

Can These Bones Live?

She spins in space, a mere point of view, and far away the stars wheel slowly about her. Curiosity builds, and with gathering intensity she strives to see, to pierce through those uncaring flares of silence. With effort comes strain, comes pain, mounting in linked agony with her struggle. The stars begin to shimmer and melt, the blackness coating the universe beyond them to ripple, thin, transluce . . . and then the pain mounts past endurance, she gives over in defeat; victorious night rolls back, a ponderous black drop framing meaningless lights. The pain wanders off somewhere, leaving her limp with exhaustion, and for ages she hangs bodiless in nothing, the stars sliding steadily past her vision, until once more she will be ready to try to see *through* . . .

She woke.

She lay on the soft slope of a swelling which rose gently in the middle of a wooded no-pace. Sun beat down warmly on bare shoulders. She lay a while, blinking her eyes, the dream fading away as consciousness grew that something was wrong, unexpected.

Finally she sat up and looked at herself. In sudden panic reflex she whipped herself over and burrowed belly down, as best she could in the short grass. She lay there, breathing rapidly, as minutes passed with no sound but quiet wind and distant bird, no movement but that of a small industrious ant a few inches from her eyes.

Slowly raising her head, she scanned the horizon cautiously. Mellow dips and swells. Shrubs in flower, a few drifting cirrus clouds high, high up. A bird flitted twittering across the sky. No one in sight.

Thank God. And she lying here in the open, stark naked . . .

Squirming on her stomach like a celluloid Indian, she negotiated her way to the nearest bush, where she squatted for a longer look around. Not a soul anywhere. How did she ever get herself into *this!* Well, first things first. Time enough to think of reasons after she'd found herself something to wear.

She reached the top of the rise; the world spread about her lovely, lonely, bare as herself. No house; no road. An opossum curled under a bush, ignoring her. She sat there in bewilderment, and gradually another thought grew in upon her, something else that didn't make sense, that wasn't quite right.

She had died. She clearly remembered her death.

By late afternoon, fear that someone would see her was being supplemented by fear that no one would. Still unclothed, but bearing a large portion of bush before her, she moved down the slope of a hill towards the rivers, lying beneath her in leisurely looping swaths which gleamed in the sunlight.

Anywhere in her part of the world, she thought, there would be some sort of town at the confluence of two rivers of this size. Here was nothing but the grassy slopes, studded with isolated groves of slender trees, slurring off along the river borders into marshes and mudflats where waterbirds splashed and fed. No river traffic; no jet trails; no.

It was now clear she was heading west, at least if the sun kept to the old path . . . if that **were** the old sun. At this point, she wasn't laying any odds.

When the moon rose, its familiar face told her she was on Earth after all. But wasn't it a shade too large? No, don't think about **that** one! It's just the right size.

Perhaps, she thought vaguely, she was Eve? Was Adam around the next bend? No, far more likely she was around the bend.

That night she huddled beside a fallen trunk; not for warmth, (she discovered for the first time, **emotionally**, that trees are not warm-blooded) but for the rough contact with something solidly actual. Staring blankly up into the featureless night, she retreated into her memories, recalling the tubes and needles and pains, the fading lights and voices and her dying. The last things she could recall were those instants of observing the operation from outside of her own body, and realizing even then this was only her mind's final defense mechanism to soften the inevitable annihilation - and she had **known** it was for keeps. So why hadn't it been? Why was she here? And why wasn't anybody else?

I can't hold a Jehoshaphat, she thought, all by myself, can I?

The night was warm, the trees stoically silent. The largest animal she had seen all day was a badger or woodchuckish thing looking out of a hole in a clay bank. That kind of fear didn't touch her now. Just the one cry filled her mind as she fell asleep. How am I here at all; why aren't I still dead?

She didn't really expect a reply. She got one.

She was standing on the slope where she had first awakened, and was looking out across the world when the Roanei appeared, quite abruptly, as their habit always and everywhere is. She watched them as they debarked themselves and spread out for picnicking, and she understood them, as one will in a dream, and at the same time knew that neither the way they had arrived nor the way they looked would make the least bit of sense to her when she awoke. She couldn't even be sure if the Roanei were many, or was one.

One of them, or part of it, appeared at her side. A truly lovely little world, it indicated somehow, and, oh, my, it went on in exaggerated surprise as if an adult condescending to a child's make-believe, what have we here? It signified the ground at her feet where a minute gleam sparked the soil. It uncovered the gleam and withdrew a shining bone. The Roanei totality flowed around the spot to contemplate the discovery.

The one turned to her and waved the bone gently. So there was once a species of some accomplishment on this world, it rendered cheerfully, and now there are no more of it. How interesting. Reconstruction is in order. It tossed the bone on the earth, where it lay as the Roanei resurrected it, in that unique way of theirs, which they make appear so simple, and which perhaps really is simple, only they never let on how it's done. In a gradual, perhaps mildly obscene, process the bone became her own unclad unconscious form.

One aspect of the Roanei turned to her dream portion and conveyed, you know we are nothing like this, but it will serve you well enough as symbol, all of this is metaphor, it chanted,

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is metaphor,
is metaphor,
all of this is metaphor
for a somewhat complex reality.

It touched her forehead. Your questions will be answered, it remarked. Forever farewell. And they were gone.

At least that was as near as she could reconstruct the dream when she woke by the fallen log.

The dream stayed solidly with her as she wandered down the way of the river. It had been very real, had spoken with authority, not as one of the scribes. Either it was a message, a real answer to the question she had fallen asleep with, or her dreaming self now had resources of imagination she'd certainly never had her first time through life. She would rather have dreamed of frustrating cocktail parties and ominous taxicabs the way she'd used to.

An *authentic* dream? She wished there were some around (among other reasons) to ask whether this fell within *their* range of experience. It might well be one of those numerous everybody-else-knows-it-happens-but-nobody-thought-to-tell-*me* phenomena.

She went on, and the further she went, the more people she didn't find, nor their leftovers. She found and munched berries, drank from the river, and didn't die a second time on the spot, though the diet hardly excited her. She went to some lengths to find *something* to wear at first, with the dogged persistence of an Edison trying electric light filaments. Eventually she found a kind of tree, from which the bark came off in fairly large slices, and lashed herself up in some of it with creepers. She called the tree 'birch' provisionally, and thought there might never be anyone to tell her if she had guessed right.

The vestments were rather unpleasant to wear, and already seemed a waste of time and modesty. She could no longer really believe there was anyone left to see or to know or to care.

It appeared a beautiful world, if one cared about such things. Summer, she supposed, nature at its most prodigal expansiveness. Nothing hovering here of Man, not even a dwindling fond memory. I wonder, she wondered, how they finally managed to do us all in, but she soon found she'd rather not think about that.

For several nights she carefully kept that, and all other questions, out of her mind as she prepared for sleep. She wasn't ready for any more answers just yet.

Sometime during the second week of her second life she gave up on her leggings completely. They seemed quite superfluous. She decided to carve a diary on the bark instead.

She scratched with the sharp end of a stick.

"Dear Diary:

"In order to preserve my sanity, in case I've still got it, I shall write what occurs in proper order. Or in case, in my lonely senile years, I forget the earlier days of this second fleshy incarceration. Or rather, that I may inscribe the relevant facts within which lie the clues I may

be someday able to decipher, as to the reason for my improbable situation. Or maybe for the hell of it. Anyway, I write.

"Item: what we used to call humanity is gone, extinct, obliterated. There's just me, alone, at a time seemingly long after the close of man's gory story. I have found some suspicious mounds, but within them, as deep as I've cared to dig, no paper, wood, or metal, nor plastic nor ceramic. A couple of bones. But for all I know, not even human bones.

"So I linger on, long after the multitudes have passed from off the stage of life. This, then, is a posthumanous diary.

"Ouch. That wasn't very successful.

"Hell, one tries to write pretty, even to a private diary, in the vague feeling that someone sometime will read the words. Even when I was a girl, locking my personal diary in my desk, screaming in wrath if my brother entered while I was writing, somehow I wrote for everybody, for posterity maybe. I winced at a grammatical lapse, an awkward phrase . . .

"What does it matter now? I'm everybody else's posterity, and they've left nothing for me to read.

"But I do seem to have strayed from the subject . . ."

Thus far took many hours, and endless pieces of bark. She realized she couldn't lug all that bark around with her. She also found she couldn't even make out a lot of what she'd just written. She gave up her diary.

A little later, threading through breast-high wild grasses down a shallow valley, her dream recurred to her, bound up somehow with trappings of guilt. She tried half-heartedly to dismiss it. So what if she couldn't remember dreams with such authentic auras from her earlier existence? Hadn't she been absolutely convinced by other auras, that afterward, to her sorrow, had proved quite meretricious?

Still, she couldn't pass it off as just another dream. For one thing, if it was more than a dream, if it somehow embodied honest-to-God's-sake truth, then it was probably very important.

She sat down where she was amid the grasses and tried to work it out. If one quite impossible thing had happened - she **had** come back to life - then why not think of other impossible things? Like maybe the whole human race could be brought back.

If me, she thought, why not anybody else? Why not everybody else?

And then there would be plenty of people to read my diary. Isn't **that** worth something?

She lay on her back where she was. It was a moist day, and she stared up past the long stalks gratefully condensing droplets from the hazy air, to the heavy blade tips far above her, and thought hard. She thought all the afternoon, and finally fell asleep in the same spot with a single question, cut and hewed and placed upright in the forecourts of her mind.

"Can **everybody** be brought back to life the way I've been?"

And answer came, of a sort.

She stands on the Moon, on the harsh dead lunar soil, and watches the Earth in the sky, so beautifully smeared in its streaky whites, blues, browns, greens that her throat throbs with longing. It hangs up there in the black, unmoving, unwinking, and she watches it in the cold and the silence.

A speck of red, tiny but fluid, appears at the rim of the sphere, out of tune, oddly malignant. It grows, flings out extended filaments across the globe, which coalesce, puddle together, as the Earth slowly becomes tinged with crawling, hideous with roiling, bloated with loathsome red, until the last touch of green is extinguished; and at that moment the whole creeping cancerous red Earth . . . opens up . . . into a . . . perfect white blossom floating serene and still and beautiful on the face of darkness . . .

Do you really want it back the way it was, ask the lunar rocks in their barren silent idiom.

It's not clear why you'd want the whole race back, blazes the sun, shining down eternally, up top left center, but you can always **ask**; not promising any reply.

Ask **once only**, that is, tinkle the constellations, strewn endlessly across forever. It is tedious to consider invalid requests. One individual per species is usually **quite** sufficient.

And the Earth, silent blossom, silently whispers, be very sure before you ask. Cannot unwish wishes once wished. Remember . . .

And just before she wakes, one very brief glimpse of a withered hag, creeping under the weight of a string of sausages firmly welded to the tip of her nose.

That last touch might account for the intense irritation with which she awoke. It seemed to be rubbing it in a little **too** much!

She had been around long enough that the season seemed to be changing. With an abrupt memory of what winter would mean without civilized amenities, she headed south.

A few months of utter solitude, and she was about ready to take the Roanei up on their offer, or challenge, and ask for the return of humanity. But the terms in which the matter had been couched had somehow kept her up till now from requesting a total species regeneration. She hadn't been able to bring herself, quite, to fall asleep with that demand in the forefront of her thoughts.

She headed south, wondering if she were on the North American continent, or if that geographical distinction didn't mean anything any longer. She had no idea how long it had been since the Age of Man. Some animals and constellations were quite familiar to her, others she felt she should surely been aware of if they'd existed before. But maybe not. There were no large animals, predatory or otherwise; she ate randomly, things bland but sustaining; she never grew ill. She passed various flora, fauna, and geography, and paid little attention, existing most often by choice in the world of her own thoughts. She played there-are-other-people-somewhere games till it hurt too much.

She wished she were a logical thinker, a scientist or something, rather than an ordinary nobody-special. Here they brought back one person, and perhaps the future existence of the whole race hung on the person's decisions, and it was only her. It didn't, somehow, seem very fair. She wasn't all that bright, why didn't they bring back Einstein or von Neumann or somebody, who could figure out what to do in these really rather unprecedented circumstances? I mean, she thought, if I've virtually got to decide whether to ask for the resurrection of the

whole human race, hadn't I ought to be a better representative of the species? Why couldn't they have snagged Gandhi or Schweitzer?

She knew what she should do, she thought - ask them for the whole human race back. Then she wandered off into wondering if that included the ancient Romans and Egyptians, or just the last generation that went defunct. There'd be population problems again. She wondered if she'd be allowed to pick and choose . . . "no Albanians or Victorians, please" . . . and realized she was off the track again.

Why **not** ask for the race back? What countervailing factors were there? They said she could **ask**.

Not, she had to admit to herself, that she'd ever been a true mankind enthusiast. She'd liked some people, sure. But she'd never reached the point, never lived long enough, maybe never **would** have lived long enough, to accept the existence of others with that wholehearted acceptance with which she accepted her own.

Of course she felt very strongly the responsibility (if her dreams weren't just dreams) of being the one who **could** decide, any night now, whether humanity should be brought to life again. But humanity had never turned her on. Of course she would like someone, almost anyone, to talk to, to write a diary for, to show things to, to sleep with . . . that was not meant, that was to be censored, please ignore . . . surely, you understand what goes through the mind, through the body, when one is **alone**. Forgive . . .

Who was there to understand? Who to forgive?

She eventually came to a conclusion, and with it, came back to awareness of her surroundings. She had attained different types of foliage than she was used to, less stark and noble, more entwined and languorous; her images of the south, bayou and magnolia and mangrove, seemed to be closer. South, she thought, how much further?

She found some hammocky roots and made herself comfortable, determined to do this thing right. The onus had fallen on her, for whatever, and she would pick it up and get it over with. She must be cunning and clever, pit herself against the Roanei for the lives of her own unborn species. These Roanei will have their price. For sufficient reason, they'll resurrect. Find the price, persuade them, convince them . . .

Sleepline, to be held into the night shadows. "What must we pay you for the rebirth of mankind? We'll pay you anything. Name the price."

And slept. And dreamed.

It crouches towering against the stars on a pinnacle ridge, far above her, black against the sky. Its clutching talons curve among the rocks, its hawk features jut proudly upwards against the cold sparks of fire. It is utterly awesome and arrogant.

She knows, in her dream, that she sees the last, the resurrected specimen of the Mnestepoi. He is making his great pitch to the Roanei, and is he laying it on strong! Power he offers, in all four hands, and knowledge unimagined, and riches untold. It is a bit hard to follow, because it is full of concepts she can't quite get her mind around, but the idea that the Mnestepoi hold the riches of all yearning, the knowledge of all ages, the powers of the universe, comes through loud and clear. And all these will be for the Roanei alone, if they'll only bring the "Can These Bones Live?" is a 1980 short story by Ted Reynolds which won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story that year

rest of the Mnestepoi back to life. The Roanei can rule the universe forever, cries out that thing on the crag, they will have the cosmic mastership the Mnestepoi had planned for themselves and almost attained, would have attained but for one little unforeseen accident which had erased them. All will be for the Roanei, the Mnestepoi will be their humble servants, if only they can live. If a few of them can live. If a single mate can live . . .

And from among the stars, from that distant wherever the Roanei have got to, comes the answer.

"What would we want with power, you call it, with riches, with knowledge? These mean nothing to us. We do not comprehend the value you put on these things, nor do we care. The answer to your request is no."

And with a shriek of despairing rage, the last of the Mnestepoi hurls himself with ravening fury at the sky, hangs clawing against the stars, and plunges to sickening destruction on the cliffs beneath.

It shook her up a bit, that dream. She felt at the time that that creature could actually deliver what he promised. If ever she had felt the cold beat of power, it was in the looks and the speech of that monster. She had to admit she was sort of glad that the Roanei didn't take him up on the proposal. Maybe she was being provincial, and the Mnestepoi were just grand folks when you got to know them, but still . . .

And she never thought again that the Roanei might be bribable - not with anything man had to offer . . .

She had stopped going south. She had run out of things she knew were good to eat, and had to face learning all over again, or staying up where things were more familiar. It had come to her with a sort of unpleasant realization that there wasn't a thing known to be poison that wasn't found out by a lot of people dying rather unpleasantly. As the last human being, there was need to be more careful of her existence. She'd have to accept a few cool nights.

So much for her half-planned scheme of getting across to Africa where her memory told her the Atlantic was narrower. (If she **was** in America, and if the continents hadn't drifted) and seeing if any traces of the pyramids or the Great Wall of China could still be traced. She'd stay around here, wherever that was, and try to make friends with the animals that looked like rabbits but acted like squirrels; they looked the most tamable. She'd never been much for pets before, but circumstances alter cases.

She couldn't forget her responsibility completely. It came creeping back into her mind in subtle ways, alternately making her curse herself, the Roanei, or the rest of humanity. Another day arrived when she realized she'd have to try again. She couldn't let her own hang-ups keep her from seeing if she could bring back humanity. It didn't matter what she thought of people, whether she liked them or not. It was a trust, like when her mother had given her money to buy something at the grocery, and she'd had to get what Mama wanted, even if she'd rather have had bubble gum instead. Anyway, if mankind could be brought back, she thought, it will have to include some psychoanalyst who can make me feel better about it all.

Man must be brought back; the Roanei have to be convinced we're worth saving. Why? Why indeed?

She walked to the top of a hill to sleep. She gazed out to where a shallow sea drowsed on the horizon. The climate was definitely softer this life, yes, and healthier. She never felt the

need of constructed shelter. She lay down under the deepening evening blue and pondered her approach.

She planned her dream query, etched her question with all her subtlety, and the selective memory of an arts major the first time around. She ran over in her mind all that man had made of wonder and beauty, for it was all part of the question. She let her mind, dimming toward sleep, dip and soar over the finest she knew of man's creations; the spacious perspectives of the Taj Mahal, and the clumped hallelujah of Manhattan, Raphael's wistful Madonnas and the bleak clarity of Hokusai's ink line. She ran trippingly over Dante and Milton and Goethe, dipped into Keats, dabbled in Shelley, flirted with Swinburne, hovered over Blake, soaking in from each only the beauty, the feeling of joy she had received when she had first met them. In her preplanned tour she conjures up what she knows or imagines of Babylon and Athens and Samarkand, Louis XIV's Versailles and Charles II's London, Shakespeare and Michelangelo, Dostoevski and Klee and Melville and Miro and Bartok and Pynchon, and as she feels herself slipping into the nightly oblivion she rolls it all up in a single ball of ultimate question, a cry of the heart, "Can you let all this die? Don't you care to bring back all this creation, this searching for beauty and truth and loveliness . . . this **humanness** back?"

And she falls asleep. The hard thing in this case being to **avoid** certain humannesses.

And she dreams.

They are the Coronolee. What they look like is irrelevant. It is what they touch that matters. They stroke the rocks and the trees till they respond in joy and beauty. They build mild cities that fondle the seas and skies, plant gardens that woo the earth; and grow in skill and art and scope with the ages, till all they handle becomes a wonder and a delight. All that sees the work of the Coronolee exclaim "Ahhh, **yes!**"

They soften their suns to mellow hues that gentle all they fall upon. They form worlds from which one would willingly never part, where momentary existence is a flowing environmental caress. They meet other races and speak to them and touch them and somehow, species with hard edges and callous beginnings and mean needs begin to warm and soften and flow in beauty.

And of a mere moment, as the universe plunges through time, the Coronolee are gone. Something had happened to them or been done to them or . . . anyway, it was so ugly, **such** bad art, that they went quietly.

And - how long after, who knows - the Roanei arrive and hear of the extinct Coronolee, still somewhat of an epic in that part of space at that time. And so, as they always do, the Roanei resurrect one member of that species, and leave it alone on the barren remains of one of the Coronol worlds, amid the relics and wreckage of departed splendour, and depart - leaving, of course, a dream-channel link. And the last of the Coronolee lives a short space, as their lifespan goes, puttering about the shards of beauty, trying to set things to rights, and then asks from the depth of its heart and the height of its soul that its people might be brought back from nothingness to correct this ugliness. The Roanei hear immediately from the far places they were then in, and answer:

No. What value is there in the things your people have done? None of them matter to us at all.

And the dream link is broken forever. And the last Coronol dies, in shame and chagrin, at the ugliness of the world. And no one ever lives there again.

That was her dream. It was quite discouraging. In the face of what the Coronolee had achieved, even what she could rescue clinging to from the wrack of dream, what man ever did

seemed not a little childish. If she'd ever loved anything human, it was the arts, but compared to what **they** were capable of, even Mozart and Seami looked like the triflings of a child that may amount to something someday if he ever grows up and doesn't get too snotty.

And **they** didn't impress the Roanei one smidgeon.

She had lost, she knew, another round.

She lived pleasantly enough under the trees, that might be oaks or beeches, or banyans for all she knew, surrounded by her squirrabbits, and on the whole content. Time passed, usually without her noticing or being bothered by its passing, but once in a while she was reminded by something or other of time passing and duty undone, and went through a heavy guilt session.

It was really a bit chilling to think that she hadn't yet actually **asked** for humanity to be brought back yet. She did have some symptoms of growing older, and someday she might drop dead of an aneurysm or something, and there's the last chance gone for everybody that ever was. Even if **she** didn't much believe it's a chance, shouldn't she at least **try** it? Think of all the people who are dead forever, and just maybe her mere asking could bring them back.

Sometimes, now she could never bring herself to say it out loud but she thought it . . . sometimes she thought she just didn't want to bring anybody back. Did she really want any of them? Had they ever been at all important to her? Had she once been better off or more contented in the old human days?

On the other hand, she supposed she'd be very important to them, a sort of goddess at least, if she could have them all brought back . . . **if** they ever believed what she told them, that it was her that brought them back. She imagined all sorts of people would be quick to claim all kinds of things once they were brought back.

Finally, on the eve of a rare day of rolling thunder and rain, she looked out at the last fugitive wisps of sun through angry clouds, the first she'd seen of its light all day, and thought she had the answer. She dreaded using the dream channel again, but she would have to. She hoped it would be the last time.

She spent the evening thinking over the good and just and decent things men had (sometimes) done. She poured into a common pool her idea portraits of Jesus and Buddha and Thomas Assisi and Florence Nightingale and little Dutch boys at dikes and men in newspaper writeups who die saving children from burning buildings and her cousin Martha who broke an elbow getting a kitten out of a well. She wished she could add something of her own, but she well knew that she had never lived for anybody or died for anybody but herself. Maybe now she could make up for that. Alone on the wet earth, naked to the chill breeze, no human eye to see, she slept her question.

"I challenge you, Roanei. These are things men have done. Are you worse than man was? Can you do less for man than man, at his best, could do for his fellow man?"

She learned the answer.

It was early enough in the history of the cosmos that the galaxies were not far strewn as yet, and blazed in the sky as thick as stars.

She dreamt the ancient story of the Toomeer, or so the Roanei termed them. They were already of age when the Roanei were young, and they guided the Roanei and taught and aided and nurtured them, as they did so many of the races that first came into being on the earlier worlds of the earliest suns. They gave unstintingly of their time and their energy and their sustenance, and yet never seemed to call guilt into existence, as if they were rewarded simply by being permitted to give.

And the Roanei, young and precipitous race, found itself abruptly on the rim of annihilation, despite their unique talent of resurrection, or rather because of it. For the races of a galaxy rose against the arrogance and the parsimony of the Roanei in the use of their gift, and descended upon them to erase them totally.

And at the point of doom, unexpectedly, the Toomeer were there, interposing themselves between the furious attackers and the fleeing Roanei. This race is young and foolish, said the Toomeer, but let it live. We should all be for life together, not death. If you must slay, we are here . . . slay us.

And the attacking races did. In their fury and hate for the Roanei, they destroyed the intervening Toomeer to the last member of the species. But by the time the path to the Roanei lay clear again, the bloodlust had died, and they were aghast at what they had done, and at the virtue of the race they had destroyed. And they slunk back to their various home-worlds and what became of them is instructive, but not part of the dream in question.

But the Roanei followed their customary procedure. They resurrected one of the Toomeer, and told him he could **request** the resurrection of his species if he chose. Perhaps he never asked; certainly the Roanei never acted. They did not understand why the Toomeer had behaved in that suicidal manner, but presumably they had their own satisfactions in doing so. So the Roanei reasoned. The values of the Toomeer were as meaningless to them as those of the Mnestepoi or the Coronolee or Man. Of gratitude, they showed not a trace. The Toomeer have been extinct for many billion years.

The next day was a mental seething. She sat or paced for hours, gnashing, weeping, boiling over. Those Toomeer were teachers and parents and **friends** to the Roanei, and if they were allowed to rot forever, after they had died for the Roanei, she figured she wasn't going to get far with an appeal to altruism.

In fact, she figured she'd give up.

No, wait. She could still **ask** them anyway.

Who was she trying to kid? The Roanei weren't just giving out life for the asking, that was clear. And she had never forgotten that she could ask only once; she kept remembering the sausages on the nose. She'd better hold off on that ultimate request a little longer. Once she'd pulled that, there'd be nothing left.

That night, still with fury smouldering in her breast, and an icier determination than she'd ever known in either of her lives, she stood a while, sniffing the scents she had come to know, feeling the rough bark of the trees, tasting fear and anger in the back of her throat. She did not know the answer, but she would find out. She lay down. Sleep was long in coming as she worried her question into place.

"Show me those races who **have** been granted rebirth. Why were **they** resurrected?"

It was a sleep profoundly empty of dream.

The dreamlessness had the authoritative aura of the dreams. She knew that itself was the answer.

There were no such cases. There never had been one.

She was somewhat hindered in the comments she wished to make to the Roanei by a lack of adequate knowledge of their progenerative processes or their personal antipathies. But she requested them quite strongly to be so kind as to attempt to reproduce themselves in liaison with that lifeform most unbearably repugnant to them.

She would be damned if she'd give such moral monsters the satisfaction of seeing her cringe. She'd been long taken for a sucker, but that was over. Now she'd just have to forget it.

She was sorry for the rest of mankind, but now she knew that nothing she could have done would have brought them back anyway.

Sadists!!!

Years passed over her head, long in the passing, short in looking back on them. She was getting old.

At times the thought flirted with her mind . . . should she not at least try? There is always a first time, people used to say, and perhaps the Roanei might make their first exception in favor of man.

She wouldn't care to bet on that, though.

She had traveled long, and then settled long, developed a spot that was particularly hers in a world that was all hers in general, showed elderly crotchets to her line of squirabbits, forgot at times who and where she was.

A night came at last when, sitting on the shore of her own peculiar lake, she was in terror of death.

It had almost had her that day and was still waiting, invisibly final, in the shadows. She could no longer promise herself the whole night.

She felt she saw herself as she truly was - a lonely, selfish old woman. She never had cared for her fellow men. They could not have had a more indifferent advocate than herself.

She would not live forever. She felt an aura that told her she would not live out the next sleep. Let her at least go knowing she had done what she could. Let her pray for man to the Roanei.

The stars wheeled overhead. She could not do it. She **could not!** She was terrified to sleep without, and yet she could not. All her life, both her lives, spun about her, and all the other lives waiting for her to speak out for them, and she could not. What kind of abominable thing, then, she thought, must I be?

The east paled, she supposed it was the east, though it was only its paling that had ever told her so, and soon the sun would rise again. She could stay awake no longer, but at last she had brought her soul to a balance she could live or die with.

Lying on the shore of the lake, she wearily closed her eyes.

She did not think the Roanei ever granted wishes.

But if she could get only one wish, she would wish big.

She would wish alive something the universe needed badly, something the Roanei could not comprehend. She would wish for humanity, but not for Man.

She thought, her withered cheeks wet with her last tears, "Roanei, I wish for the rebirth of the Toomeer, they who gave themselves to death that you yourselves might live."

For the last time she moved in the landscapes of responsive dream, where human symbols clothed alien reply.

Wearily she struggled across the floor of the barren valley. The hummocks were strewn with countless bones, and they were white, and they were very dry. At a turning in the path she came across a dwarf. It squatted among the bones and stared up at her.

"Good evening," the dwarf said quietly.

"Good evening."

"You are quite certain of your wish?" it asked. "This is forever, you know. You wish for the rebirth of a race you do not know, rather than your own?"

She nodded mutely.

The dwarf's face puckered oddly. "This is very hard to understand. Did you hate your own kind so?"

"I didn't hate," she said, "but I never learned to love. I didn't have the Toomeer to teach me," she added with a touch of bitterness.

"Do you hate *us*, then?" asked the dwarf.

"I am trying not to hate anything for a few minutes more, and then it won't matter," she said.

The dwarf looked down at its gnarled palms, spat into them and wiped them on its thighs.

"The universe is full of creatures," it said slowly, "and all live their separate lives and crave their varied wants and hold their distinct values, and little do we comprehend or sympathize with any of them. One thing we found always and everywhere. When an individual is brought back to brief existence, and permitted to request racial rebirth, it invariably wishes the return of its own species. Each being appreciates the existence of its own kind, shares their particular values. We never grant such requests. We are rather . . . amused."

It looked at her, its eyes almost pleading. "But you . . . you have shamed us."

It was silent awhile, rocking back and forth on its haunches, considering.

"If you ask for rebirth," it said at last, "not for your own kind, but for another, we can only assume that, however little we can appreciate the reasons for such requests, there is

something in that other race of higher and more universal value than the contingent preference of a single species. We feel we must grant such a request. For what is higher, should be."

The dwarf tightened its lips. "We can restore life when we choose. But the cost to us is high. High not in your concepts of money, or time, or energy, but in terms you could not grasp, though to us they are of highest importance. But somehow at this moment, although we feel the costs, we shall ignore them. Your request is granted, then. The race of the Toomeer shall live again, as they did when we were young."

She bowed her head. "Thank you," she said softly.

And the heavens darkened with a crash as a sheet of lightning caromed from end to end of the heavens above them, and out of the darkness and the lightning a voice spoke in rolling thunder.

"WE HAVE NO WISH NOR NEED TO RETURN," boomed out the voice, awesome beyond belief and yet more human than she had ever heard from the lips of men. "FOR CYCLES WE HAVE BEEN CONTENT TO REMAIN FAR BEYOND YOUR VIEW EVER SINCE THE EVENT YOU PRESUMED OUR ANNIHILATION. WE FOUND THAT THE VALUES WE HAD HELD FOR THEIR OWN SAKE WERE NOT AS EPHEMERAL AS WE HAD FEARED, FOR THEY ARE CHERISHED IN A REALITY YOU HAVE NOT YET GLIMPSED. WE OURSELVES WERE SURPRISED."

The thunder softened to an organ richness.

"WE HAVE LONG WISHED YOU TO JOIN US, ROANEI. BUT UNTIL YOU RECOGNIZED THE NEED, WE COULD NEITHER REACH NOR INSTRUCT YOU. WHAT YOU HAVE THIS DAY FOUND LACKING WITHIN YOU, WE CAN TEACH YOU TO POSSESS. WE CALL YOU TO US. WILL YOU COME?"

As the dwarf nodded, tears funneled the gnomish face.

"AND BRING BACK THIS RACE," continued the words on the wind. "WE ARE GRATEFUL TO IT. GIVE IT YOUR POWERS AS WELL. PERHAPS THEY MAY DO SOMEWHAT WITH THEM."

The dwarf stared into the sky. "Will they do better than we? They were a race riddled with weakness and folly beyond imagining."

"THAT IS TRUE. AND WITH STRENGTH AND UNDERSTANDING. PERHAPS MAN WILL BECOME THE LATTER-DAY ROANEI OR MNESTEPOI. BUT PERHAPS IT WILL BE A NEW CORONOLEE OR TOOMEER. THE RACE HAS THE SEED, THE POTENTIAL FOR ALL THINGS. THE UNIVERSE IS A TESTING GROUND, AND WE MUST NOT PREJUDGE WHAT THEY MAY BECOME.

"BUT FOR YOU, ROANEI, WE HAVE BEEN LONG WAITING. COME, CHILDREN."

There was a long silence. Through the air a shaft of brighter sunlight struck down and bathed the dwarf. Finally he sighed deeply, rose to his feet, stretched his arms towards the heavens. He stood there, winds whipping his hair, tears drying on his craggy face; and as she watched, his form dwindled, dissolved, was gone.

She stood alone on the bare plain, the bones scattered far about her, white and bare and dry, to the furthest horizon. As she watched, they began to stir.