

LOVE LETTERS TO EARTH

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Love Letters to Earth

Priestess and anthropologist, 1

Bag People, 5

Dancers, 10

The Mystery of the Spectacular Ending to the Story of the World, 14

Instructions for Creating the Earth, 18

The Reason the World has Ended, 22

The Afterlife, 26

Priestess and anthropologist, 32

Swakes, 37

War, 42

Weather, 47

Wind, 53

Streams of Conscience, 58

For Love, 62

Priestess and anthropologist, 68

Fishing for Lost Souls, 73

The Two Sighs of God, 79

The Town Fool, 83

A Great Victory, 89

The People Who Retreat from Themselves, 94

Actors, 102

Priestess and anthropologist, 109

A pair of tattooed warriors grips the anthropologist's arms and leads him up a hillock to a small round hut. Inside, the priestess, nude as always, shifts her raised knee to keep her hammock swaying.

"Leave him," she says. The warriors release their grips. One of them throws the anthropologist's frayed and bulky backpack to the dirt.

"Why the rough treatment?" The anthropologist has been here for months and speaks her language fluently.

"You've learned too much," says the priestess. "We're going to have to kill you."

"I don't understand. You gave me permission to stay as long as I liked."

She shrugs one shoulder, a habit of hers. "Now you can stay even longer."

Hers is the only naked body that has not lost its effect on him. "I've been planning to write all good things about your people," he says, "if that's what you're worried about."

"All lies," she says. "We've been putting on a show for you."

"I don't believe you."

"We know the most child-like tribes get all the government benefits." She clucks her tongue. "Believe me or not as you wish. You'll be killed either way." She opens her hand and invites him to pull up a mat. "Don't worry, you have until the rain stops," she says. The anthropologist looks over his shoulder. The warriors are gone and, she's right, it's raining again, one of those light-switch rains that could quit just as quickly.

“That’s one of our customs,” she adds. “Don’t you have that scratched into your big black notebook somewhere?”

“Execution rituals. I must have missed that one.”

“I don’t know how. You scratch all day long in your ugly notebook, and for what?”

“It’s my job.”

“That notebook! How old is it? Why don’t you ever make a new one? Why don’t you at least paint something on the cover? It’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen an anthropologist carry, and that’s saying a lot.”

“I’m not really an anthropologist,” he confesses. “I’ve lapsed. I don’t study. I don’t write papers anyone will read.”

“Then what do you do?”

It’s a question he’s been avoiding. “I travel and observe...I’m collecting my thoughts.”

“Into what?”

He’s not sure how to respond.

“If I find a pile of your thoughts lying around, I will carry it out to the shitting place before someone steps in it.”

He starts to laugh, then remembers she’s about to have him killed.

He folds his arms. She taps the edge of the hammock

He stares through the doorless entry. It’s pouring now. The rain cascades through the rain forest’s leaves, overfilling those like cupped palms, spattering those like spatulas. The puddles swell and join hands, climbing toward the hut.

His legs are tired and a little wobbly from nerves. He decides to take a mat after all. He sits at an awkward distance from the priestess, near the entry. For a while, they observe each other out of the corners of their eyes.

The priestess pushes her toes against the hammock cords to get it moving again. The anthropologist puts his forearms on his knees and lets his head sink. He rubs the back of his stiff neck.

His back hurts, too. After all his travels, his endless observations, he wishes he had a comfortable chair for what now appears to be his last hours on earth. He's owed that, at least, isn't he?

He raises his head. "Isn't it also a custom to allow the condemned to live like kings, to bring them food and drink and women, or whatever?"

"You must have us confused with some other people," she says.

"So you expect me just to sit here quietly?"

"I never said you had to be quiet."

"Maybe I'll run."

"If our warriors don't catch you, the jaguars will. You needed three guides just to find us, remember."

Outside, the rain hastens the dusk. After years of moving on, taking leave at the first sign of entanglement, his worst fear has at last been realized. He's overstayed his welcome.

"It is raining," says the priestess. "Soon you'll be dead. Now would be a good time to show me what's in your very ugly notebook."

The idea angers him at first. He doesn't deserve a death sentence for notetaking.

So why should he entertain his killer? After a few minutes of silence he reconsiders.

She's right: he's going to die soon. Why harbor a grudge? He doesn't want to spend his final hours in boredom.

Still, he waits long enough for the silence to register his complaint.

It is dark now, and the rain falls steadily. The anthropologist takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. He unzips his backpack and pulls out his ugly notebook. There's a small flashlight in there, too. He has sealed it with duct tape and used it sparingly. It still works.

He opens the notebook and clears his throat.

Bag People

There was a time when the Jooga tribe were notorious collectors. They took everything they could get their hands on, whether natural or man-made, and put it into piles. They even raided the villages of neighboring tribes, harming no one but stealing everything that interested them and some things that didn't, simply to add to their collections. To outsiders, their village looked like a garbage dump, piles surrounding their huts, some taller than the huts, some *on* the huts, some in the village commons, others stretching out well beyond the boundaries of the village, strangling trees and providing homes for some animals, playgrounds for others.

At first, the Joogas had a system of classification that allowed them to put like items in like piles. Spear-shaped objects went in one pile, egg-shaped objects in another. Flexible objects in one pile, brittle objects in another. Daytime objects in one pile, nighttime objects in another. When an object fell into more than one category, the village's Collector-in-Chief would weigh the factors and make the call. The system worked for centuries, until the nearby river became the bearer of a new variety of objects that seemed impossible to classify. The Joogas found floating down the river and amassing on its banks objects which appeared egg-shaped when first discovered, but could

become spear-shaped simply by pulling on the ends. Then there were objects that seemed both flexible and brittle depending on the direction you tried to bend them and on other factors, like the weather. There were also many objects that could be used in both daytime and nighttime, and some that seemed useful at no time. Such objects caused a breakdown in the classification system, and the piles, once neat and orderly, became chaotic and cluttered, and the sheer numbers of items found floating in the river threatened to overwhelm the village.

Then one day it began raining, so hard that the Joogas were driven into their huts, where they watched out their doorways as their treasured piles collapsed in the downpour. The storm continued for days, and soon the banks of the river overflowed, and the Joogas were forced to climb into trees like monkeys just to prevent themselves from being swept away. When the flood surged through the village, all the collections of the Joogas were washed away, as were their huts, leaving them with nothing. Finally, as the waters began to recede and the rain began to slow, the heavens provided them with the greatest object yet invented, an object so useful and well-suited to the Joogas, it had to come directly from the gods. The rain turned from water into bags, and the whole sky was suddenly checkered with falling bags. Some of the bags caught their handles on the branches of the trees and hung there like new fruit, while others turned upside down and landed on the heads of the frightened Joogas. When the rains, and the bags, finally stopped falling, the Joogas climbed down from the trees (some with bags still on their heads, afraid to touch them), sank their feet into the muddy ground, and wept at the loss of their cherished collections.

The Collector-in-Chief called a meeting, to which he requested that everyone bring

one of the bags that had been given to them by the gods. The bags were large, made of plain beige cloth, with egg-shaped wooden handles that opened wide.

“The gods have sent us both a message and a gift,” said the Collector-in-Chief. “The message is that our collections had become too heavy and threatened to break the back of the earth, so the gods decided to wash them away. To replace our collections, the gods have sent us the gift of these new containers, which are objects from their own collections. ‘May we suggest you try these?’ the gods are saying, and as usual we will follow the good suggestions of the gods.”

Thus it was decreed that from now on each person’s entire collection must never exceed the dimensions of his bag.

Almost overnight, the Jooga culture changed dramatically. They rebuilt their village and lived as before, but now they were much choosier about the items they collected, knowing that only so much could fit in one bag. Their lives felt lighter and more concise, and their collections sometimes surprised them with meanings that would have been smothered in the era of great piles.

The Joogas still raid villages, but now they take very little, and if they take more than they can fit in their bags, they return what they don’t use.

“I won’t be needing this,” a Jooga will say, handing a stolen cup back to its owner.

“Oh, so it’s not good enough for you?” the owner will say knowingly.

Almost every Jooga’s bag is full, even at an early age, so that an addition to its contents also means a subtraction of something already bagged. The young Jooga’s bag is often full of flashy items plucked from the river, while an older Jooga replaces such items with subtler ones, more personally and less conventionally meaningful.

Household items used daily--cooking utensils, clothing, personal grooming items--are exempted from the bag's contents. All else is part of the collection. When a Jooga obtains a new and interesting item, he may carry that item around the village for a day or two, showing it to everyone he meets. At night, though, it must be returned to the bag, which is kept in a corner of its owner's hut.

The entire collection is brought out only for special occasions, such as the beginning of a new friendship or marriage. When two Joogas strike up a conversation for the first time, one will suggest an *oog*, a meeting in which two people display the contents of their bags to each other. Sometimes old friends will renew their friendship with an *oog*, too.

At an *oog*, two or more Joogas will take turns pulling out items from their bags. The owner will describe each item, where and when it was found, what it might be used for, and will then tell any stories connected with it, which are often embellished to make the item more meaningful and important.

"This is a nut that fell on my head when I was a boy," said one Jooga man, twisting the nut between his fingers and weighing it in his hand.

The man's wife, a woman well known for the beautiful black beads she'd worn around her neck, had recently died, and his friends had suggested an *oog* to help him overcome his grieving.

"I was walking in the place where the parrots feed," said the man, "and it was the first time I was allowed to walk in the trees alone. The nut frightened me and left a bump on my head for many days. When I picked the nut off the ground, I looked to see who had dropped it. There was a parrot high in the tree above me, looking down at me, first

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