appear to you as a monster that pours out of your chest. If you are able to stand the sight of it without losing your mind, you will eventually be able to see what can be known, though this wisdom will not come without the help of the higher ones.”

“As you pass through this mirror of yourself the terror will be more than you can imagine. Stay with it. Do not succumb. In the end its whispers will fade into nothing. Your mind will be lucid, supple and clean.”

“To survive in the space beyond the monster is not easy, but it is work that humanizes whoever takes it on. There, one must become responsible for one’s own equilibrium.”

Chapter 2

That evening I stopped under a twisted tree. When it was time for sleep I pulled my blanket around me. In the darkest part of the night I dreamed this dream:

I was lying in a coffin made of ice. I lay there a long time, shivering in the cold. I wasn't at all sure I could break out of that prison. I was weak with fear and the ice was thick.

When my fear gave way to desperation, I pushed up hard into the ceiling with my fist. To my great surprise, there was not ice, but snow, and it gave way.

I saw a sky of a trillion stars. Everywhere around me there were coffins of snow and ice. They were spread out in all directions to the edge of the horizon. I saw a set of footsteps and sensed I should follow.

When I arrived at an unbroken grave of snow, it occurred to me to free the person inside. As I leaned down to begin, a voice said:

“NO!”

So I continued on my way alone, and the stars were like glitter spilled on black felt.

The next morning I ate quickly and began my walk. About mid-morning I was surprised to see the man I'd met the day before. How

he had gotten ahead of me I could not say, as he was much older and I had left him far behind.

He fell in with my step and this is what he told me:

“There are levels of dreaming. The lowest dreams are of the bodily functions. The highest are of a state in which one is free of the body. All objects in such a dream are metaphors for states of mind, desires, forces and invisible beings. Such dreams can have the force of prophecy.”

“When light appears in a dream it is a very good sign.”

In the course of our conversation that day, I asked him how God justifies the violence in the world.

He answered this way:

“Why look to God for answers about violence? Violence is the responsibility of each human being. Look into yourself and you will find Hell and Heaven. Exactly where is it you would like to live?”

I said, “but there is so much misery human beings heap on other human beings! It must be stopped. The perpetrators must be blamed, they must be shamed, they must be punished.”

He looked me in the eye and said: “The only perpetrator is you. Do not be concerned with others. That way brings death. And remember that sanctimony is the scourge of the privileged. In the end, it will break this world.

Finally, remember this: the crime is its own punishment.”

Overhead the day was blue, and the air was dry. I thought I saw tigers floating by like clouds. We stopped to eat, and I asked him why he was willing to talk to me. After all I knew nothing, and had left my friends behind.

He said, “I will be with you for a time because the wind has brought me. When the wind changes, who knows where I will go. It is even possible I will be back again.”

“To know why one person receives and another doesn’t takes a special kind of sight. Only the elect have such vision, not I.”

“As for life, what it owes you, it has already given you, and this it will continue to give. You can return the favor by becoming more and less of what you already are. What you are able to make of yourself will be your gift to the world.”

We had been walking all day. The stars blinked in the pale blue of twilight. The man said: “If you look carefully, you will see that the world is rising from its sleep. The colors have lifted from the objects they once adorned. The old forms of life survive only in the air. Not a single one of them remains tied to its origins. So it is with people. They have no place to call their own, even if they never leave the place where they were born. It is the end of everything, and the time of the nothing. For a while, in the nothing, good and evil will appear interchangeable.”

“One frees one’s self from memory only by remembering. Without remembering in this way-- cathartically--the memories live on as if they were you, while you exist only in parentheses”

We talked for a time as the darkness fell, until all I could see were the old man's eyes. These are the last things he said before he lay down to sleep.

“Darkness is only frightening if mistrust lives inside you. For those who trust, the darkness is like soil, and the human being is a plant that is rooted deep. In such a person there lives a rich joy.”

And then, changing the subject, I don’t know why:

“Work that kills the soul is work one should leave behind. We were not made to work so hard we have nothing left to offer others.”

Chapter 3

The next morning was dusty. The old man was gone.

The road stretched out through the fields and curved away. Alone, I walked in silence and remembered my life, and those memories took the form of a prison in my mind.

I remembered the sadness I felt as a child. How I had looked into the faces of so many who had looked away. I remembered the house, the wealth of its trappings. I remembered the family from which I was estranged.

I remembered the loss of friends, and I saw the moment of my greatest emptiness, as I had turned to look for something they denied, though it was something I felt, something I trusted more than their skepticism.

I walked past cotton clouds of white and blue. The wind strummed the trees, quietly, easily. The silence was a clarity of the air.

I realized that with no one to talk to, it wasn't possible to know who I was. That without others to provide me with an experience of myself, I was empty-- a mirror in a storefront with no passersby.

I saw, in the darkness between the trees, many forms I did not fully grasp. Some appeared as animals. Others as twisting and writhing fears. A few were smiling, and seemed to wish me well. I asked them what they had to say. This is what they answered:

“You see us because we have permitted it. But a day will come when you will see nothing. When you will hear nothing. Learn all you can now, so you will be able to stand that embrace. At the other side of it is a sacred field.”

“Regard the blue sky: it will teach you honesty. Regard the dark soil: it will teach you your value. In this way learn to recognize yourself after everything else has fallen away.”

I looked on the fields and saw white clouds. They were dragging heavily across the land. The lakes reflected them and the geese flew between. The sun seemed to whisper.

I do not know what it said.

I thought of the old man and the things he told me. How his kindness had been lined with steel. How the light in his eyes had been flecked with lightning.

The trees thinned out and there were fields, then marshes. I came to a large village at the edge of the sea. It had painted buildings of white, blue and pink. They sat on terraced outcroppings against a background of blue waves. There I met a woman, and decided to stay.

Chapter 4

Her form was as a dark guitar, and her eyes held silence. She, more than anyone, taught me the value of beauty. She, more than anyone, taught me to sigh. When I looked at her I was able to smile.

I took a job in the village mending shoes, a skill I had been lucky enough to learn from my father. Sometimes in the evenings I would sing in the plaza. People dropped money into my outstretched hat. The moon looked on wryly as it rose in the air.

On my return she would smile. We would cook and eat. I told her of the old man I had met on the way. How his eyes seemed to see into the heart of desire, into the sighs that breathe out from the invisible worlds that surround us everywhere, both night and day.

She said: “Such a person is rare today. Perhaps you will have an unusual fate.”

We hoped for a child, but it did not come. After four years, she said: “While it is true not everyone is fulfilled by children, without a child I believe I will die.”

Then she asked me to leave, and I made my preparations as we said our goodbyes. That was late spring. The trees were heavy with blossoms.

From the pink and white buildings birds poured into the sky. Friends asked, “where are you going?” But I had no answer, so I told them I was going to find my fate.

One said: But your fate will find you. Don’t you know that? I could not help but hang my head.

As I walked along the road etched into the hillside, I saw the sparrows skim the sea. White foam spread its veins after a surge of broken waves.

Chapter 5

After many days I came to a house on a cliff. It was said a woman lived there who knew the ways of the dead. I was hungry and I was sore with walking, so I asked her for a meal, and she let me in.

I could not tell how old she was. Her hair was braided, dark and gray. Her face was wrinkled though she often smiled. She was quiet, thoughtful, with intelligent eyes.

I asked her to teach me what she knew.

She said: “The land of death is like a vacuum. There, what you learn on earth is drawn out of you, unless it has eternal value.”

“When you think of someone you have lost to death, it means the departed one is thinking of you.”

“There is much beauty in the land of death, but it is different from what is beautiful on earth. The beautiful there is formed of moral force. A building may be composed of love, taking its form from the kind of love it is intended to house.”

“Imagine a home, its walls suffused with humility and joy. Only those who are humble and joyful may enter.”

“The greatest pain for the dead is in seeing how far they are from perfection. This is especially true when they meet one they wronged on earth. At such a moment they feel the pain of the one they affected. They can do nothing to change this until they return.”

“If you wish to communicate with one who is gone, know that only spiritual thoughts can reach them.”

“The dead remember the living and the earth with love. They are concerned with what the earth will become. They are profoundly aware of what they did to help or harm it.”

“What you want tells you how far you are from being at home in the nothing.”

I asked her how she knew these things and I still remember her reply:

“The dead are present everywhere. I was born with the gift of seeing them. At times I leave my body and live among them, but my life is here on earth, so I always return.”

I asked her why so few are capable of such sight. She said:

“We are still in the echoes of a time of skepticism. Because of it, human beings have learned to stand by themselves. This, as you might imagine, is an important skill. “

“Abstract thought drew a veil across the entrance to the other world. In their denial of the land of death, people are able to feel a justification for themselves. If this goes too far, humanity may forget its origins, and, even worse, its destination.”

I stayed with her a year, and in that time she gave me many insights. When it was time to leave I asked her why we die.

She answered this way:

“The earth, for all its beauty, is not our home. We die to return to where we come from. Each time we die, we take new knowledge with us, knowledge that enables us to understand more than before. One day we will be so changed, the earth will not be able to hold us. Love will be our body, and we will fly to the stars and become their angels.”

She walked with me down the path that led from her home. The sun was shining and the blue sea foamed. I thanked her and turned to meet the road.

Chapter 6

As I walked through the silence that held the world, I wondered about my life and what I would become. The clouds piled on top of one another. The trees edged the fields with a thick bevel of green.

I saw cattle in the pastures. Pigs in their sties. And I was able to realize many things:

Our lives are ours to spend as we please. We owe nothing to anyone as to outward appearances.

To be free is to voluntarily participate in what is necessary.

Time is the container for all we need on earth.

What is necessary changes. if we don't change with it we will die a death that is worse than death.

I realized the world is a created thing, and that we participate in its creation. The right kind of silence allows us to pass through the veil of that creation into something beyond our ordinary understanding. When we are in that place, the world is like music. The animals, trees and hillsides are its song.

I understood myself as one who had never been satisfied. That without a meaning for my life, beyond what was immediately supplied, I would always be restless, and would remain untouched. I understood that my love of silence was part of that longing.

As I walked the sea road along the cliffs, I came to a place where it turned inland. The gulls faded. The fields gave way to forests of pine. I passed a few cars that had been pushed to the side and abandoned. I thought of how the cities had once been filled with them. The strangeness of that. The chaos and noise. It occurred to me that history is not a record of what we thought, but a record of *how* we thought. That cars for instance, were only possible, when people's dominant mode of thought was mechanical and dry.

I wondered what a world would look like, in which the dominant mode of thought followed the laws of growth like a rose, or a field of strawberries carefully tended.

I realized that silence was not an absence, but a presence. A medium, or an antechamber, to the world inside this one.

Chapter 7

After a while I happened on a little farm. It had a wood frame house that was painted blue. The windows were done up in a neat white trim.

I knocked on the door, and an old couple invited me in. They had made the decision when they were young that they would read through the *Great Destruction* without being too concerned about whether they survived.

They cooked for me, though I protested. They offered me a place to sleep.

That night after dinner, they talked of what they learned.

What follows is what I remember of what they said:

“In the Days Before, the world lived in dread. There were more reasons for that than anyone could understand. Chief among them was the emptiness brought on by the lack of any sense of a meaningful life.”

“. . .A meaningful life is a life that sustains human beings well, with the outside structured in harmony with the inside. Instead, wealth and technology became substitutes for meaning."

“As the world changes, the forms of its relationships change also. Those who prefer the path of least resistance group themselves with others of like mind. Likewise, people with similar interests find themselves dependent on others who are like them. Obviously this still happens now, but its beginnings were in the *Days Before*.”

“Reality is structured in such a way that every level of understanding a human being can reach finds its counterpart in the external world, though that world may not always be physical in nature.”

“If one who loves is quiet enough, he or she can feel the sun radiating love into the leaves of the plants.”

“What we now know as the nothing is the *fertile void* on which all created reality rests. With the help of higher powers, human beings thought themselves into existence out of that void. This is why they return to it after death.”

“Beauty is infinite in its forms, each of which is rooted in silence.”

As they talked I realized I needed a change, that I was tired of wandering. I wanted to see something of what the world had made of itself, something to contrast with the world of silence they had helped to explain.

In the morning I thanked them and began my walk again.

I had decided to head to the *City of Sorrows*. There, the old life still existed. There were cars and trains, tall buildings and subways. The people still held to the old understanding, having drawn a line between them and the ways of the countryside.

SECTION 2

Chapter 8

On my approach to the city I arrived at the Garden of Painted Stones. Each stone was a different color, studding a vast field with pastels that jutted into the sky. It is said the artist wished to remain anonymous, so the viewer's attention was directed solely to the work itself.

The garden had a reputation as a place of contemplation--of adjustment and calm for those who left the city.

I decided to spend the night among the stones, each of which was said to represent a single musical tone. The sunlight falling on the various combinations of colors results in an array of chords that can be heard in the mind.

As the sun swept over the garden at the approach of twilight, I heard music rise from the stones to the stars. I thought of the genius behind such an idea and was grateful for the artist who had brought this concept to life.

As I slept that night, I dreamed of a pond. Its water was as clear as glass. There were red brick walkways just below the surface. At their edge, the water was thick with fish. They were perfectly transparent, yet I could see their mouths opening and closing at the surface. There were so many of them I couldn't tell the life of the fish from the life of the water. Then I noticed a hovering stillness in the air.

It was so profound it bordered on music. I walked to the center on the serpentine red path.

There was a fountain of pure water there.

I took a drink.

As I left The Garden of Painted Stones the next morning, The sun lit the field with burnished hues. My mind still swells with the thought of that song. I took it with me for much of the day.

That afternoon as I closed in on the city, I walked quietly past the Lake of Lost Souls. Not long after that, I heard something new. The music I had heard in the Garden began to be drowned out by the sound of engines.

That evening I reached the City of Sorrow, so named because it was alone--the only city left in the world. I had been surviving on hardtack and handouts for many weeks, so I decided to eat a proper meal . The noise of the traffic was painful to my ears, but I was fascinated with the cars and the frenetic, jagged motion. The bright colored lights and deepening shadows.

Chapter 9

At the inn I met a man who had been born in the city. He suggested the roast chicken, which I immediately ordered. We began to talk as I waited for my meal. He said:

“The City of Sorrow is a city of memory. A repository for the history of the *Days Before*. There is beauty here, culture, industry and

business. The world as it was--the last form of a world that doesn't exist anymore."

When I asked him what he did for a living, he explained he was a scientist. I asked him what a scientist does and he offered me this answer:

"A scientist studies what exists, so that science may change it into something more useful. The chief tools of the scientist are measurement, experiment and theory. If something cannot be measured, it is left to those who call themselves "artists." They are charming people, the self-appointed guardians of what they call "culture." Yet it is the scientists who define the artists' starting point and their end."

The man smiled kindly and looked modestly down.

"In the Days Before, the city was the center of life. It was powerful by reason of its attractions. Those attractions were made possible by the means science was able to provide. And also by the power that went into its defense.

I understand that, in the world outside the city, science is a word that has been almost forgotten. So the people who live in the City of Sorrows have a knowledge the rest of the world cannot understand. It is a knowledge based on fire, or in other words, the explosive principle, in which energy is created out of destruction. Therefore we hold destruction in high esteem. Our entire way of life is based on it." He looked up and smiled, and then explained further:

“Take the neon you see around you in the city. The advertisements, store names, and pictures frozen in bright varicolored tubes of glass, marking the locations of buildings, and other important places, their functions and their worth. As such it is highly valued by all, or, as one of our better writers has said, neon is: “a dream of desire frozen in the incandescent shapes of words.” This neon is created with the use of electricity, and electricity is the product of friction created by the destruction of fossil fuels.”

I told him of the stone garden outside the city, and of the music I had heard there. I asked him if he would please explain to me the science of such a creation.

It was for this question that I was brought before the council.

Chapter 10

The council was a group of men and women tasked with guarding the well-being of the city. There were nine of them in total, chosen by virtue of their contributions to the greater good. They asked me to explain myself and why I had come.

These were my words to them:

“My name is John. I was born by the sea in the Region of White Grass. My family was well off, with many fields. I was brought up learning a manifold of skills, and put to work at the age of 15.

I was promised the wealth of my parents at their death, and at first I assented to this and thought myself lucky. But then something terrible happened, and my life changed forever: I was struck with an insatiable desire to *know*. As a result my work began to sour, I felt afflicted with a longing to see the world.

My relationships became strained. I began to hear a voice that sang to me sweetly. It said “No one who loves knowledge can remain at home.”

I wrote a note to my parents and turned to go. Leaving at dawn at the beginning of my twentieth year, I followed the road that twisted past the sea and turned inland toward the country of green hills and honey bees.”

I told them of the man I met on the road. I told them of the village and of the woman I had loved. I recounted my year with the one who knew the dead, of the couple who gave me bread, and of the Garden of Painted Stones.

I was allowed to wait in the city as they debated my fate. The man who had been my interviewer came often to talk. We would walk through the city and discuss the world.

He told me that because the City of Sorrows is a lonely city--the last of its kind in all the world, everyone who lives there feels the heaviness of that, as well as the need to keep it alive, in the hope that one day, its like will rise from the ashes and spread again into the countryside, for no other way of living has produced such marvels.

I asked him if marvels were necessary for a good life. I asked this because I did not know.

He said: “Though I am surprised at your question I see you are sincere. So I will answer you with as much sincerity as I can. Without wonder life is flat, and empty. And it is a good thing for human beings to be able to create wonders out of their own effort. This is why marvels and wonders are necessary for a good life. They inspire us as they give us purpose.”

I asked him which was greater, the wonders of the natural world, or those of art, or those of science, and which of these helps most to teach people to love, for love had been an interest of mine since I was a child.

The man had a pained look, and said he did not know. But he assumed that love was the thing that brought more love. This was the wisest thing I heard in the City of Sorrows, and I felt it important to tell him so.

His reply was this:

“I see you are an earnest man, but dangerous to our city. I will do what I can to help, but it is impossible for me to recommend that you stay.”

It was because of him I was not killed.

In a week's time I was brought before the council again, and banished to The Island. I did not tell them that banishment was far from a punishment, that I had not come to the city to remain.

Chapter 11

On my way to the island for an undetermined sentence, the guards were kind, having been instructed by the council to treat me well. There are a few things I remember from that trip of many days. Not the least of which was spending time in an automobile.

The land rolled by at a terrible rate. The trees were no longer trees, but a slow green blur. The sky above them seemed pressed behind glass.

The guards were amused at my shaking, though they laughed even harder when it went away, because then I played as a child might play, sticking my head out the window, feeling the wind on my face and hands.

One of the guards was more friendly than the rest. I talked to him often, and I remember some of the things he said:

“You're a lucky one, you are.
Not everyone banished makes it to the island alive.”

I asked him if they become ill, or just what happens.
He said:

“Let's just say the council isn't always so generous. The rumor is, your interviewer stood up for you. That is unusual to say the least. Generally, he stays silent.”

I told him that a silence like that must not be easy, and the guard smiled a smile I did not want to understand.

I asked the guard how he had come by his work, and how he found life in the City. He said:

“Everyone in the City is given a test. That test determines what you are suited to do. It was determined that I was good at driving and taking orders. At the right time I was given the position I have now.”

“All in the city are required to work, except those who are incapable at birth or by accident. These are excused, and become the source of work for others.”

I said it must be good to be recognized for one's talents.

He said, “ I am recognized for these things, and these things alone.”

Before we reached the island, the guards began to smile and chuckle among themselves. Then they asked me if I would like to drive.

I replied “Yes!” quickly and smiled widely in return.

They put me behind the wheel and told me what to do, reminding me not to hit anything. The road was empty, so I wasn't worried. We had not seen a single car since we left the city. I drove for nearly an hour,

as the guards laughed and made jokes. It was at this point I understood the appeal of city life.

Before we reached the bridge that would take us to the island, I turned the car over to my friend. At the gate I was given to a new set of guards. My friends wished me well in my new home. I wished them well also and turned to go.

Chapter 12

The new guards were curious to see their counterparts wish me well. Nonetheless, they kept their distance. They explained that they would not allow me to leave the island unless it was permitted by the officials of the City.

Next, they showed me to my quarters-- a small hut of mud and stone. They gave me a few chickens and a goat for milk, some fishing line, seeds, and a hoe for weeding. This was how I began the next nine years.

The water around the island was deep and wide. The bridge was guarded day and night. Winters were mild and summers bright. For the first year I spoke to no one. I did not even know if there were others like myself.

I took walks on the beach. I tended the animals, caught fish, and grew vegetables. I tracked the sun in the sky, and the patterns of the weather. I watched the stars and the moon at night. There was nothing

to read. No one to talk to, so I spoke to the goat so I would not lose my mind. We had many fine conversations and I considered her a friend.

One night the old man I had met on the road came to me in a dream. He spoke to me as before, saying, “Do not be afraid. Your circumstances may be difficult for a while, but in the end you will emerge from them changed for the better. Stay with the silence and let it teach you.”

“The silence of each thing, whether living or inanimate, is the beginning of the possibility of knowledge of that thing. This is also true of the larger silence, the silence of the world around you, of the air, stars, and sky.”

The old man smiled. His eyes were like two suns. Before he disappeared he spoke these words: “This island is the right place for you. Remember that, regardless of what comes.”

Then he faded and disappeared, and I saw around me a garden of many flowers. I walked through the garden until I came to a grave. Out of it, with no warning, my own, long dead body rose up to greet me with an empty grin. I woke up suddenly, and was terrified.

Chapter 13

The second year I had two visitors. The first was a new guard. He came as I was weeding carrots. Without a word he hit me across the cheek, took one of my chickens, and disappeared.

He was not one of the guards I met when I first arrived. I hoped I would not see him again, but he became a frequent visitor. For the next 6 years he was part of my life. He was not always violent, but he was always cruel, taunting me and kicking the animals, taking anything of mine he had a use for. I know now that this man was of great value to me. But there were times I felt a torment so vast and so immediate, I did not know what to do.

For several years those feelings came and went, though for the most part I was able to recover myself after his visits. I would fish, tend the chickens and mind the goat. I would till and weed the garden. I took long walks on the beach and studied the sea. It's bright glitter. Its rough, slate waves.

It was on one of these walks that I met a friend. I can still feel the depth of my astonishment. Coming over a rise in the sand, I saw him walking toward me. The guards had placed him on the other side of the island, saying nothing to either one of us about the other. Nonetheless, we spoke often after that. I still remember pieces of those conversations. He said:

“Hello, My name is Tong . . . I'm from the west. I worked off and on as a laborer before I came here, studying history the rest of the time.

My interest was in the *Days Before*, and the time of the *Great Destruction*.

I asked him to tell me what he had learned in his studies. Over many days he recounted what he knew:

“The earth has a history billions of years long, and it has passed through many phases. At each phase of the human part of our history, the leading thinkers are convinced that their way of understanding things is best, and that everyone who came before them was mistaken-- ignorant. They spare no effort and no expense to hold on to what they know.”

“Time is a force that destroys. But in the wake of its destruction there is always new life. These are the conditions from which all life proceeds, and these are the conditions that bring every death.”

“New epochs of history bubble up out of the ones that come before. They are the result of humanity waking up to a new capacity inside itself-- an impulse that had lain dormant in all previous human beings .”

“In the *Days Before*, there was a great emptiness. The old knowledge, the glue that once held things together, was gone. People filled their time with distractions—music, technology, work and games.”

“Much wealth was had by a few, and the rest were kept in line by a kind of hypnosis, in which the lives of the rich were dangled before them like shiny objects on a golden chain.”

“In the great destruction, this falsified life was discovered as something that could not stand. The population dwindled almost 80 percent in a matter of decades .”

“The sorrow was so great after the destructive phase, that it was not possible for it to be absorbed. In its place is a silence that has many aspects. Those in the countryside look to the future. In the City of Sorrows people hold to the past, as their thinking is old and outdated. Outside the city the new thinking tends to be based on *listening*. Saying this to the council was what brought me here.”

That night the guard came and beat me harder than usual. He left with two chickens and all the milk from my pail.

Chapter 14

Another day Tong asked me how I had come to the island. I told him that I too said something to the Council. I told them I had heard the music in the Garden of Painted Stones.

I told him about the man I had met on the road, and of the woman who spoke with the dead. I told of the town of pink, white and blue buildings, and of the woman I had loved. I spoke of the older couple who had decided to read through the great destruction. I mentioned their heroism--that they had put knowledge ahead of their fear of death. I told him of the man on the council who had helped me, and of the guards who had laughed while letting me drive.

He said: “ Perhaps this woman you loved was right: Such a strange group of people suggests an unusual fate.”

I never told him of the guard who had become my greatest enemy, though a few years after we met, I asked him if he had met anyone else on the island. He said he had not, that the guards had not even come to check up on him. He attributed their lack of interest to a lack of concern for whether he lived or died.

For several years our lives played out in this way. We met several times a week, always in the same place. We talked and traded items we had an excess of. Tong would smoke cigarettes made from tobacco he found growing wild. I tried smoking once, but could not stop coughing. That was just one of the many times we laughed, though in this instance Tong laughed much more than I, at least until I had finished coughing

After five years on the island, the guard’s visit’s became more frequent. His anger grew and he became more violent. Once I was able to see him coming from across the beach, so I left before he arrived.

From a long way off I watched him carefully. He was furious that I wasn't there. He tore down the pen I had made for the goat. He trampled my garden, then kicked open the door to my hut. After that I decided it was better if I were there when he came.

Th next time he came to visit he was more angry than ever. I can’t help but remember his harsh voice as he said:

“We gave these things to you and we can take them away. You are an enemy of the City, and as far as I’m concerned you deserve nothing.”

I told him I had no objection to the City or its people. For this he kicked me and beat me with his fists until I bled, I convulsed in the sand as it began to rain.

I considered going to the other guards to complain. But in the end I kept away from them, unsure of whether they or someone higher might have sent him.

I will always be grateful for my friendship with Tong. Because of him I was able to keep myself from a sorrow so deep it would have ended in despair. But after several years of the guard’s beatings and mistreatment, I began to withdraw somewhat, looking for solitude more than ever before.

In my isolation the silence began to speak to me. It taught me many things and they were beautiful to learn:

If we are quiet enough, the blue sky will teach us honesty.

The animals will teach us innocence, the plants, purity.

The summer expands us. In the winter we contract. In that contraction we are more able to sense ourselves. In the expansion of summer, we have a harder time thinking.

I was grateful to know these things, but they did not take away the brutality of the guard, or the sense of isolation and helplessness I felt after his visits.

For the next year I vacillated between the lessons of the silence and the guard that taught me about pain and rage.

At the end of that year-- my sixth on the island-- I sensed something powerful growing inside me, though I was not yet ready to admit to myself what it was.

Chapter 15

The turmoil of that time is still a strong memory. I felt both fear and anger, so much so that as that year continued, the silence faded to nothing at all.

Tong was no help to me, as I did not wish him to know of the guard and my troubles. I was afraid that if he knew, he would involve himself, increasing his difficulties along with my own. As a result of that concern I withdrew even further.

I took walks by myself and thought of what I knew. I remembered the old man, and the teachings of the woman who spoke to the dead. The hope in what they had offered seemed far away.

Every moment of every day I heard a dim roar, as if there were a fire inside my head. Each day, each week, that roar grew more

pronounced until I was utterly and completely emptied of joy-- a condition I had never experienced before.

As that emptiness gained ground, the guard seemed to notice. He visited more frequently. His beatings increased in frequency and intensity. One day he said to me:

“If you had any courage in you, you would fight, like a man.”

I said nothing, but he smiled with contempt and said :

“I know you want to. I can see the burning in your eyes”

The next morning I woke, and there was a thought in my mind. It was a thought so terrible I could not look away. I walked all that day, trying hard not to give it a place in my mind. But by the time night came and I went to bed, I knew. The next time the guard came to visit I would kill him.

Chapter 16

The island had been my prison, but it had much beauty. After my decision I was unable to see it. All I knew was the roar of my own rage and the anticipation of what I would do. I did not care what happened to me afterwards.

The next time the guard came, I saw him first. I gripped the sharpened stick behind my back as I approached, though I was still

some distance away, descending the rippled beige crest of a large dune.

As I reached the bottom of the dune, gripping the knife I had fashioned from a piece of wood, I was surprised by a familiar voice in my head. It was the voice of the old man I had met so many years ago.

He said:

“The only perpetrator is you, yourself.”

And then, with great compassion and kindness:

“The mark of a good human being is in how much reality they can hold and still be kind.”

With that, an epiphany flashed inside me, and I understood that the guard and I were of the same mind, and that killing him would be the same as taking my own life. Then I realized in a second flash that every blow and insult he had visited on me was waiting patiently to return to him in its own good time, and with that realization I felt sorry for both of us.

Walking toward him over the dune, I dropped my knife and began to smile. For the first time since I had come to the island, I felt I was not alone. He hit me across the face three times, then punched me in the stomach until I fell to the ground. The sound of each blow was like the sound of a bell, ringing to mark my liberation.

Chapter 17

After he left I went immediately to bed. I was exhausted, moribund. I had not slept in several days. Inside myself I felt a darkness accelerating, as if a black smoke gathered itself in my chest and torso. I felt this way for many days. Inexplicably, (given my victory over my own hate and rage) a great fear held me.

In that darkness I was unsure of myself. Anxious and despairing. I could not think. I could not act. I felt helpless. Hopeless. Untouchable and unclean.

As the days went by the darkness seemed to tighten itself into a clenched fist in my chest. I don't know how I managed to live through this. The fear was great. That I survived it makes me believe there is help for us. The word I have heard for this help is "Grace."

In the end I could only wait and hope for deliverance, not knowing if it would come, or, if it did, what it would look like. I spoke every day to the nothing that surrounded me and cried every night as I lost myself in sleep. It was only years later I was able to realize that this process and the fear it brought was the very help I was crying out for.

Perhaps two months after this process began, I felt a surge of dark power streaming out of my chest, and I saw, floating in the air in front of me, a monster of hideous visage and shape. For three days it hovered there, staring at me with burning eyes. For a time it spoke, but what it said I will not repeat.

When it left I fell backwards into exhaustion and watched as the fear slowly drained away until there was only a throbbing memory of it my body inhabited. My relationship to the world had changed utterly in those moments. I had survived that most horrific of sights, then found myself alive inside a kind of emptiness, with no anchor inside and no anchor outside.

When I could, I went to visit Tong. He told me I seemed different, but he could not say how. I asked him to speak of what he knew of evil, and this is what he told me:

Evil is the result of an impulse out of place-- either it comes too soon or its time has past. In this way it accelerates us beyond our ability to properly take it in. or else it is spoiled, its life force darkened, and so it spoils everything it touches. As when sentimentality for a long gone age fuels politics, or a torrent of technology drowns out silence and hope. Such things lead to the personal acts we all know as evil, as well as to global conflicts in which all sense of decency disappears. . . .This I learned in my study of history.

But there is another evil that is more deeply hidden. It is everything low and fearful within us, untouched by consciousness and untransformed.

I asked him how he knew of this last kind of evil. He said it came to him in a dream the night before, that he had no inkling of it until that moment.

We continued our walk on the beach that day. I caught two fish and gave him one. He smiled and thanked me, saying:

“You have no idea how much your being here has helped me. You came into my life at exactly the right time.”

I replied that this was true for me also.

Chapter 18

In my last two years on the island, I saw very little of the guard I had come to know so well. My time was spent in contemplation and preparation, even though I wasn't sure exactly what I was preparing for.

My conversations with Tong continued to the end. Though even when the trouble had passed I never mentioned the guard. Neither did I mention the monster that had poured out of me over three days, or the fear I had felt, the profound shame at realizing that this monster was something I had called forward from myself, that it was, in fact something I had created.

In the absence of that hideous being, I felt an emptiness where most of my old feelings of self had lived, and it took all my mental effort to maintain my equilibrium day to day. I felt as if I had been opened up-- as a great tide of muddy water flowed out of me, and the organs that had held that force within them were like sponges being slowly drained of what was left.

As that darkness faded over the months that followed, the skies grew brighter. The sun seemed to ring like a golden bell. That was a strange feeling, because I heard no sound . . . yet I could sense it as if it were

ringing nonetheless. One night I had a dream of the old man from long ago. He turned to me and said simply, “It won’t be long now.” On waking I had the sense that I might soon leave the island. The next day I spoke to Tong and asked him how long he had been sentenced to stay. He said there had been no set length, but that he had been assured at his sentencing that if he ever returned to the City he would be killed.

Smiling I told him that I too had not been told the length of my sentence, then I related my dream to him, and we both chuckled at the thought of our freedom, speaking of what we would do. Tong said he would miss only one thing from the City of Sorrow. It was a cold confection that they called *ice cream*. He said it was almost worth risking death for, and we laughed in that giddy way that lost men do.

That night I looked up at the stars above my roof. I heard a deep resonance inside the silence and felt the stars shining into my heart at the same time my heart lifted up to meet them.

Chapter 19

As the great wound inside me continued to heal, Tong was released and left the Island. He was kind enough to leave a present for me in the place where we usually met. By this present, I knew I would no longer see him. It was a bundle of dried fish with a note inside that read:

“I am gone, but I hope we will meet again. In the meantime I will be thankful for your help and your friendship.”

At the moment I read this note I felt grateful, but I also felt alone again. Not even the beauty of the island could comfort me: the shifting blues of sea and sky, the corn and tomatoes that hung soundlessly in my garden.

For the remainder of that year I fought to maintain myself without help from anyone. There were even times I would have welcomed a beating from the guard, my old friend. But he was nowhere to be found, and it should be said in all honesty that I did not try very hard to find him.

There were many things I learned during that last year on the island. The most important of these were the following:

To know one’s self is to learn one’s relationship to the nothing--the void that lines every experience of silence.

Meaning lives in every existent thing, and we ourselves are the experience of that meaning.

To think is to experience the life inside the life we live out while in human form.

I determined that matter was not an illusion, rather it is a means by which the invisible experiences itself as mass, density and form.

Most importantly of all, I realized that the effort to understand myself and the world around me was the very thing that allowed me to keep myself sane.

Chapter 20

One day as I was wandering across the island, thinking in just this way, a completely irrational thought assailed me: soon this island would not be able to hold me. It was a strong feeling, though it faded quickly.

The next day I felt light, as if my bones were hollow, like a bird's. I thought I felt a sphere of light pass through my head. It was an illumination by the nothing that was finally beginning to feel like my friend.

The next day I felt that light more strongly than before.

The day after that it spoke to me, though I am not at liberty to reveal what it said. Yet I saw in my mind's eye a hooded figure as it spoke and I felt myself inside a wisdom that was kind, with a knowledge of life that was constantly both surprised and surprising.

Chapter 21

One night, after a day of quiet thought, and a walk on the sand to my favorite fishing spot, I dreamed this dream:

A little man, dressed in emerald green, danced in a circle of lunging snakes. He held a cane in his hand as he moved to strange music on a bare patch of earth that had been long ago tamped down. Each time he tapped his cane on the ground, it hit exactly at the place the next snake would strike. The snake hit the cane and bounced off harmlessly as the man continued to dance and sing. In the dream the more I listened, the more dizzy I became, till suddenly I was infused with a feeling of light and the sense of a strange radiance. In that joy I knew I was the song the man sang. . . the music, the lyric and the voice itself.

The next morning, walking across the dunes near the center of the island, I saw my old friend, the guard, from far away. I looked at him with fear, until I realized that his pain had begun long before he met me, and it would be a long time before it left him. He saw me from across the dune, looked into my eyes for a second, then turned away. To my complete surprise I felt a moment of sorrow, though I also understood with some relief, that the invisible thread that had connected us no longer existed, that in fact it had begun to fray the moment I had dropped the knife I'd made.

The next day I woke up with the light in my head again and heard a voice say:

“Soon.”

It never occurred to me to question this voice.

I began to think of what I needed to do to be ready to leave the island, without considering the possibility that I would be officially released. Neither did it occur to me that I should be frightened. Instead I felt that it was simply time to go. I resolved to let the animals run wild. I was sure they would be OK-- that the guards would take care of them.

SECTION 3

Chapter 22

On the right night, at the right time, I walked to the beach. The water was as calm as I had ever seen it. The moon was shining white and blue. Dimly I saw a figure in an approaching boat. After a time I saw that figure more clearly. It was the old man I had met so long ago, singing a beautiful song that was both familiar and unfamiliar.

We sailed all night to a shore far away. There, we were met by men and women on horseback. They took me to a place among distant mountains, and I lived there and studied until it was time to return. During our trip, the old man spoke of many things. These are the only ones that I can tell you:

“Though you have been through a great deal, it is only the beginning. You must come to a new awareness-- one that contains the living names of everything on earth.”

“Though you have much more to learn, it was determined that you could not learn it on this island. For this reason I was sent to free you.”

“Every human being carries the same monster within them. In by far the greatest number of people this being is asleep. Yet even in its sleep it influences human actions indirectly, since we are naturally afraid of it and project those fears onto the people around us.”

“From time to time a person is ready to step out of the natural equilibrium that was given to them at birth, If they persist in this, the meeting you have had will eventually come to pass for them.”

“After this encounter the task is to continue to develop one’s self. In this way and this way only can we transform all that fear into a force for good.”

“Love is the reality on which all material experience is founded. The earth is the invisible made visible, in all its ferocity and beauty.”

“The monster is not the only thing hidden inside a human being. Glorious beings wait in the interior of each one of us. One of them in particular is waiting to meet you at the right time. These beings dwarf the power of the fear and pain inside us, and if we align ourselves with them, nothing can harm us, and nothing at all can stand in our way.”

The men and women we met on that far shore carried themselves in a majestic silence. I was not used to being around so many people, so I spoke only when spoken to, except when I sought out my old friend.

Occasionally one of the others would offer what they knew. Some of what they said was so rarified I was unable to hold onto it, but a few were sufficiently understandable that I was able to remember them and I will now pass them on.

They taught me that life is a means to an end.

That love is the way, and peace the guiding star.
They spoke of the City of Sorrow as a stage on that way, one we could look back on with both delight and regret.

They said "The world of technology is a world of desperation. Yet there is absolutely no need to condemn what it has made. Rather it is important to understand the impulse."

As we talked one night, my thoughts turned to the island I had so recently left. I thought of the guard I'd had so much trouble with, and I wondered why this trouble had come, and what would happen to the one who had been so difficult for me.

Suddenly I heard this voice in my head:

"This guard was an old friend. He did not know he was helping you, but help you he did." Then I saw a light shine far off in the distance. It had an authority and a presence that was unassailable, promising beauty, joy and the eternal pursuit of more and more wisdom. I looked at the old man. He put his finger to his lips and smiled, as if to say the *beginning begins*.