



short story by alex jeffers

the fire the fire



ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



*All the roots of all the trees
Perpetually drinking
And the river outdrinking them all:
Salt from skin, good blood
From iron, chalk from bones
And the bones go on stumbling:
Under the roof-sized leaves
Through the heart of a tree
And into the clearing
To find what everyone comes for
– Ronald Perry: “The Bonepickers”*

We broke camp in the pale light before dawn. According to the old man’s map we would reach the place he called the House of the Mouth before noon. Pondicherry grumbled at the dark and the earliness and the mugginess as she sipped at her bitter whitebark tea. Aussin had caught a small bird before the rest of us were awake; he crouched by the fire and ripped at the tiny corpse with white slivers of teeth. Green grimaced with elaborate distaste. The leader of our expedition, Oli, calmly asked Aussin and Pondicherry to hurry their breakfasts as hse wished to start soon.

Green and I struck the tents: webs of intangible force flared for a moment, collapsed into their palm-sized generators. I stowed them in the bottom of my pack. Despite the relatively low gravity and the early hour Pondicherry, Green, and I were already sweating. Oli and Aussin were as always imperturbable and immaculate. Aussin licked his chops, rearranged his whiskers, and leapt to his position on my shoulders: he was ready. Green tied his hair back, tightened his belt (we had all, except-

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



ing always Aussin and Oli, lost weight), and put a coal in his pot: he was ready. Pondicherry kicked out the fire; she shrugged her anachronistic, inconvenient robes about her, shouldered her pack, and was ready. Oli surveyed the campsite, satisfied himself we had done no permanent damage, consulted the map, and signalled that hse was ready. We followed hir down to the river bank.

This was our fourth expedition with Oli. Hse was p!anh—a member of one of the seven peoples who achieved spaceflight unaided: one of the sponsor races. Hse had found us in various places and gathered us together three years before. Oli found Pondicherry in Nueva Granada where the apostate nun was a cause célèbre on account of her meticulous forgeries of lost or imaginary art objects. Green hse found on Tawil, obsessively revising his historical novel on the early days of the aaawh Gossamer Hegemony. Aussin and I were both from Earth. He was the most successful member of the most successful litter of cats manipulated to high intelligence by a group of geneticists in México. Oli purchased him for a sum that might have rebuilt the entire decrepit city. Me hse discovered in San Francisco, where I was a consultant on the cultural reconstruction of the late twentieth century in that city.

What were we? We were a coven of disreputables, a stagger of misfits, a choir of perfectionists: a team of xenarchaeologists. We were, together, Oli's plaything: an amusement to lighten the last decades of hir life.

We climbed into the canoe. Oli asked me to steer. Stowing my pack, I sat in the stern, Aussin beside me. The river was slow-moving and brown as tea. It had no name. The colony had not yet claimed the tropics.

Oli assumed hir place in the bow. I started the engine; its quiet hum powered us upstream. Water curled back from the bow in swirls like molasses. Trees hung over us from either side of the river. Branches reached out of the dark like hands. Aussin looked up at me. His eyes were a pale clear grey. "Did you enjoy your breakfast?" I asked.

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



“Yes,” he said. His voice was high-pitched, sibilant, lispng. “The flavor is odd a little, but the chase is all. He struggles so prettily. I can scarcely bear to snap his neck.” He touched his slate-grey nose with the tip of his tongue: his grin.

Green looked back at us. “You’re charming.”

Aussin grinned again. “I retain all my instincts,” he said. “My nature is not tampered with. I am a genius and fully civilized: I am also a cat.” He scratched at his neck. Needling Green was one of his chief pleasures. Green was something of an ailurophobe.

Dawn arrived, climactically. The pale blue flowers of the ubiquitous santangel vine opened. The first breaths of their fragrance, collected and distilled overnight, combusted spontaneously, and for a short time the jungle flared with thousands of pale torches and a rich scent reminiscent of attar of roses. A bird howled and was answered. Trees shouldered out of the dusk, stared at us with myriads of tiny flowers like eyes nestled in their leaves. A flotilla of vidrios settled out of the air, shards of black glass congregating on a stretch of calm water. A column of hand-sized myrmidons marched across a fallen log, bottle-green carapaces glinting in the leaf-drowned twilight.

Aussin stepped into my lap and made himself comfortable. His eyes closed to slits and he kneaded my thigh. The river took light. Particles of silt flashed in its depths. I saw a fish, all mouth and membranous wings. Green turned around in his seat, peering unhappily at Aussin and unhappily downstream. “I don’t know why I stay on with this.”

“If not here, where are you?” said Aussin. “In Tawil scribble scribble scribble. Much better to be companion to Aussin and O!i.” He formed the click in our leader’s name by clashing his teeth together, delicately.

“Aussin is right,” I said. “We were all wasted before O!i found us.”

“We aren’t now?”

“Think what you will write of the House of the Mouth,” I said in an attempt at consolation.

“I’d rather not.” Green was—we all were, to varying degrees—a past-seer. His sensitivity was stronger than mine.

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



“Have you seen anything?”

“Not conclusively.”

I thought on that. We really knew little of this site we sought. The old man in Aguasombras knew nothing but what he had seen, and wasn't satisfactorily clear on that. It was a place, he said, that he never wished to see again. Evil crawled in its walls, he said. He was drunk. Yet Oli listens to him. The night beats around us with the soft wings of half-meter-wide moths and their soft expiring voices. Down on the beach the fishers have landed a serpiente and set up an impromptu fête. Raucous music drifts up to where we sit with the old man and his bottles on the verandah above the cliff. The House of the Mouth! he says. His own mouth is slack, the lips grey and cracked. White perfect teeth erupt from his gums as though in a hurry to get someplace. A film of mucus covers his eyes. He's dying, of the endemic tropic rot: he's only ten years older than I.

“There's no evidence anywhere that Xibalba ever had intelligent natives,” Green says, his uneasy voice echoing in my memory.

“They wouldn't have to be native,” says Pondicherry.

They were not *alive*, the old man says. Then he unrolls his map on the table. He has drawn it on heavy recalcitrant plastic, which he anchors with empty rum bottles. Most of the sheet is blank: it shows the coast and the harbor at Aguasombras, and the course of the nameless river meandering down from the mountains of the interior. From the coast to the mountains all is dense rainforest. Oli traces the river with a long triple-jointed finger, moving east along the course the canoe would follow later, to where it divides around a small island the old man has marked with a peculiar hieroglyph: a pair of overlapping ellipses, black and red.

Pondicherry said, “I'd hazard a guess that we're here.”

I looked up. The river came toward us now from two directions, closing in from both sides of a sharp stone abutment, its peak crowned with vegetation. It was a good ten meters high and nearly sheer. Aussin purred. “We all need to be cats,” he said, “to climb that.”

Green looked at me desperately. “Turn us around,” he muttered.

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



“Take us back.” He was terrified—the old man’s murmurings and intimations had found a target. Green’s face appeared totally defenseless, and I was able to see how attractive he really was.

O!i asked me to take the right channel. We would look for the cove the old man hadn’t mentioned. Green’s face closed off. I wasn’t to be his savior.

I steered up close under the escarpment. The stone was grey and hard and uncompromising. Little fracture lines and crevices ran through it, tiny ledges interrupted the upward thrust. Aussin could have climbed it easily. Green refused to look. Aussin snorted. “You have too much imagination,” he told Green. Yet his tail waved with some barely suppressed emotion. Lifting his head, he sniffed delicately at the air, then, flustered, turned to lick fiercely at his left shoulder. His claws dug into me for a moment. He peered with distaste at the water sliding past. Then he leapt from my lap and the canoe to a barely visible ledge in the cliff.

“Aussin!” I called, more angry than startled, more afraid than angry, more desolate than I cared to think about.

“I meet you at the House!” he cried in a voice more catlike than usual. And began to climb, a soft grey blot against the hard grey stone.

O!i looked down the length of the canoe at me with what I took to be a pained patience. Raising the speed of the engine, I hurried us along the island’s shore.

Pondicherry grunted. She looked at me and at Green, struggling with an unaccustomed monumental sympathy. “He will,” she said. “We can trust Aussin.” Her eyes went sidelong. “More than some others.” She licked her lips. “I do not smell mouths,” she said, “but eyes.”

I was too upset to feel anything. Aussin meant to me what? He was closer to me than Green or Pondicherry. They were human and offered comfort, but Aussin (on our second expedition, to the gardens of Seihay on Ka, Pondicherry—delicate little Pondicherry with the soul and mind-set of a titan—Pondicherry and I were volitionless lovers: we moved in a slow daze, a haze of subtle scents: rose-petal potpourri, pennyroyal, thyme) Aussin (when quiet reflective Green and I were paired it was a

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



period of remembered tints, bleached pale by the process of recall: amber, lavender, mauve) Aussin was primary. He perceived without preconception. He apprehended the worlds and took them by their throats and shook them. His vista on the past was like a video display: he saw the bright colors, arbitrary actions, passionate convictions of the dead and knew them for what they were.

The cliff continued sheer. The river ran deep beside it, almost silent. Little eddies caught at snags in the rock and swirled. Creepers that resembled but were not santangel fell down the cliff. Their flowers were dusky rose-purple deepening to black in the throat. A fragrance like cardamom and honey hung around them. O!i reached out with one of hir disproportionately long arms and tweaked off a length of the vine. Clouds of gnat-sized insects erupted from the flowers' mouths. Most homed back to the parent vine but a few hundred swarmed about O!i. Hir tongue lashed as though on reflex and snagged a few: hir face became bemused.

I heard suddenly a sound that was not real. It echoed out of the island's stone. I couldn't make sense of it. It was sharp, brittle, but not metallic; bright but bass; one note but with the overtones of a minor chord. It was a desolate noise.

The cliff tumbled down, frozen in its fall. I had to steer into mid-stream around the rocks crowding the shore. Strange succulent plants with fleshy scarlet flowers edged cautiously out of crevices among the boulders. Just beyond this morass of stone a little cove looked out into the river. I took the canoe in and beached it. O!i pulled it fully out of the water. With varying degrees of reluctance we debarked.

There was no path away from the cove, and here the old man's map became useless. O!i took a moment to orient herself, then led us in among the trees. They were tall and sagged with the weight of their foliage and that of a myriad saprophytes. Little light penetrated the canopy. Shadows wove thick blankets of darkness where we walked. I heard the imaginary sound again. Its source was directly ahead of us. Did O!i hear it too? Hse led us aright.

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



In the foliar darkness little undergrowth flourished. Dead leaves muffled our passage. Glints of red lit in among the roots: flowers and, as Pondicherry discovered, moth-like insects perfectly disguised.

A creeper brushed my neck with a clammy hand. Suddenly terrified, I beat it off, and thousands of gnats settled on my skin like motes of dust. They didn't bite but clung so tightly I was pressed to brush them off. I felt defiled. Green walked a short distance from me, eidetic eyes wide as marbles, classifying and cataloguing despite his terror.

The sound hit at me again, like a blow, beating and echoing against my interior ears. It was wholly non-human and in its overtones bore no resemblance to the sentients I was familiar with. (My variant on past-sight is primarily aural, as Pondicherry's is olfactory and O!i's—we believe—gustatory. I hear a muddled synaesthetic goulash of impermeable sound echoing and throbbing from any object invested by emotion. On Castro Street in old San Francisco I heard the brilliant orange cacophony of millions of hasty encounters. At Seihay I heard the sibilant hissing veils of the teiyaniin as they performed their thousand-year-dead rituals in court and plaza. In Pelascie I heard the riotous joy of St Arras's army and the thundering quiet of their piety.) This noise was pervasive. It came from the soil and the bedrock and the air: and every plant and insect (I thought) contributed its frequency. It must be ancient to be so rich with association.

We pressed on. Leaves like talons fell around us. Fronds like claws reared from the soil. Green stared. "What do you see?" I asked.

"I can't make sense of it," he said. "The whole island is moving, writhing. It was alive, and it *watched*. It watched us."

"Then?"

"Yes." His face was grey as a charcoal drawing.

O!i called to us. Hse had found something. It was a stone, a truncated pillar leaning at an angle among the roots of a tree with flaking red-brown bark. The stone's surface, weathered almost smooth, bore faint impressions. I listened to its song. O!i asked Green what it looked like.

"It's a stone," Green said. "Just a stone. I can't—" his voice broke—"I

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



can't see who."

The soft beating of wide wings. The dripping of acid. The hissing and rustling of flame.

"Did the old man say *mouth*?" asked Pondicherry. "Really?"

His accent had been nearly impenetrable—a thick glutinous soup of broad slurred vowels and eccentric diphthongs, skewed and mumbled consonants.

"No," I said slowly, listening, "he didn't. But I don't know what he did say."

"They had no hands," Pondicherry said. Her own hands wrapped around each other. "There were mouths, yes, and eyes—and small insensitive claws."

Fire. "They worshipped fire," I said. "I hear it burning in bowls of stone."

Oli beckoned us on. I heard shadows breathing through the night. We moved on among the trees and their weighty shades. It was still morning but somehow the air seemed thick with darkness. Oli walked quickly, purposefully, as though hse knew where hse was going. I realized I'd heard no birds since we left the river, nor seen any animate life beyond the insects that thrived here. There were the vine-dwelling gnats and the blossommoths. There were bright flocks of vidrios, and conquering phalanxes of myrmidons. There were brilliant dangerous insects like dragonflies and mantises, and ponderous beetles as long as my foot. We walked.

We came to the House. It was set in a clearing among the trees and should have been flooded with sunlight. Gigantic stone pillars stood around it in a circle; they were nearly as tall as the trees, and interlacing ropes or cables hung between them—nets like titanic spiderwebs with thick radial lines and thinner circling threads. Creepers climbed them as trellises. I heard faint breathy melodies played on them as if on the strings of a giant's aeolian harp. But there was nothing menacing in the music. I decided the old man must have been crazed with hunger or

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



exhaustion or fear of the unknown. Of course—he didn't have my talents to reassure him. Looked at with the eyes only it could have seemed terrifying.

Oli went up to one of the webs and pushed against a strand. It gave a little under his touch, and gnats swarmed from the vines. Green watched him with dismay and gripped my hand hard. I pulled loose gently, pushed him gently away. He would have to make his own peace. I stepped forward.

Something fast and heavy hit me between the shoulders. I staggered and almost fell. "Many apologies," said Aussin as we gained our balances. "My judgment is off. I have many frights and shockings." He curled around my neck and began to purr frantically.

"You see!" hissed Green.

Oli turned patiently and inquired. Pondicherry looked upset, tucked an arm around Green's waist.

Aussin sighed faintly. "Shocks, I say, and frightings. You note I do not say terrifyingings or horrors. I am small, weaponless, and high-strung, alone in a strange place. I am not damaged. My mind continues within my head. Banners flying." He purred.

Oli asked him to explain.

"I pass a cleft in the rocks," he said. "I sense a thought: *The fire the fire the fire*. It is an intelligence of a very odd sort. Cold. Unfeeling. Flying. *The little ones with no mind*, it says. *The fire*. I hurry on, to find my friends." Desperately, he purred.

"Is this now?" Pondicherry asked. "Is it a memory of a thought?"

"I can't tell." Aussin's claws tightened on my shoulders. "They are not mammal or reptile or amphibian. They should not think."

Oli pressed against a cable again. He asked if we should continue.

Green looked around. His eyes were hard and unfocussed. "*The little ones with no mind*," he said musingly. Pondicherry clutched at him. "*The fire*," he said. "The little ones that tend the flame, and bring the stones on their myriad backs." He shuddered. "The little ones." He walked up to one of the nets, grasped two strands in his hands.

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



“What do you see?” whispered Pondicherry.

Aussin shuddered. “Look at the stone. It is very old, yes, you can smell that. It is carved out of the island by the little ones, with the acid of their tongues. It is lifted on their backs—there are thousands of them—and they bring it here and stand it up.” He shuddered again, a jolt against my neck. “Green must be very strong. Watch him.”

Green lifted one foot to a linkage-point in the net and began like a multi-amputee spider to climb. Pondicherry rushed forward, stopped. O!i clambered gracelessly after Green up the web. Pondicherry, hampered by her robes, and I followed. Aussin leapt from my shoulders and slipped between the cords.

I didn’t know what to listen to. Green moved in a trance. The strands of the web had never been climbed before but took our weight easily. Heavy velvet wings beat the ancient air. I listened to the old man. A great moth brushed through our circle of lamp-light, sieving shadows. “The House of the Moth!” I cried, hearing him finally.

Green reached the top of the net and leaped down on the other side. He staggered, fell to his knees. O!i wafted down beside him like something lighter than air. Green knelt, hands clenched in the soil. Aussin wandered over to him, licked at his chin with some concern. Pondicherry scuttled down the net quickly and unsafely. “Are you all right?” she asked Green.

He didn’t answer. I reached the ground. It rolled and trembled with ancient sound. “The House of the Moth,” I said again.

Aussin came to me, tangled himself around my legs. I picked him up, held him in my arms. He purred nervously—as loud as the House. We looked at it uncertainly.

It was an extremely odd edifice—a building it was but hardly a house. It seemed to be roughly circular (an uncannily poor light made it difficult to be sure of anything). The outer wall was of a piece, molded, rough-textured, sandy yellow-grey; its form was baroque, all arbitrary curves and hollows, eccentric battlements and lumpy turrets. It reminded me of one of the huge termite palaces of the African veldt. I could see no doors or

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



windows or any less obvious portal.

Green pulled himself up from the ground. He moved slowly, uncertainly, as if just awakening—or struggling against the weight of a body he wasn't accustomed to. Pondicherry watched him closely. Oli, typically, had attuned himself to the building, all his mental and paramental antennae out and exploring, sensing, tasting. Hse was abstracted, absorbed, and paid no discernible attention to the rest of us.

Green, faltering, went up to the House. He pressed his hands against the wall. Crumbles of dust dribbled down around his fingers. I heard the ordered marching of millions of tiny feet. Green leaned against the wall, pushing, as if to knock it down.

Aussin moved in my arms. "What do you do?" he called.

"Everything is within," Green muttered.

"I smell acid—formic acid," Pondicherry said, "and smoke, and the little darts of flame and burning." She went up next to Green and pressed herself against the House.

Oli started away, going around the building to the left, searching for an entrance hse said. Hse wouldn't find one, I could have told him, but hse already knew that. Aussin wriggled out of my arms. He stalked around to the right. I was left, standing alone, and listening.

Listening to the consuming roar of the bonfire. It filled the night with crackles and hisses, the hushing of combustion. The subliminal moan of the fervor of the little ones with no mind was loud in my ears. The soft collapse of ash in the heart of the flame. The faint shock of gas pockets igniting. The speaking murmur of the coals. I went up to where Pondicherry and Green stood, attempting to submerge themselves in the walls of the House. The noise was horrendous. I put one hand on one of Green's and one on Pondicherry's, and pressed my cheek and my chest against the wall.

I felt Oli join us. Hse stood behind me. Hse placed his hands on Pondicherry's and Green's outer hands and leaned his narrow bladed chest against my back.

My eyes did not close but everything became dark. I tasted smoke at

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire

12

the back of my tongue. I smelled singed hair. I felt the heat of a massive conflagration on my face. I saw.

We soared, the four of us, above the jungle. The light of the sun was too bright, painful. Dizzily we swooped, drunkenly we swayed through the air. For millions of days we flew. We were huge: I saw Green, and his spread of dusty wing, grey and brown in patterns as intricate as an ancient carpet, was fully a meter and a half.

The santangel flowers burned. We flitted among them and my wings were exquisitely singed. Little cousins of ours died in splendor.

Pondicherry found a santangel sport that flamed longer and more fiercely, and earlier—at the faintest intimation of dawn. Joyfully she lost a leg to it. O!i discovered how to rear it, hybridize and modify, until we had a colony of vines whose purple-rose blossoms ignited at moonrise and burned for a significant period. On wings with wondrous holes in them we limped about the sky.

(Aussin climbed onto O!i's shoulders, and from hers to mine, coiled himself about my neck. The gestalt complete, there were five of us tottering through the night air, and I could hear what we thought.)

The little ones with no mind—the myrmidons and blossommoths and vidrios, the gnats that hatched in the mouths of the flameflowers and died there in flame, the web-beetles long as my head—rushed, over a thousand years, to our bidding. The sweet acid of the blossommoths' tongues etched great slabs of stone from a cliff at the east end of our island. The sturdy backs of the myrmidons carried the stones to the site we had chosen. The web-beetles wove ropes to haul the stones upright and then to link them together. The gnats carried seeds for us and planted them so as to form a bower growing up around the web-beetles' trellis.

It was wonderful, at the rising of the moon, when the grand circle lit up. We dove into a pool of fire and swam there and sported. The little ones with no mind rejoiced in our joy, and died in swarms.

But still, it was not sufficient. The light was not bright enough. There were too many shadows to catch at our wings with cold touches and

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire

13

damp breezes. We wanted, needed a night full of bright pure light and only ourselves as shadows.

Green discovered that certain dry woods would take the flame and burn for hours. Our myrmidons and web-beetles gathered a quantity of the woods and piled them up in our circle until a vast pyre filled it all. At moonrise the perimeter of the circle lit up gloriously. Little threads of flame darted over the heaped logs. The bonfire took. It blazed like a small magnificent sun.

When the fire died early in the morning, we fell from a height. All our carefully planted and tended vines had perished in the ecstasy of flame. And still the bonfire had not been sufficient. Its burning was too erratic. Bright spots had risen—and died as we found them. Toppling pillars of shade fell around us like stones. And it would be too long before the rite could be repeated.

We remembered the rock-hard nests of the vidrios, and called them out. Thousands of them answered in glass-bright clouds flashing and sparkling like aerial flames. Over months and years they labored, each placing its little daub of intestinal cement on the rising walls.

We waited, and the flameflower vines rose from their ashy grave, more luxuriant than before. The walls of the vidrios' structure rose too, bulking strong and flameproof from the scarred soil.

We waited, growing old and dying, and dancing under the night and among the stars.

Where had the day gone? I opened my eyes to night. Aussin hung around my neck like a heavy collar. My face was sore, pitted from the inexorable pressure of the walls of the House of the Moth. I heard the whirring of thousands of tiny wings and felt the purring of thousands of tiny feet on my flesh. I stepped back from the wall. Oli moved aside, his face deadly composed. Pondicherry turned and leaned her back against the wall. Her eyes were as violent as flames. Green remained still, pressed up like a human laminate on the rough surface of the vidrios' construction.

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



Could we doubt any of it? The vidrios in their millions swarmed all around us on their wings so loud I could hear neither the present nor the past. They hung particularly thickly about the crown of the building, wheeling in a dance of great purpose. We could sense the walls rising millimeter by arduous millimeter.

Pondicherry said, "The moon will rise shortly."

Aussin slipped from my shoulders and fell, a dead weight, to the ground. I knelt beside

him. His breath was too fast. "What's wrong?"

"Too small. Too many heads in my head." He mewled pitifully. "Too many heads in my head!"

I stroked his flank gently, offering what comfort I could. He licked at my hand with his dry rasping tongue. "We will be all right," I said.

"Maybe," said Pondicherry bleakly, "and maybe not."

"Sssh," I said. "We'll be all right."

"But the moon is rising."

A draft of cool clear white light whispered into the clearing. Oli looked around, calculating. Hse motioned us all to move away from walls and to stand clear of the trellised vines. Green would not or could not comply. I carried Aussin to a safe spot, then helped Pondicherry drag Green away from his support. We huddled together in a mass, peering about curiously and fearfully like a litter of newly eye-opened kittens.

The vidrios were suddenly gone, lifting away in an invisible humming cloud. The moon rose slowly, majestically, implacably, over the tree-tops, drenched the clearing with light.

A faint hiss. A burst of flame. Green pulled himself to his feet. Around the trellised perimeter blossoms ignited like torches. "The fire," said Green. "The fire." The flames burst in a chain reaction, popping like hydrogen balloons. Within moments we were encircled by a blue blazing wall. I stared through the night, hearing a vast hopeful hush.

"The fire; the fire." I heard our wings beating. Aussin's claws dug painfully into my arm. "The fire." he hissed. I lifted him up, a fragile precious bundle of grey fur. His hair was stiff and brushed out. Narrow, nearly

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire

15

invisible threads bisected his eyes. He moaned in the back of his throat. He shivered. I held him close. “The fire,” he said.

The fire bloomed out of the mouth of the House like the time-lapse opening of a scarlet orchid. Aussin struggled in my arms. O!i hissed through hir mandibles. Hir arms went up and down.

Green moaned. Pondicherry grabbed at him, but he eluded her. He darted toward the House of the Moth. Aussin cried out, a sharp despairing mewl, and scratched fiercely at my arms. I would not let him go. He was too important. Pondicherry flailed at the sudden noise of combustion.

Green ran across the clearing. His arms thrashed, his prominent shoulder blades beat as though they lifted wings. I heard his wings, wide and soft and dusty, and I expected him to take flight. To vault into the supporting air and soar among the tongues of flame.

“Green!” shouted Pondicherry. “No!”

O!i leapt from immobility to wrap hir arms about Pondicherry. Hse spoke to her silently.

Green hit the walls of the House like a wave. Incredibly, he swarmed up them. Shadows and flames wavered around him like wings. He reached the crest and stood there against the light on his hind legs. His forelimbs and midlimbs wavered indecisively, sharp shadowplay silhouettes on the wide dusty screen of his wings.

I was torn. Aussin’s claws ripped at my arms and chest. He caterwauled like a rutting tom. He wanted to leap into the light. And I—did too.

Green leaned into the flame. Pondicherry screamed. O!i turned hir face toward me. Hir blackly faceted eyes were glossed with regret. Green’s wings angled and caught the roaring updraft of hot air. He soared into the sky like a flake of ash. Pondicherry screamed again. Aussin dug his claws deep into my forearm. “Listen to me!” he howled. “Listen to your mind!”

The air was filled with sudden wings. I could hear nothing for the din. The wafting of wings echoed to a two-syllable chant: the *fire*, the *fire*,

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



the *fire*.

Aussin scrambled out of my arms. He flew to the top of the great firepit. Eyes and conscience smarting, I followed him. Buoyed up by intense desiccated air we searched among flames and moth shadows for Green. A tongue of fire lashed me. I fell with mournful slowness and delicacy.

Great moths with two-meter wingspans sieved confusion from the darkness above me. I lay stunned at the base of the House's wall. After a time, Oli leaned over me, concerned. Hse asked me how I was.

"Battered," I said, with half an attempt at a grin. I closed my eyes. I heard the moths catapulting joyfully to suicide. Was Green among them? My memories were obscure. Was Aussin a member of that aerial ballet? Aussin!

"Aussin!" I cried.

"Here." His warm rasping tongue brushed my cheek. "You are well, yes?"

"I think so. You?"

"Distressed. Disturbed. But healthy and undamaged."

I opened my eyes. Aussin climbed onto my chest. "Where," I said, "where is Green?"

Oli said hse didn't know.

"He flew into the heart of the flame," Aussin said with finality.

I heard a low moan from some paces away: Pondicherry.

I listened to the past. Nothing. I had been burned out.

Oli shook hir shoulders. Hse asked what had happened. Hse seemed hopeful.

I looked into the sky. Millions of stars watched us. The moon was falling into the jungle. A shape flitted across it: a giant moth, singular and alone. Where were all its fellows, I wondered. Did they flutter and expire only in our minds?

"Aussin," I said, "were we the voices you heard this morning?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



“Are we their ghosts?”

Pondicherry came and sat by me. “Where is Green?” she said, her voice flat. “Why didn’t I fly with him?”

“The fire,” said Green into my memory. “We are the fire’s keepers and its creators. We are its reason for being—and it is ours.” His wings wept blood, or flame. “What are we without the fire? What is the fire without us?”

“Where are you?” I asked him silently.

“I am in the moon,” he said.

I sat up stiffly. I considered speaking to Pondicherry—but no, she was distraught as it was. I peered up at the moon, and saw the last fragment of it swallowed by ecstatic trees. The stars plummeted into focus. My eyes screamed for light. Oli hissed in surprise. I closed my eyes for a moment. The fire was gone . . . had never burned.

“What happened?” Pondicherry asked.

“A better question,” Aussin said, regaining control very fast, “is, what doesn’t happen. I feel we may be deluded.”

“We formed a gestalt with them,” I said, feeling my way through the maze of words Green and Aussin and Oli placed in my memory. “They aren’t entirely dead.”

“But Green,” Pondicherry said. “Where is Green?”

I listened to my mind. “I don’t know.”

Aussin leapt up. A grey shadow, he threaded the eye of the night. After only a moment I couldn’t see where he went.

Oli folded up at my side. Hse expressed bewilderment. I didn’t believe hir. “They’re in chrysalis,” I said. “They wait, and live and relive their triumph. We simply appropriated their dream for ourselves.”

Aussin howled from somewhere far away. We all three started. Pondicherry scrambled to her feet. “He’s found Green,” she muttered, and stumbled into the dark. I rose to follow. Oli put a claw on my leg. Hir face was readable: what if Aussin *had* found Green. I wanted to know.

We followed the remembered sound of Pondicherry’s footfalls. She had gone around the House and found a place where the irregularities in

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



the wall allowed her to climb. I saw her at the top, robes wisping in the wind, a faint hesitant black flame. She fell in.

Oli and I climbed. The interior of the House was a well of blackness. A whimper—Pondicherry’s? or Green’s?—rose from it. I jumped, tensed for an ankle-turning drop. The floor was thick with soft wood ash over deep loam. It was very dark. “Aussin?” I asked quietly.

“Here,” he said. “Use your flash.”

I dug the flash out of its pocket and ignited it. The blackness disappeared, and all sight with it. I saw the negative image of Pondicherry huddled in the center of the House, and stumbled through ash and charred wood to her. My vision adjusted slowly. It seemed to take hours to reach Pondicherry. Her shoulders shook with sobs. I leaned over her. “What—?” I whispered, burned to the core by shock.

“Green,” said Aussin. “Green finds the true end of the dream.”

I knelt beside Pondicherry. Oli laid his hands on our shoulders. The memory of Green’s eyes stared up at us from the blank sockets of his charred skull, white as the moon. His skeleton arms were outstretched in the ash that, in its bleached tints of grey and brown and rose, was like a carpet of decomposed mothwings.

“Green. . . .” I said.

My wings beat fitfully. Green’s remembered voice guides my fingers over the keyboard; I am no longer sure whose voice I write in. Aussin sleeps calmly by the window of my apartment high above San Francisco.

We broke camp in the pale light before dawn. Numbly, Pondicherry let me guide her to the canoe. Oli steered us downstream, unresting till we reached Aguasombras three days later. Our party broke up there. Oli paid us well, and went his own way. I hadn’t the heart to ask Pondicherry what she intended to do. I’ve heard since that she returned to her monastery in Nueva Granada; and saw recently a reproduction of one of her latest works: a memorial portrait of Green, carved into bone, and charred. He stands, ecstatic, on a spur of rock, his eyes hollow and bright, his skel-

ALEX JEFFERS

The Fire The Fire



etal body enfolded in dusty moth's wings.

“Turn us around,” Green tells me. “Take us back!” I did what I could. Aussin and I have returned to Earth. We work here: Aussin remembering the thoughts of the ghosts of San Francisco and I their voices. But occasionally Aussin whimpers and moans, “Too many heads in my head. Too many heads in my head!”

And sometimes Green whispers to me, “The fire the fire.” And sometimes I hear the little ones with no mind who did our bidding with such suicidal joy. And always the breath of wings, and always the hiss of flame. The fire. The fire. The fire.

The Fire The Fire

Copyright © 1992, 2008 Alex Jeffers.

First published in slightly different form in *Universe 2*, edited by Robert Silverberg & Karen Haber. New York: Bantam Spectra, 1992.

This edition e-published in 2008 by sentence and paragraph.



Set in Minion, Bookman Old Style, and Braggadocio.

Cover art by Alex Jeffers using found images.

All rights reserved. As a courtesy to the author, please do not duplicate, distribute, or alter this file.
