

Sphinx or Robot by Leena Krohn, 2005

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Evil Soup



“Lydia!” said Father. “Have you read this?”

Father held up an article in the morning paper. It was on the front page, where usually only advertisements appeared.

“What is it?” Lydia asked.

“It’s an announcement from the National Ministry of Health. Read it.”

Lydia read.

Because of certain recent events, our countrymen are cautioned to be careful in handling broths, cereal, and beverages, particularly if they are hot. It is not advisable to cool them off by stirring them too vigorously, rhythmically, in one direction only, or too long. The safest course is to let all foods cool off by themselves. In a few, admittedly rare, cases, stirring may produce, through a manifestation of turbulence, what is termed a singularity. Those who knead dough are also in danger. If a sucking is noted in the direction of the turn, one must absolutely push the dough farther away and direct one’s gaze away from it. Staring at the turbulence too intently increases the danger. In the worst case, such a “wormhole” can suck the unwary kneader into itself. To date there is no known way of retrieving those who have disappeared into a singularity.

Fellow citizens! We urge you to moderation and precision both in the home kitchen and in public eating places.

“What’s this supposed to mean?” Lydia asked.

“It’s a necessary warning. Some accidents have happened,” Father said.

“Really unfortunate events. Like what happened to Uncle Kauto.”

“What happened to Uncle Kauto?” Lydia asked.

“You mean you still don’t know about that? It happened last spring, when he sat down to eat some cabbage soup. His wife ladled it onto his soup plate right from the boiling-hot soup kettle. Uncle Kauto was very hungry and stirred his portion very rapidly with his spoon so that it would cool down faster.”

“Everyone does that,” Lydia said.

“That’s right. But fortunately, what happened to Uncle Kauto doesn’t happen to everyone.”

“Well, what happened to Uncle Kauto?” Lydia asked again.

“His wife heard his astonished gasp,” Father related, “and turned to look. She had just time to see that a vortex had appeared in the soup plate like what you see when you pull the plug on the bathtub. It didn’t stop whirling, even though Uncle Kauto had stopped stirring. On the contrary, the soup bulged and rose up and splattered like a stormy sea. After a while they couldn’t even

see the plate. The soup itself swelled up. At the same time the spoon dropped from Uncle Kauto's hand and his wife saw his face pressed into the vortex of soup. She said to me, 'It was just as though the plate was sucking him in. He seemed to get noticeably narrower and thinner. Before I could do anything, his head disappeared into the maw of that funnel-like thing. An irresistible force gobbled him up. It was truly a witch's brew.'

21

"How awful!" Lydia said.

22

"His wife grabbed her husband's suspenders, but at the same time she also felt herself being sucked in. She said it felt as though some monstrous vacuum cleaner was coming at them from the soup. The wife said that she too would have disappeared in the same way if her husband hadn't kicked her away. She was sure that that kick saved her."

23

"Evil soup!" Lydia said. "But what happened to Uncle Kauto?"

24

"He disappeared," said Father. "He drowned in the maelstrom of the soup. Soon afterward things calmed down, the surge died down, and there was just a soup plate on the table from which a little steam was rising. The man hasn't been seen since."

25

"How is that possible?" Lydia asked.

26

Lydia's father said, "Well- Quite likely the hot mass of the soup, as it whirled around, produced a kind of turbulence manifestation just as the Ministry of Health article described. It is unusual, but such things happen. Whatever isn't impossible will happen sooner or later. But sometimes even the impossible happens."

27

"I still don't really understand," Lydia said.

28

"At that moment, time-space started to curve and become denser. That caused the creation of what is called a singularity, or black hole. In turn, that created a strong magnetic field. And note: once we get a singularity, nothing can be predicted. In a singularity the laws of Nature no longer apply. When Uncle Kauto bent over his soup plate, he surpassed the event horizons of science. After that, the process could no longer be stopped. No one could have helped Uncle Kauto. In his ignorance, he caused his own downfall by his vigorous stirring."

29

"But is he coming back?" Lydia asked.

30

"It's possible. But I wouldn't say it's likely."

31

"Is he now in some other world?"

32

"Possibly," Father guessed again.

33

"But surely people there have to eat," Lydia mused. "And if he stirs his soup again, maybe he'll cause another singularity. If then he would remember to come right back here--"

34

"Let's hope for the best."

35

"But," Lydia said, "couldn't we disappear like Uncle Kauto? Couldn't the same thing happen to us, if we stirred our soup or cereal or tea too hard?" "What happens to one person can happen to anyone at all," Father said. "And anyway, we all came from soup. We originated in the boiling chaos of an ancient, primordial soup, and one day we must sink back into it. It doesn't have to happen exactly as with Uncle Kauto, but eventually it will happen. To us-to the whole world."

36

“Oh, Father, when?”

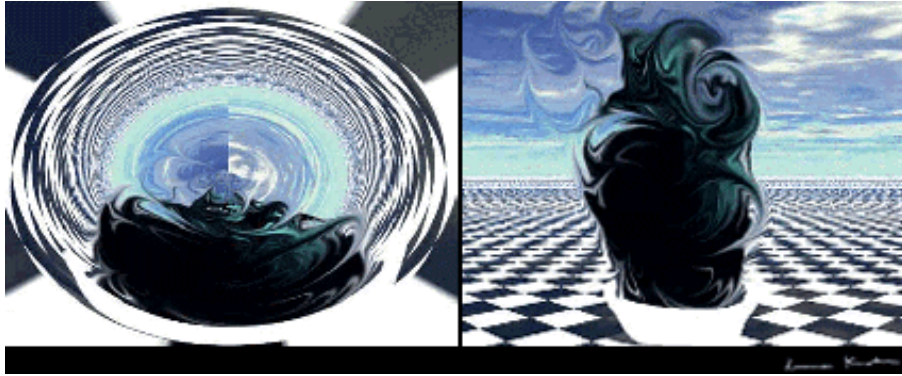
“Who knows? Tomorrow, or a hundred billion years from now,” Father said.

“Ahh,” said Lydia, reassured, and drank the rest of her cocoa.

37

38

39



Night Shift



Lydia could fly. Lydia flew over nameless cities and ripening grain fields and out of a storm to sunny open water. Once she looked behind her and saw that someone else was accompanying her. That being caught up to Lydia and said, “Guess what.”

“Well, what?” Lydia asked.

“You’re dreaming.”

“That can’t be,” Lydia said. “How could that be possible? Can’t you see that I’m flying? If I’m flying, I don’t have time to sleep. If I did, I’d fall.”

“On the contrary,” Someone said.

“How on the contrary?”

“You will fall if you try to fly when you aren’t dreaming. Try to remember the rule: if you’re flying, you are not awake,” Someone said. “If on the other hand you are awake, you won’t fly.”

Dimly, Lydia began to remember something, as they flew through a flock of twittering sparrows. But she really didn’t want to remember it.

“Drink this,” someone whispered. But it wasn’t Someone, it was Father. Lydia drank. and then she pulled the down quilt over her ears and again began dreaming uninterrupted. She slipped from one dream to another, and there was nothing Father could do about it. Not even the doctor could do anything about it.

That was how it had been throughout the autumn. Scarcely had Lydia awakened but she was dozing off again. She slept on the way to school and during classes and on the way home from school and at the lunch table and while trying to study. She seemed to want always to sleep. She would have liked the night to go on and on, but the darkness always ended. Day dawned, and when the lights were turned on, the dreams were turned off. The morning was bad. It wanted to drag her out from under the covers and force her to stand up and get dressed and remember that Mother was dead.

Father spoke to her through her sleep: “Do you want to sleep your life away? It’s all going to waste. You must go to school and grow up and do everything that people do in this world. And you can’t do them in your sleep. Now be a good girl.”

“That’s what I am! I’m always doing all kinds of things,” Lydia thought she grumbled. “Don’t you see me flying right now?”

She was free and high in the sky. Someone was once again flying beside her.

“Were you the one who once said that we were sleeping?” Lydia asked.

“You are sleeping,” Someone said. “I am actually awake.”

“But your rule stated that if a person is flying, that person is not awake.”

“The rule applies to you,” Someone said, “not to me. I’m a different story. I can fly and still be awake.”

“That’s not fair,” Lydia said. “But if you’re awake and I’m asleep, then how can we be having a conversation?”

“Easily. We can only converse when you’re asleep and I’m awake,” explained Someone as they glided over the city lights.

“I don’t understand that,” Lydia said. But she went on with her flying and sleeping.

“Then again, when you’re awake, I dream,” Someone said, but Lydia didn’t understand at all. It didn’t worry her.

Lydia slept day and night. So it seemed to her father, who kept a worried vigil at her bedside. Lydia appeared to be lying in her bed, pale and with eyes closed. But from her own point of view, Lydia was not there but somewhere else altogether. Which of them was right, or were they both?

Maybe there were two Lydias. One was asleep, but the other was flying happily under the dream sun over dream landscapes. She glided lightly and far like a paper airplane over green meadows. What fun such a glider has anywhere in the world! Over the deep blue waters! Over the city lights! And in the moonlight, when Venus twinkles and twinkles.

Lydia had no idea that she was dreaming. If she had known, she would have already awakened. But while her dream body, hale and healthy, adventured [seikkaili] in other worlds, her small, motionless real body grew weaker and weaker.

“When you go to sleep there, you wake up here,” Someone said. They were flying over a snow-covered plain, which was full of beds like a hospital ward. But they were all empty.

“Where have they all gone?” Lydia asked.

“Into their dreams,” Someone said.

Often in her dreams Lydia met her mother. “How strange. They told me that you were dead,” Lydia related.

“Nonsense,” Mother said, laughing. She showed Lydia her little garden, which was full of big blue flowers, dark as ink.

But then Lydia flew off again.

“Remember the rule,” Someone said.

“If I were asleep, you would be my dream,” Lydia said. “But I don’t want you to be just a dream.”

“In dreams, dreams are true,” Someone said.

“But if someone is just someone’s dream, he doesn’t really exist,” Lydia said, as they flew over a dark lake, smooth as a mirror, that reflected the stars.

“If he thinks he exists, then he exists,” Someone said. “Then he is alive. There is no mistaking it. That is life and that is truth. There is no life other than that.”

“Do you think you are alive?”

“In principle, yes,” Someone said. “But now you must go back.”

“Why?” Lydia asked.

“Take turns, Lydia, take turns!” Someone whispered

“What do you mean, take turns?” Lydia asked. She noticed that a storm was brewing. She felt very restless. She found it hard to stay aloft.

“Day and night,” Someone said. “Asleep and awake. Night shift and day shift. Being and not being. Truth and untruth. You can’t have one without the other. And each becomes the other. Sleep wakes you. Being awake makes you dream. There you have another rule.”

They descended through a swirling cloud toward a small, familiar house.

“So which one is this?” Lydia asked. They were now standing in a yard that Lydia knew well.

“It’s just now changing,” Someone said. “Now comes the day shift.”

“You’ve got me all mixed up with your talk,” Lydia said. “Pinch me so I can be sure I’m not asleep.”

Someone pinched her arm. “Ouch,” said Lydia. “That hurt. Of course I knew that this was real. And you’re real too.”

Lydia looked triumphantly at Someone, but Someone wasn’t there. Where Someone had been, a Someone-shaped hole had been torn, through which Lydia saw Father’s face. The hole kept growing larger until she could also see the doctor and the whole room. The world now filled the place where Someone had just been. Lydia had awakened, and a new day was ready and fresh.

Now it was the day shift, the day’s turn.

Her arm stung a little. The doctor stood by her bed holding a hypodermic needle. He had just injected Lydia in the arm with it, in exactly the same place where Someone had pinched her.

“Good morning,” said the doctor. “It’s high time you got up.”

Lydia rubbed her hands, stretched and said to the doctor and her father: “Good morning!”

“It worked!” her father said. “The shot woke her.”

“No,” Lydia said, “not the shot, just the pinch. Didn’t you notice how Someone pinched me?”

“What someone?” the doctor asked. “Must have been me.”

“No, it was the one who-” Lydia started to explain. But she could no longer remember what Someone looked like or what they had talked about.

“You were dreaming,” Father said. “You just woke up from that dream.”

“Yes,” Lydia said. “I awoke from one dream, I awoke to another.”



You Come to Read a Book

99

100



There are places that are full of words, yet they are quiet. They are called libraries. One book takes up little room, only an inch or so. But when you open a book, it starts to grow. It can grow to the size of the world. But this happens only if the one who opens it can read. To those who cannot read, the book is just an object. It is a pile of papers fastened together, and the marks on it mean nothing.

101

But then comes someone who can read, like Lydia. She seizes the book and kindles a light with it.

102

Lydia had come to the library to return some books. She had read them during her summer vacation, and now summer was over and the books were due.

103

During the summer Lydia had made trips to the wild meadow behind her uncle's summer home. In the library, she remembered that meadow. She had taken along a blanket, a bottle of juice and a book. She had slept or read among the humming of bumblebees until Grandmother called to her from the porch steps. Sometimes the wind seized the pages and riffled through the book as if looking for some important piece of information.

104

The library reminded Lydia of that meadow, even though there she had to stay inside and sleeping was not quite proper. But sometimes she was just as contented in the library's reading-room as she had been in the meadow.

105

"Are all the books in the world in here?" Lydia had asked the librarian when she came to the library for the first time.

106

That had been many years ago. Now she knew better. There was no place where all the world's books would fit, however little space each of them occupied.

107

It was at the library that Lydia made friends with Sulevi. Sulevi was a quiet boy who was in the same grade as she, but in a different classroom, and she knew him only by sight.

108

Sulevi sat reading a book in which were pictures of mushrooms, and the only vacant seat was next to him. After Lydia had returned her books, she sat down beside Sulevi to read.

109

"What are you reading?" Lydia asked after a while.

110

"A mushroom book," Sulevi replied, without turning his head.

111

"Which mushroom is that?" Lydia asked, pointing to a little picture.

112

"That is a *Podaxis Pistillaris*."

113

"Can you eat it?"

114

"Better not to."

115

"Is it poisonous?"

116

“No, but otherwise dangerous. It’s a very unusual mushroom.”

117

“Really?” Lydia became interested. Everything that was unusual and dangerous appealed to her. “How is it dangerous?”

118

“If a person gets its spores on him, mushrooms start growing on him,” Sulevi informed her.

119

Lydia shuddered. “How does anyone dare to go into the woods, if mushrooms like that are lurking there?” she wondered.

120

“There is no danger from them here. They don’t grow around here. Podaxis Pistillaris only grows in the wilderness areas of California,” Sulevi said. He glanced at Lydia’s book. “What book is that? That one you’re reading?”

121

“It has songs and poems in it,” Lydia said.

122

“Oh,” Sulevi said and again buried himself in his mushroom book. But Lydia read:

123

All of you read the book of life
And find in it what you will.
You come from far away, from the void,
To where the book lies open still.
Light as a feather in the wind
Or plodding, shunning the sun,
Some truly possess a thousand feet
While others seem to have none.
All of you read what can be seen
And even what cannot.
After time has turned the page,
Even you will have come to naught.
And the book is always the same.
The change is in those who read.
With you I looked at a book,
And you, you let me read.

124



Summer and Gravity

125

126



Late in August, when the sky was almost cloudless, Father and Lydia and Sulevi took a trip. They drove far away into the countryside, to a little hill where Father's friend the professor lived. His name was Dr. Siirak. He had moved into an observatory that he had been building for many years. Now it was finally ready.

127

It was the last day of summer, or the first day of fall. They waited for the evening, when they would be able to see a comet which was just then passing by Earth. When finally their own star sank in the west, the little foreign suns lit up the sky over the hill, and they climbed up into the observatory.

128

"Today the comet is only 15 million kilometers away," Siirak said.

129

"To me, that's not 'only,'" Lydia said.

130

"Oh, yes, it is 'only'. In space, all objects are so distant from one another that even a thousand million kilometers is 'only,'" Siirak said.

131

"Why are they so far apart?" Lydia asked.

132

"The universe is expanding. The stars have been moving away from one another since the Big Bang. And they are still moving away," the professor said.

133

To Lydia that sounded disturbing. Then the stars were getting more solitary day by day.

134

"When will they stop moving away?" she asked.

135

"Oh my, you tell me," Siirak answered absentmindedly. "Of course some people believe that the time will come when the universe will start to shrink again."

136

"So, was it once very small?" Lydia asked.

137

"Smaller than a raisin. And still it contained everything," Siirak answered. "And it was very, very hot."

138

Lydia thought about the universal raisin from which all the moons and stars and suns had come. It was surely the most astonishing thing she had ever heard. She would have liked to ask where that raisin had come from and why it started swelling up without measure. And what if someone had eaten it? Then nothing would exist, and that someone would have burned his mouth badly and exploded.

139

Sulevi interrupted her thoughts: "What is a thousand million kilometers away?"

140

"The Sun's nearest fixed star, Proxima Centauri," the professor said.

141

Lydia looked into the eyepiece of the telescope. And then Sulevi looked. At first all they saw were clouds of fog, but the doctor said that was the Milky Way and that every particle of fog was a star, like the sun or even larger. It seemed to Lydia that they were all attached to one another, and she wondered if Dr. Siirak might not have slightly misunderstood the whole matter. But the

doctor said that the stars were light years apart, they just couldn't see that with his binoculars. And a light year was such a great distance that no person could ever travel it. But Lydia had difficulty understanding how a year could be a distance.

"Well, that's just the way it is," Siirak said. "A light year is the distance light travels in one year. But gravity gives us the earth year. And that is a trip around the sun. Without gravity we would have no seasons. But now we can be sure that summer will always come again."

"Well, that's good," Lydia said earnestly.

Siirak showed them Proxima Centauri. It wasn't much more than a point of light. But the comet glowed and beamed, although Siirak said it was only a piece of dirty ice. Still, it was unbelievably beautiful. They saw its corona. It had come from far away, it was going far away. They could look at Proxima Centauri whenever they wished, but they would never again see the comet. It would not return for centuries, and then they would no longer exist. To Lydia that, too, seemed not quite right.

Other persons or beings would look at it centuries and millennia and millions of years from now. And Lydia thought of her mother, who had gone even farther away than the comet but who would never return.

"What exactly is gravity?" Lydia asked.

"It is a property of matter. We stay on the ground because we are so small and the Earth is so big," Dr. Siirak answered. "Because of it we can walk and sit and lie down. And because of it we say that the ground is below and the sky above, even though actually there is no such thing as above or below."

"It's that simple?" Lydia asked.

"Not exactly simple," Siirak said.

"Mr. Cyrus Teed would have an altogether different explanation," Father said and winked at Lydia.

"What kind?" Lydia asked.

"That we stay on the ground because of centrifugal force," Father said.

"You're not teaching the child fallacies, are you?" the professor said, raising his thick eyebrows.

"I'm teaching her to think," Father asserted.

"But can't gravity sometimes let go, just for a little while, now and then?" Sulevi asked.

"That isn't possible," the professor said. "There are laws of nature, which are immutable."

He thought a while and added, "So far as we know."

"But suppose it did," Sulevi insisted, "what would happen to us?"

"Naturally, we'd fall like stones straight into the sky," Lydia said.

"Or we would rise," Father said. "It's the same thing."

“No, in zero gravity we float,” the doctor explained. “The astronauts have experienced it. Many people think it’s an unmatched experience.”

162

“I’ve floated too,” Lydia said. “In my dreams.”

163

“Dreams don’t count,” Sulevi said. “And it wouldn’t be practical to be always floating.”

164

“No,” Siirak agreed. “We would be very different beings if we had been designed for such an environment. We can’t live without Earth and without gravity.”

165

In the morning they once again saw only one star. All the rest were obscured by its light. They carried their breakfast trays out into the sunshine on the steps of the observatory and ate muesli and drank cocoa. Lydia sat firmly on the steps, the cocoa stayed in its cup and the observatory stood solidly on its hill. All of it was as it should be.

166

Lydia felt the traces of the night in the cold of the stone steps and the warmth of the sun. Now that autumn had come, they would move away from their star until the winter solstice. But after that they would again turn toward its hot eye. Lydia remembered a song that went:

167

She began humming to herself on the steps of the observatory. A threshing machine was rolling slowly in the field, gathering the heads of grain.

168

“Now we are rich,” Father said. “We have received the gold of both the stars and the grain.”

169

But Sulevi asked: “But what if gravity would let go its hold just once, just for a little while? Maybe there is such a place on earth-”

170



Built on a Rock

172

173



That morning Mr. End, the insurance claims adjustor, had awakened at the usual time in his usual house, which his father had build with his own hands on an outcropping of solid granite. There he had awakened every morning since the day he was born. It was hardly possible that any claims adjustor could have found a more stable and peaceful place.

174

This morning was, however, not the same as all the other mornings. When Mr. End, while dressing himself in seasonably suitable attire, glanced at the thermometer attached to the window frame, he became aware of a change in the landscape. He could not see the highway or the bus stop to which the path from his yard should have led.

175

At first Mr. End thought that there was a thick fog that obscured all distant objects. Under normal circumstances this would have explained his perception. But when End opened the front door he observed that the summer day was clear and cloudless. Normal circumstances were out of the question. There was no fog, but still the path ended in thin air.

176

Mr. End remained standing on the top step. He appeared unperturbed, but nevertheless was breathing more deeply than usual.

177

Because of his job description he had become accustomed to many sights.

178

Catastrophe was one of the disadvantages of his profession. It was irregularity that brought him his regular income.

179

But End had never before seen anything like this. The plot of ground that the claims adjustor had inherited had become an island. But it was not an island in the Atlantic Ocean, rather in the ocean of the air. Either his yard had risen, or the ground to which it had been attached had fallen down. How this could have happened he had not the faintest notion. The great change had happened in absolute silence, for he had slept soundly all night.

180

Mr. End realized something right away: even his Super Homeowner's Policy would not compensate him for the consequences of this event. For the company did not insure acts of God, and this was undoubtedly an act of God.

181

End got his binoculars and looked in every direction. But he saw nothing but blue sky and scraps of cloud. No other islands, nothing resembling land even in the distance. Quite far below flocks of birds flew, and surely they had to have a nest in a tree somewhere. But otherwise nothing was as it had been. The bus station and the highway were gone, gone the automatic teller machine and the beer grill. Gone, gone, gone. The dull rumble of passing trucks was silenced, the gasoline station's banners no longer fluttered.

182

The view was breathtakingly expansive, but it caused him uneasy thoughts. The claims adjustor stepped out to look in his mailbox. He wanted to know if there was anything in the newspaper about this event, since it was absolutely extraordinary. Then he realized that it was impossible, since if the newspaper had arrived, the destruction would have happened afterward.

The newspaper had not come. Nor would it come again; of this, the claims adjustor was absolutely sure. The mail carrier had only a bicycle. 183

End knew from past experience that what goes up must eventually come down. Purely of its own accord. If not, there is slight hope. The world was made like that, End had realized already at an early age. Time and gravity made the world what it was. But something had now happened to gravity. It was reasonable to hope that it was only temporary. 184

End suspected that eventually his island would also set down. Of course he could not be sure that it would land on the same spot where it had previously been attached. Perhaps the earth under it had gone on rotating in the same direction and just as regularly as it had until then. But his newborn island might be traveling along a different route entirely. When it finally landed, End might find himself in the Gobi Desert or in the middle of some big city marketplace. 185

The insurance adjuster hoped that the descent would not be a sudden crash, although he also hoped it would happen pretty soon. He was afraid that the sugar bowl he had inherited from his great-aunt, which was the most valuable object in the house, could not withstand a very abrupt landing. Today End would be unable to investigate accidents. Nor could anyone else investigate his accident. And he could not even go to the store. But fortunately End had flour and crispbread in his cupboard, and he had just stored in the root cellar the carrot and potato crop from his little vegetable garden. And there was a pond of clear water behind the house that was still in place. 186

Mr. End was a cold-blooded professional. He knew that what people think is certain and self-evident is in fact uncertain and unpredictable. He did not succumb to panic. And he decided to behave as he would on any ordinary Sunday, even if today was a weekday. Awaiting the descent which would shortly take place, End went inside to brew coffee and make a couple of cheese-and-cucumber sandwiches. He also tried the telephone. It was not working, but then he had not expected that it would be. 187

Insurance claims adjustor End sat down on his steps to eat his sandwiches. The wind ruffled his scanty hair. The air was as clean and clear as in high mountains. He saw clouds, clouds, clouds-there were clouds both above and below. It seemed to him that the house and lot were constantly moving, but he could not be sure of it without some fixed point of comparison. Perhaps the clouds were just rushing by. 188

Adjustor End recalled a question that his old philosophy teacher had once asked: "What can we do when we cannot do anything?" 189

It was an important question. It was the Question of the Day. And the teacher himself had answered it: "We can look at the event from a philosophical point of view. This means: although we cannot change events, we can change our reactions to them." 190

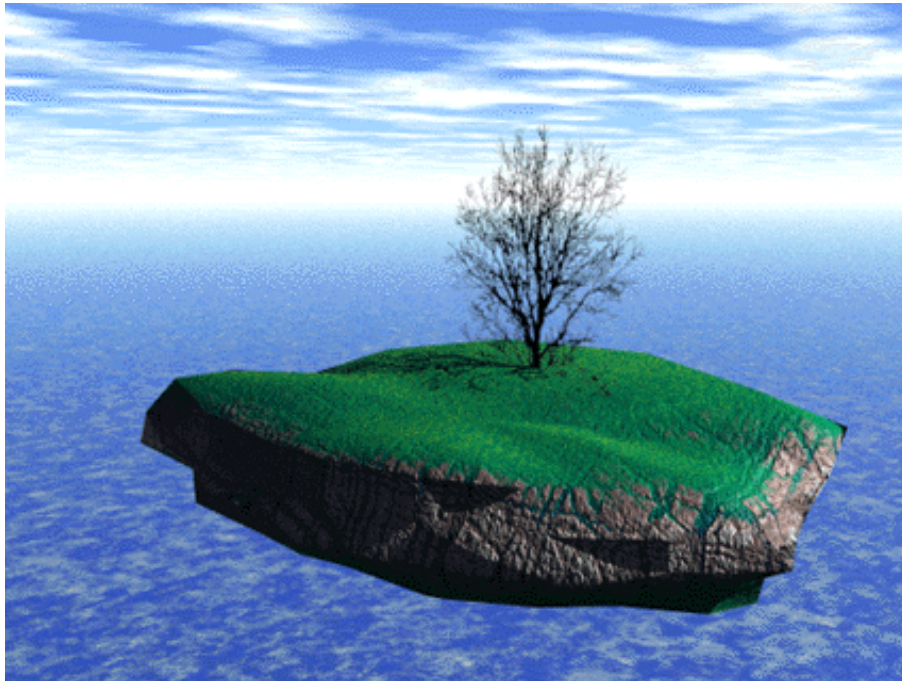
Here undoubtedly was an event that End could not change. But he realized that now he did not really want to change it. The day had its advantages. He was in no hurry, he had no schedule. The insurance company was not asking him to think up dirty tricks so that they wouldn't have to pay their clients' claims. Eternity murmured in his ears. 191

End had retained his sunny disposition in spite of the multifarious catastrophes which he had been obliged to witness. He sat up on the warm step and raised his head so that could see the 192

clouds gliding by. Mr. End had been planning to go abroad on vacation. But he had not yet had time to buy the tickets.

“What luck, for now I can travel free and who knows how far. What lovely views! And I don’t have to sleep in a strange bed. At the insurance agency they will be wondering what has become of me. Twenty-eight years, and never was I tardy! They’ll surely believe that something has happened. They’ll remember me for a while and then they’ll forget. New insurance claims adjustors will come, just as qualified as I am and maybe even more qualified,” End thought, content with his destiny.

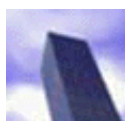
What can we do when we cannot do anything? Raise our heads like investigator End, so as to better see the clouds.



Unless People Learn

196

197



The Prophet had arrived in the city. He had come by bicycle from far away. The Prophet had long hair and an unkempt beard such as befits a prophet, but no robe nor sandals. Just old jeans and running shoes and a faded T-shirt on which read: YOU CANNOT BUY THE FUTURE.

198

The Prophet prophesied at streetcar stops, on pedestrian walkways, in the marketplace, in the exhibition hall, on railroad platforms and in supermarkets. But from all those places he was eventually driven away.

199

He had a lot to say, but nothing very amusing. He predicted catastrophes and accidents. He said that the world's cities would soon fall into ruin and desolation and would disintegrate into clouds of dust. And that the populace was threatened by comets and wars and floods and hurricanes and mudslides and drought and thirst and Kreutz-Ebbing's Disease.

200

No, that was no fun at all, and few people cared to listen to the Prophet. Some began to weep, some laughed, many became irritated. But still there were a few who endured until the end of each sermon. They followed the Prophet from country to country and were known as disciples.

201

Lydia happened to hear the Prophet's predictions when she went with Sulevi to a large shopping mall to buy cocoa and milk and oranges and chocolate cookies. The Prophet stood on the walkway between a hosiery boutique and a nail studio and preached. On either side of him stood two young disciples, like an honor guard.

202

A product demonstrator was demonstrating new products opposite the Prophet, on the other side of the walkway. Lydia and Sulevi heard what both were saying.

203

The product demonstrator held up a small object. He said it was a genuine, original Neurophone.

204

"Find out what the Neurophone can do for you!" the product demonstrator said. "The electrodes and audio receivers are included. Now at a bargain price! Come closer and hear with your own ears!"

205

"What's a Neurophone?" Lydia whispered.

206

"Come closer!" the Prophet also commanded Lydia and Sulevi and a retired lady and three third-grade boys. "Hear what the future will bring! Learn how you yourselves can change it!"

207

The product demonstrator raised his voice and cried, "I have here another revolutionary technological invention!"

208

"Technology," said the Prophet, "and human greed have led us astray. Everything that mankind has made, all his inventions and machines, everything that is his pride and joy will be destroyed. Unless-"

209

And the Prophet fell silent and looked expectantly at his little audience.

“Unless what?” asked a second-grader finally. 210

“You tell them,” the Prophet urged one of his disciples. And the disciple cleared his throat and said shyly: “Unless people change.” 211

“Exactly!” the Prophet said. “People must change, and change greatly. But we do not want to change, therefore we must first want the desire. That is the hardest thing. If our desires change, everything else will follow automatically.” 212

“Boing’s springy athletic shoes!” the product demonstrator said. “Notice the flexible heel!” 213

“Learn to change. Teach yourselves to desire the right desires,” the Prophet said. 214

Sulevi listened to the Prophet very attentively. Lydia began to worry a little at how intently Sulevi was listening. 215

“Let’s go now,” Lydia whispered. On the other side of the walkway the product demonstrator was saying, “Run twice as fast! Wear the Boing springy shoes, they’ll give you the speed of a panther!” 216

“No,” Sulevi said, “he’s only telling the truth.” 217

“Which one?” Lydia asked. 218

The product demonstrator had already switched to a third product. He said: “This device is revolutionary! Come and test it for yourselves! This digital helmet will massage your cranium and free you from needless tension.” 219

But the Prophet said that the future would not come if people did not change. At the same time he looked into the eyes of each of his listeners in turn. 220

“How must we change?” Lydia heard Sulevi say. 221

“You must forget yourselves,” the Prophet said. “You must live simply. You must renounce everything that is nonessential.” 222

But how do we know what’s nonessential? Lydia thought. And how can we forget ourselves when we have to live inside ourselves all the time? 223

She looked at the new watch that she had received as a birthday present and on which her name was engraved. She felt that she needed it, but did that mean that the watch was truly essential? 224

The product demonstrator said, “Here is the ultimate Father’s Day gift. Truly a specialty: a pistol-shaped TV remote control!” 225

“I’d like to travel like the Prophet,” Sulevi said, “from city to city.” 226

In his eyes was a faraway look, a look of longing. 227

“You can’t do that,” Lydia said, poking him in the ribs almost angrily. “You’re still too young. And I’d miss you.” 228

“You could come along,” Sulevi said. 229

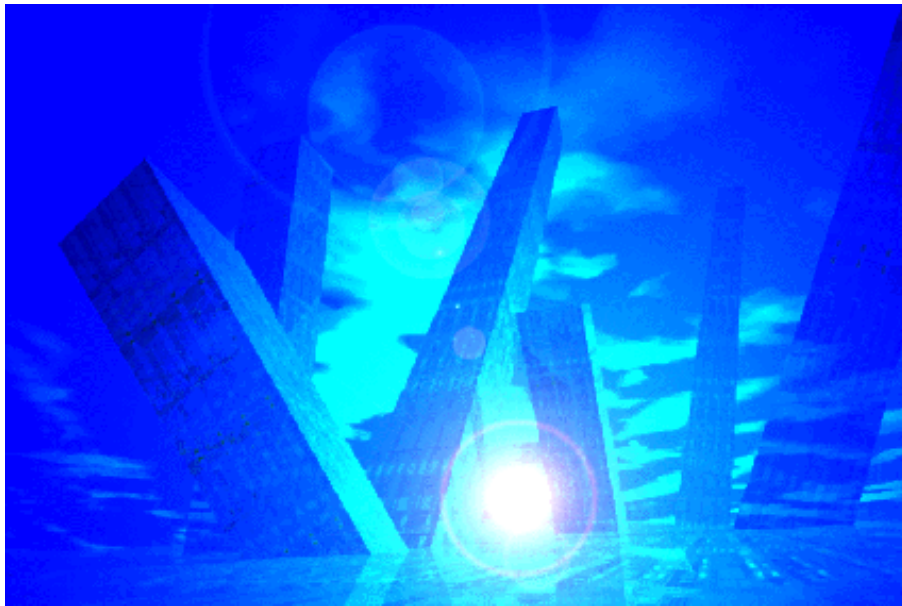
“No, I couldn’t,” Lydia said. “I don’t particularly care for the Prophet, and I don’t want to leave Father.” 230

Just then a security guard approached and told the Prophet that he would have to preach his sermon somewhere else. “Go outside to speak,” the man said. “It’s not appropriate here.”

Then the product demonstrator was able to make his voice heard again. He showed them a small, ugly bag.

“This,” he said, “is the world’s most effective flytrap. It may look like just a little bag, but it can catch up to 20,000 flies!”

What on earth would anyone do with 20,000 flies? Lydia wondered to herself.



The Hollow Earth Theory

236

237



On one of those not-so-fine days of which their city had rather more than less, Lydia's father said to his daughter, "Now that you're such a big girl, I have to tell you some of the facts of life."

238

Lydia was embarrassed for her father, since she thought she had already known the facts of life for many years.

239

"You don't have to," she muttered.

240

But her father continued, "You know that in my youth I was a student of Mr. Cyrus Teed's. But you haven't heard what Mr. Cyrus Teed told me. A secret, revolutionary fact. He had discovered something that modern science still doesn't understand."

241

"What is it?" Lydia asked absentmindedly.

242

"That the earth is hollow," Father said.

243

This had no effect on Lydia. But then Father lowered his voice as if he didn't want anyone else to hear him, even though the two of them were at home alone, as usual.

244

"The earth is a hollow ball, and everything that exists is inside the ball," he said and gazed expectantly at Lydia.

245

"Inside? I don't think so," Lydia said, now truly surprised. "That can't be! It isn't written anywhere."

246

"Not yet!" Father said. "Not yet! But Cyrus Teed believed that before long it would get into all the textbooks. The whole scientific institution will be overturned!"

247

"And I suppose we're inside the ball too?" Lydia asked doubtfully.

248

"Absolutely," Father said. "There we are, along with all the planets and their inhabitants, suns and fixed stars, dust and invisible matter. The whole universe!"

249

"How can that be? What's outside the ball, then?" Lydia asked.

250

"What, out there?" Father said. "There's nothing out there. Why should there be? Other scientists have understood everything completely backwards. They imagine that we are standing on the convex outer surface of the ball. Hah! But in fact we're standing on its concave inner surface. Cyrus Teed was the first to realize that. A brilliant man!"

251

"But does that mean that, for example, China—"

252

"That's right," Father said. "China isn't under our feet, it's over our heads. Up there!"

253

And Father pointed toward the high, drifting clouds.

254

"Oh!" said Lydia, amazed. "In school we were taught something else altogether."

255

“If we had a powerful enough telescope,” Father said, “do you know what we would see, Lydia?”

256

“Maybe the Great Wall of China,” Lydia guessed.

257

“That’s right!” her father said and clapped her on the back.

258

“What about gravity?” asked Lydia, who was a clever girl.

259

“You said it,” said her father enthusiastically. “There’s another fundamental mistake that has been made. We don’t stay on the earth’s surface because of gravity but because of centrifugal force. When we change the geometry of space, we also change the laws of nature.”

260

“Well, then, what’s in the middle of the ball?” Lydia asked.

261

“Infinity is there,” her father answered.

262

“There?” Lydia asked. “How can it possibly fit in there?”

263

“Infinity can fit anywhere,” Father said. “As we travel toward the center, everything shrinks and slows down, to infinities. Infinity is the essence of everything. Nothing is as small as infinity.”

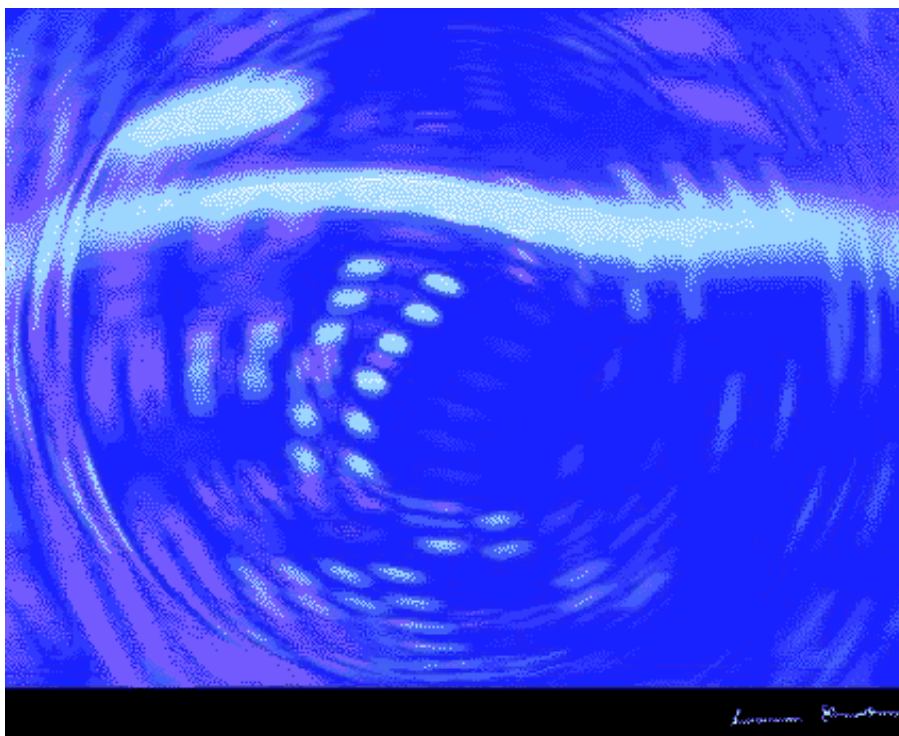
264

“Has Mr. Teed’s theory been proved?” Lydia asked.

265

“It hasn’t been disproved,” her father said. “And it never will be, either.”

266



Ordinary Pebbles

267

268



In the store window was posted a sign: ANYTHING BOUGHT THAT CAN BE SOLD.

269

Lydia and Sulevi and the other children had gathered some small multicolored stones from the beach, right at the water's edge. They put them in a bag and took them to the store and showed them to the storekeeper.

270

“How much will you pay us for these, storekeeper?” they asked.

271

“Oh dear, children, I wouldn't buy those,” the storekeeper said.

272

“Why not? It says in the store window: ANYTHING BOUGHT THAT CAN BE SOLD,” the children said, disappointed.

273

“There you are,” the storekeeper said. “Look, children, the sign doesn't say that we will buy anything at all, only anything that can be sold. There's a difference, there really is. Those little pebbles are certainly anything, but I'm sure they can't be sold. It's not worth it, buying something that you can't sell.”

274

“Not worth it to who?” the children asked.

275

“To me, of course,” the storekeeper said. “That's the point, if one wants to be a storekeeper.”

276

“Why isn't it worth it?” the children said.

277

“But my dear children, why should a storekeeper buy something he can't sell?”

278

“But if we sell these stones to you, then they're something that can be sold,” the children said.

279

“Oh for Heaven's sake, you don't understand. I couldn't turn around and sell them, that's for sure. And that's why it's not worth it for me to buy them from you. If I only buy and don't sell, I won't be a storekeeper for long. Only Croesus can buy things and not sell anything.”

280

“Who's Croesus?” the children asked.

281

“A very rich man,” the storekeeper said.

282

“Don't you want to be very rich?” the children asked.

283

The storekeeper laughed. “Absolutely,” he said. “But you don't get to be a Croesus by buying, only by selling.”

284

The children thought that what the storekeeper was saying was confused and incoherent. They fingered their bag of stones and said, “But these are very pretty stones.”

285

“Possibly. The world is full of pretty things. And many of them are also common and free. But people don't pay for something because it's pretty, but only because it's rare,” the storekeeper said.

286

“These are rare,” the children said.

287

“Jewels, precious stones-they are rare,” the storekeeper said. “Not beach pebbles. They are completely ordinary stones. Common pebbles. My customers won’t see any difference between these and the other pebbles on the beach. The whole beach is full of billions of pebbles just like these.”

288

“Not at all,” the children insisted. “We hand-picked these pebbles from the beach. We didn’t see two alike. Every one was different. And these are the prettiest ones of all.”

289

“Maybe so, children,” the storekeeper said. “But my customers won’t know that.”

290

“You can tell them,” the children said. “Then they’ll know.”

291

The storekeeper sighed. He was becoming impatient. Just to get rid of the children he said, “All right, I’ll pay you two Finnmarks per kilo.”

292

And the storekeeper weighed the stones and paid for them. There were five and a half kilos. The children went on their way, happy and richer than before. They felt almost like Croesuses.

293

The storekeeper asked his assistant to wash the stones and put them in a glass vase with water in it. The water and the lights in the show window made them shine almost like jewels. After thinking for a while, the storekeeper wrote a sign: HAND-PICKED PEBBLES. 100 GR., 1 FIM.

294

The next week Lydia and Sulevi and the other children returned to the store. The evening lights were already twinkling in the city’s windows and on the ocean’s surface and on the wet pebbles.

295

The children were pushing wheelbarrows and baby buggies or dragging suitcases mounted on wheels. The wheelbarrows and buggies and suitcases were crammed with pebbles, pretty, common, free.

296

“Storekeeper, these are for you,” they said as though bringing a gift.

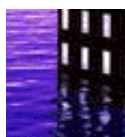
297



Penumbra

298

299



One day near Advent, Father said, “Don’t be frightened now, but the penumbra period begins today.”

300

“What period?” Lydia asked, frightened. “The penumbra. The Gregorian penumbra,” Father said. “We must be careful.”

301

“We’re living in dangerous times.”

302

“Dangerous, how?” his daughter asked anxiously.

303

“Dangerous in all respects,” Father said bleakly. “The most critical point is the winter solstice.”

304

“What happens then?” Lydia asked, her heart in her throat. “Besides the longest night,” she remembered.

305

“Anything at all can happen then,” Father said, still more gloomily. “And will happen. The penumbra period lasts from the beginning of December to the end of January. It reaches its climax precisely at the winter solstice. During the penumbra period anything can happen: strange coincidences, seizures, people going mad, disappearances, muggings, disappointments, strains, slips and sprains, shipwrecks, assassination attempts, avalanches, spontaneous forest fires, tornadoes, meteors colliding with Earth, deluges, just about anything imaginable. And even unimaginable.”

306

Lydia tried to imagine how a thing could be unimaginable. She couldn’t think of any such thing.

307

“Did you listen to the Prophet?” Lydia asked. “Or did you learn this from Cyrus Teed?”

308

“What Prophet? No, I read it in a book, the title of which is *How to Guard Against Everything*,” Father said. “A long time ago. But I didn’t want to worry you earlier. Now you’re old enough to worry.”

309

Lydia herself wasn’t sure of that. “Is there a penumbra every year?” Lydia asked.

310

“I guess so,” Father said. “Every Year of Our Lord.”

311

“But I don’t remember that last year at this time anything really terrible happened,” his daughter said. “Not the year before either. Even though naturally Christmas came, and you’ve said that Christmas is an awful time.”

312

“Christmas doesn’t count. It’s a matter of something even worse,” Father said. “We were just lucky. It can’t last forever. Now don’t be scared, but it can’t. Best to guard against it.”

313

“It’s been raining for three hours already,” Lydia mused. “Maybe it will never stop raining. The water will start to rise, and the streets will become rivers and the marketplaces lakes, and houses will start to sail away in all directions.”

“Everything is possible,” her father said and looked downright contented. 314

“It’s a good thing we went to the store only yesterday,” Lydia said. 315

Actually she had stopped worrying altogether. In the attic were an air mattress and swimming 316
tubes and flippers. She began to be interested in the penumbra’s possibilities.

On the other hand, she was somewhat doubtful. Lydia wasn’t familiar with the calculation of 317
probability or the compilation of accident statistics, but she guessed that if catastrophes were to
happen, they could just as well happen before or after the penumbra.

“The Pinatubo volcano erupted in February. Someone stole all the geraniums from the florist 318
shop last May,” Lydia said. “And my classmate’s dog ran away in March. But it came back in
December, just during the time of the penumbra.”

“What’s that supposed to prove?” her father asked. 319

“About as much as your book,” Lydia said pertly. 320

But it was still raining. It rained December’s icy drizzle, but in Lydia’s mind it was a downpour. 321
Small, cold ponds appeared in the yard. Little by little they began to run together. Perhaps the
rain had decided to fall for the entire time of the penumbra. Every few minutes Lydia peered out
the window to see how fast the water was rising. Father turned on the radio to hear the news.

“Are they talking about disasters?” Lydia asked. 322

“All kinds,” Father said. 323

“But they talk about them at other times and not just during the penumbra,” Lydia remembered. 324
She listened, but she heard not a word about deluges. Anyway, just to be on the safe side, she
went to pump up the air mattress.

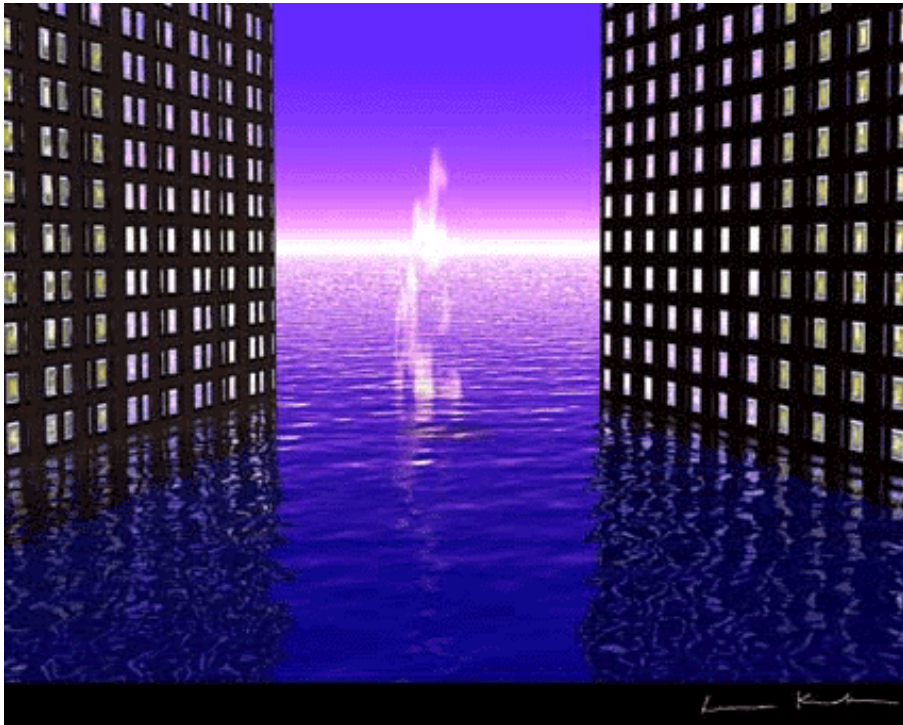
It was heavy going. Lydia pumped and pumped, and the mattress filled up painfully slowly. 325
Maybe moths had eaten holes in it. Just as she had the mattress nearly full, she noticed some-
thing. The winter sun was gleaming in the window and in the puddles in the yard. The weather
was clear. A half-frozen raindrop hung from a branch of the maple tree.

The radio was still on, and from it came a song which Mother had sometimes sung: 326

“O Fortuna, velut luna, statu variabilis!” 327

That means: “Oh Fortune, like the moon, ever-changing!” 328

329



The Wisdom of the Sphinx



Father and Lydia went to Egypt for their winter vacation. They rode on the backs of ill-tempered camels and saw the Sphinx of Giza. The sun was just setting, and the Sphinx, a black, desolate silhouette, was watching over the tombs of the kings. It had been guarding them for 4500 years, the guide said.

“Some people say that the Sphinx is much older than that,” Father said. “They say it was built when gods were said to rule the earth, when the Sun rose in the constellation Leo.”

But Lydia was exhausted and thirsty and sweaty. She didn’t have the strength to look at the Sphinx. They went to the hotel to sleep, but Lydia couldn’t fall asleep, as tired as she was.

“Do you know where Cydonia is?” Father asked Lydia then.

“Cydonia? What a strange name. Is it a country or a city?”

“A community.”

“I never heard of it. Is it here in Egypt?”

“It’s not in Egypt.”

“Maybe it’s in America?”

“It’s not in America.”

“Somewhere in Asia?”

“It’s not in Asia.”

“In Europe?”

“Not even in Europe.”

“Well, then, in Africa?”

“I don’t think it’s in Africa.”

“Then it’s nowhere,” Lydia said impatiently. “It’s nothing but some imaginary place that you’ve invented. This is a stupid game. I’m not going to guess any more.”

Behind the hotel’s windows murmured the hot, foreign, southern night. Strange insects rustled on the floor. Lydia felt homesick.

“Cydonia is no game, nothing of the sort. It’s absolutely a real place,” Father insisted.

“Well, at least tell me what city is near Cydonia?”

“All cities are far from Cydonia. But of course their distance from it varies somewhat.”

“What on earth!”

“Sometimes Cairo is closer, sometimes Ulan Bator, sometimes Shanghai or Helsinki or Puerto Rico or Uumaja. But actually all the cities you know about are, by and large, the same distance from Cydonia.”

354

“How is that possible?”

355

“Well, you tell me.”

356

“I can’t!”

357

“But it is possible. The reason is that Cydonia is far, far away from here,” Father said. “It’s not on Earth at all.”

358

“Well, then, where is it?”

359

“It’s a region on Mars. A very remarkable place.”

360

“Remarkable in what way?”

361

“They say that there is a Sphinx in Cydonia on Mars. And pyramids too.”

362

“The Sphinx lives here in Egypt,” Lydia said. “You know that.”

363

“Some Sphinx, but it’s not the only Sphinx,” Father said. “There are Sphinxes in many places.”

364

“But no one has been to Mars. There aren’t even any Martians there. So how can they know that there is a Sphinx there?”

365

“From satellite photos,” Father said. “There is a cliff there that is like a statue. Like an immense human face, many hundreds of meters high and more than a kilometer wide. It looks up at the sky and the stars.”

366

Into Lydia’s eyes rose a strange star and a sober stone face. She raised her hand to her ear. From somewhere far away she heard slow, solemn music. Perhaps she had dozed for a while.

367

“People have started to call it a Sphinx, since it seems to have an Egyptian hairstyle,” Father said.

368

“Who made the stone face? People?”

369

“Some say it was time and wind and dust and water. At one time there was rain on Mars, but that was long ago. Perhaps time and wind and dust and water have carved one mountain into such a shape that it coincidentally resembles a human face, and other mountains into shapes that coincidentally resemble pyramids.”

370

“Can there be such a coincidence?”

371

“It sounds impossible. Just as impossible as a pyramid-shaped cloud floating in the sky. No one has ever seen such a thing, nor will anyone ever see it. But it’s no less impossible that pyramids and Sphinxes should have been specially built on Mars. So you have to choose between impossibilities. You often have to. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

372

“How old is the Cydonian Sphinx? Is it just as old as the Egyptian Sphinx?”

373

“Much older. It must be tens of millions of years old.”

374

“That Sphinx has seen a lot. It must be very wise.”

375

“Do you think so?” Father asked. “They say that inside the Sphinx of Giza there is a secret chamber and that in that chamber is all ancient knowledge, sealed in quartz. But even if that were true, the Egyptian Sphinx wouldn’t know anything. Only people know. And they don’t know very much.”

376

In the morning they returned to the Sphinx of Giza.

377

Time and wind and dust and water had carved the Sphinx of Giza as well. But before them, so had human hands. The Sphinx had a nose left in name only. Little by little it had crumbled into sandstorms. Even without a nose, the Sphinx was very beautiful.

378

“The Sphinx even used to have a beard,” Father said. “But it fell off centuries ago. Now part of it is kept in a museum.”

379

Lydia imagined the solitary beard in a museum’s glass case. Did the Sphinx miss it and want it back? Merchants’ stalls had been set up near the Sphinx, and herds of tourists wandered within reach of its paws. Cries echoed. Cameras clicked. The Sphinx gazed on all this clamor with its empty, tranquil eye sockets.

380

It was both an animal and a human, even a king. No one was as old as the Sphinx of Giza except for the Cydonian Sphinx.

381

“Could we go looking for that chamber you were talking about? The one that has all ancient knowledge in it?” Lydia asked.

382

“No, we can’t,” Father said. “Nobody knows where it is. And a special permit is needed for searching. And we aren’t archeologists. But if such a chamber exists, sooner or later archeologists will surely find it.”

383

“And then we can know what we don’t know now,” Lydia guessed. “Maybe we can even know how to awaken the dead.”

384

“No, that knowledge is not even there,” Father said and stroked her head. “Have you heard the riddle of the Sphinx? Not this Sphinx, but some other one. What is it that walks on four legs in the morning, two legs during the day and three legs in the evening?”

385

“Well, what is it?” Lydia asked. “I can’t guess. Is it some animal? Or a robot?”

386

But before Father could answer, Lydia saw something remarkable: traveling along the sandy desert was a gleaming metallic thing, droning to itself. It navigated among the noisy tourist herds, past the buses and merchants’ stalls.

387

“Father, what is that thing anyway?” Lydia asked.

388

They went closer. It was a machine that somewhat resembled a small backhoe. It moved forward on six thick rubber-tired wheels. But it had no driver.

389

“Look, there’s your robot,” Father said. “But it has six legs.”

390

The robot moved steadily but not in a straight line. It was able to go around obstacles. From time to time it would stop and dig in the dry sand with its bucket.

391

“What on earth is it doing?” Lydia asked. “And how does it know how to go around obstacles?”

“I think it’s searching in the sand for things the tourists have lost-watches, money, cameras,” Father explained. “It has sensors and a camera. It’s probably a special kind of metal detector. It puts the things it finds into a storage compartment and returns to the hotel at night.”

The robot was now traveling in the shadow of the Sphinx. Soon it passed the Sphinx and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

“It looks just as though it understood what it was doing,” Lydia said thoughtfully.

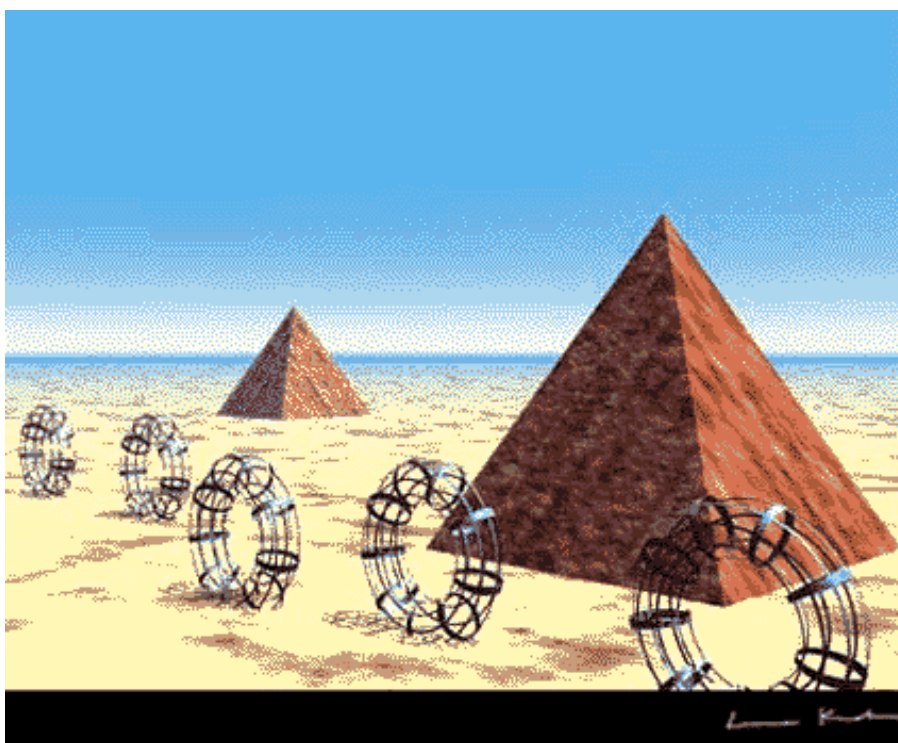
“It only looks that way,” Father said. “Even we don’t always know what we are doing. The robot is the Sphinx of this millennium. We humans made the Sphinx and the robot. And now we look at them in wonderment. One is too old for us and the other too young. And both of them ask questions that we can’t answer.”

“I didn’t hear either of them asking any questions, but if I had to choose, I’d certainly choose the Sphinx,” Lydia said.

When they got on the bus that was taking the tourists back to the hotel, Lydia looked back over her shoulder once more at the Sphinx. Above it, high in the hot southern light, floated a marvelously shaped cloud.

“Look, Father,” Lydia said. “You claimed that no one had ever seen a pyramid-shaped cloud.”

But when Lydia glanced at the clouds again, they had already had time to change so that she and her father saw only slanting cloud towers and rapidly disintegrating cities.



Hale Bopp's Companion



“Do you remember that comet that we saw with Dr. Siirak’s telescope?” Father asked.

Of course Lydia remembered it. Using her best crayons, she was drawing Sphinxes and pyramids. She also drew in the picture a little door, which in fact she hadn’t seen. It was between the Sphinx’s paws and led to the chamber where all ancient knowledge was kept.

“Now another comet is on its way to the solar system. They come and go, but this comet is different from the others,” Father said.

“Different how?” Lydia asked, selecting a blue crayon. She colored the door blue and also drew a doorbell on it.

“Not in itself, but it has a companion,” Father said. “A huge companion. It is four times the size of Earth.”

Lydia remembered the Prophet and began to feel scared. “Will it crash into the earth?” she asked. “Or will both of them?”

“I doubt it,” Father said.

“But can’t we be sure?”

“How can we?”

Now this didn’t greatly comfort Lydia. “Can you see it through a telescope?”

“Some have seen it,” Father said. “Otherwise we would know nothing about it. Photographs have been taken of it. But it’s a strange object. Sometimes it can be seen, sometimes not. It isn’t always there. And when it shows, it appears to cast its own light.”

“What does that mean? Can it be a sun?”

“Many researchers do claim that it’s a star and that the photographs have been wrongly interpreted. But a star would always be visible. The sun doesn’t wander here and there, as you know.”

“But we don’t see it at night,” Lydia said.

“No, not our own. At night we see only other suns.”

“Well, what is it, then, if it isn’t a star?”

“Other people claim that it’s some kind of vehicle.”

Now Lydia left off coloring altogether. “That can’t be true, can it?” she said. “Why couldn’t it be?”

“Because such a vehicle doesn’t exist.”

“Not here,” Father said. “But space is very large. From what we have seen we can’t conclude much of anything. How can we know what is impossible and what isn’t?”

“You believe those other people, don’t you?” Lydia asked. “You always believe people who say that impossible things are possible.”

“Preferably so,” said Father, laughing.

“But if it’s a vehicle, is someone driving it?”

“Maybe we’ll find out in March.”

“What’s happening in March?”

“Then we can see it with the naked eye. Why shouldn’t there be just as much life out there as on Earth? Or it could also be some kind of robot. There are many possibilities. Maybe it’s being remotely controlled.”

“From some other solar system?”

“Possibly.”

“Why is it coming here?”

“Maybe it isn’t really coming here at all. Maybe it’s not the least bit interested in us. It is just passing by us and has business somewhere else altogether, much farther away. It just happens to be traveling by way of this remote region.”

“Then,” Lydia said, “I’m going up to some high place. I might even climb up on the roof of a skyscraper. And then I’ll wave to them. Just so they know that we exist too.”

“Do that,” said Father.



What the Looking Glass Doesn't Tell

435

436



When Lydia was very small, she used to take her naps on a sofa that had a mirror at its foot. Before falling asleep she would often see lively beings with large heads peering at her from the mirror. They didn't look like people or any other animal that Lydia knew of. They winked at her and spoke a language that she never heard anywhere else. Yet Lydia understood it. When she got a little bigger, they disappeared and never came back again. She also forgot what it was they had said to her.

437

But Lydia liked to play with mirrors. Perhaps it was because of those very beings. In the beginning she had looked at her own eyes not knowing that they were hers. Later she would go from room to room holding a mirror. She looked only into the mirror, not ahead, and tried not to bump into things. She thought that was fun.

438

When the other children were playing ball out in the field, Lydia went outside alone, taking along a little hand mirror. She wandered along the streets and in the parks gazing into her mirror at the sky, the clouds, chimneys and tree branches. That way they looked much more interesting than if she had seen them directly.

439

The world that she saw in the mirror was exactly the same as the world that the mirror reflected. Yet, it was not the same. A change took place on the surface of the mirror that changed left to right and right to left. She wouldn't have been able to place the house or hand or tree that she saw in the mirror onto the original house or hand or tree.

440

When Lydia turned 15, she asked for a large mirror as her birthday present. Her father ordered one for her. It had a handle twenty meters long and a sturdy base. They sank the mirror into the sea in such a way that Lydia was able to raise, lower, and turn the mirror and control its angle manually from the beach.

441

Lydia sat on the beach and aimed her mirror in different directions. She looked into the mirror at the mirror waves and the clouds in the mirror sky. On cloudless nights the stars shone into her mirror from light years away. On those few occasions when the weather was calm-calm as a mirror-she turned the mirror toward the ocean's surface so that the two mirrors reflected each other reflecting each other's depths. And whichever mirror she looked at, they both showed the same infinity.

442

If, on such a night, there was also a full moon, she aimed the clean mirror right at the moon's reflection. The moon mirrored the sun and the sea mirrored the moon, and in her own mirror there glowed the reflection of the reflection of an invisible star and even her eyes were full of light. It was a night whose name was Mirror-bright.

443

Sulevi too came to sit on the beach.

444

Lydia said to him, "Do you know what? I sometimes think the world you see in the mirror is just as real and original as the world on this side of the mirror. We think everything on the other

side of the mirror is just an imitation. But who knows, over there they may be thinking the same thing about us!”

445

“You can’t really believe that,” Sulevi said.

446

“Why not?” said Lydia. “Whenever I look in the mirror I can see the other Lydia looking into her mirror at this side. Maybe she too thinks our world is a reflection of their world and that of the two of us she’s the real and original Lydia.”

447

“Mirrors are only mirrors,” Sulevi said. “Forget them. They don’t have anything secret in them.”

448

“I think,” Lydia said seriously, “that every mirror is a gate to another world. But how can I convince the mirror’s Lydia that I too, on this side of the mirror, am real and not just her reflection? Because she always puts the mirror down exactly when I do. And then she can’t see me or this world any more. I disappear as if I had never existed at all.”

449

“Let her think what she wants,” Sulevi said. “To me only you are the real and original Lydia. And you’ll never disappear from me-never.”

450

I am her mirror and she is mine, Lydia thought.

451

And the Lydias on either side of the mirror thought about what is true and what is not and how you can tell one from the other.

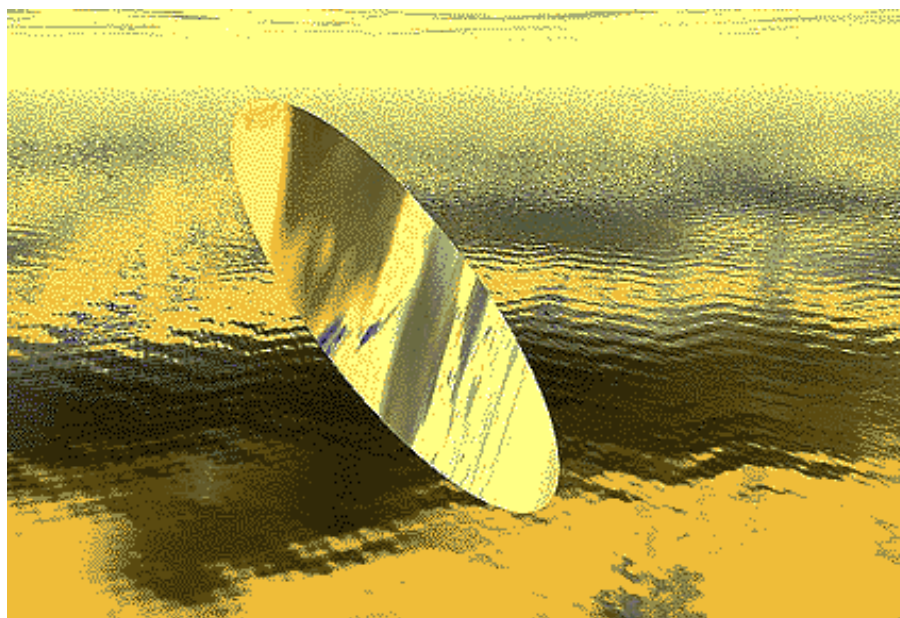
452

“Oh, Lydia, forget the mirror and think about me,” Sulevi said. “The mirror can’t tell you what I can.”

453

“Tell me,” said Lydia, and forgot the mirror.

454



Sulevi's Eyes

455

456



Every morning Sulevi would eat his breakfast and read the daily paper. And today again the paper had arrived and his breakfast was ready: porridge and coffee and orange juice. That day the newspaper contained discussions of tax renewals and low-pressure areas and some hammer-thrower's Achilles tendon.

457

But when Sulevi glanced up from his paper to rest his eyes a bit, everything his eyes fell on looked remarkably different from before. He looked at his own right hand, which was gripping the cereal spoon. It looked entirely different from what it had been, very complicated, as though his fleshly hand had numberless shadow hands.

458

Sulevi was frightened. He felt his right hand with his left, but it felt the same as always. It just looked different. Actually, both hands looked different. But nothing had happened to them. In that case, something had happened to his eyes. They didn't hurt, but they had changed.

459

It was so early on that autumn morning that the sun had not yet risen. Sulevi lived on the top floor, and from his kitchen window he could see a grand highway. When he looked at the cars' headlights, they were not at all distinct points of light. They were glowing, criss-crossing ribbons, as though they had been photographed using a time exposure.

460

Sulevi went back to bed and pulled the covers up over his head. Maybe he hadn't slept enough. He hoped that a little more rest would restore his eyes to their previous state of health. But when he opened them again, the trouble was still there.

461

Sulevi went out. The day was already long gone. On the athletic field across the street some boys were kicking around a ball. Sulevi guessed that it was a soccer ball, although it didn't look anything like a ball. It looked like an enormously long strand of macaroni that was tying intricate knots.

462

The boys themselves looked even stranger. They too looked like living ribbons, while at the same time preserving something of a human aspect.

463

Sulevi was frightened by what he saw. This kind of thing wasn't entirely normal, that he knew. Best to go see the doctor. He had to walk groping and feeling his way, since he had not yet become accustomed to his new eyes. But he managed to find the eye clinic.

464

"And was there some problem?" the eye doctor asked.

465

And Sulevi described all his symptoms to the eye doctor, and the doctor peered into his eyes with a small light and measured their pressure and asked him to read the letter E that was displayed in different directions on the wall chart.

466

"What is it, doctor?" Sulevi asked. "What's wrong with my eyes?"

467

"There is nothing wrong with your eyes," the doctor said. "Not so far as I can tell. I don't think that it actually has to do with your eyes. The problem is deeper, far deeper. Look, we don't see

with our eyes alone. We see with our whole being, so to speak. With our brains. Our memory. Our feelings.”

“But then what is wrong with me? As a person?” Sulevi asked. “And is it serious?”

“In reality you are not ill. This won’t kill you. And just the same it is serious, in a way. But as to what has caused it, well, I can’t say. The fact is, you have started to see time.”

“I beg your pardon?” Sulevi said.

“That’s right, you are seeing more dimensions than other people do. Nothing more unusual than that,” the eye doctor said.

“And isn’t that unusual?” Sulevi said.

“Of course it is rather strange,” the doctor agreed. “This has never happened before in my practice.”

“Is it possible to get rid of it somehow?” Sulevi asked. “I really wouldn’t care to see time. That is, when no one else sees it. It makes me feel somehow eccentric, surely you understand, Doctor. Perhaps you might find some suitable eye drops-”

“Such medicines I don’t have. No one has them,” the doctor said. “You must make an effort to adjust. It could have been something worse, much worse. But if you’d like a second opinion from another expert- Though I don’t think an expert is to be found for your condition.”

“But surely surgery would help,” Sulevi said. “Maybe you could remove that part of the eye that is seeing time.”

“Surgery-nooo, I don’t want to get into that,” the doctor answered. “Because the problem is not with your eyes, as I said. It is much deeper, if indeed it is a problem at all. I would not call it a problem. And I’m sure it could not be cut out. I would say that it is just a new peculiarity. It’s the way you look at the world. Accept it; that will make things a little easier for you. You might be proud of it. That’s my advice. You see more than others do; that’s surely special. Unique!”

Sulevi listened in silence. But he wasn’t proud. Rather, he was distressed. Whether the thing was a defect or a distinction, he wanted it out.

“Of course it might correct itself,” the eye doctor consoled him. “Be patient. Maybe you’re just overstressed. Give yourself time to adjust. But I would very much like to write about your condition in some prestigious scientific journal.”

“Fine with me,” Sulevi said. He thanked the doctor and paid.

Sulevi returned home with his new special distinction. The eye doctor wrote an article about Sulevi in a prestigious scientific journal, which attracted some attention. He sent Sulevi a free copy of it. It had a picture of Sulevi’s eyes, and they looked just like anyone else’s eyes. There was no evidence that he looked at the world in a different way from anyone else.

Sulevi went on living, patiently awaiting the time when his eyes would return to their former state. But time passed, and he watched it passing, but his eyes didn’t return. And gradually he stopped waiting. He understood that once someone has seen time, he will always see it.

Everything that moved and everything that aged left their tracks in the world, and Sulevi saw those tracks. But nothing stayed just as it had been. He looked at clouds and saw their earlier

stages. At night he followed the light-year voyages of the stars and the moon's orbit that arched over the sky. He eyed himself in the mirror, and the mirror was full of eyes-tired and bright, tearful and cheerful and lonely eyes.

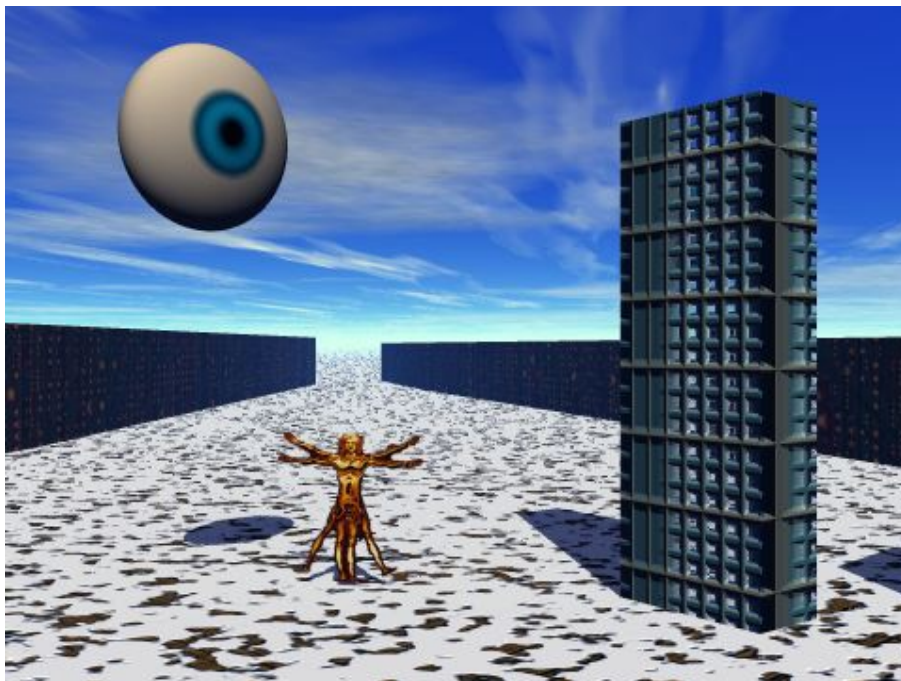
Sulevi looked at people coming toward him on the street. They were all very complicated. In every one of them there were many, many Is, and yet they were one and only. It was perplexing. It tired Sulevi. Through today's faces Sulevi saw their earlier forms, back to youth and childhood.

Once Sulevi even saw Lydia on the street, far off. At first he didn't realize that it was Lydia. And when at last he did recognize her, he noticed that Lydia did not remember him. But in the forgetfulness of Lydia's eyes he saw the days of their shared childhood.

484

485

486





Leena Krohn

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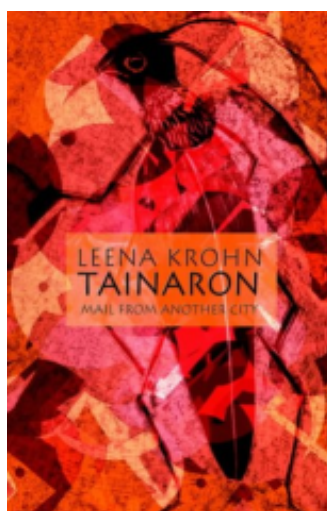
Leena Krohn's readers have access to a number of her writings and works via the World Wide Web where her home page is located at <http://www.kaapeli.fi/krohn/>

Sphinx or Robot



Sphinx or Robot

495



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