



# Carriers of Seeds

by Scott Schroder

April 27, 2013

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“Whose are these bones strewn about you, old man? They are brittle from thirst, like dead thistles crumbling in the dry hills, the ground having long since drunk the water from them. They languish under these rainless red skies, waiting to wither to dust, dust which will itself wither to the memory of dust. Why do you hoard these bones as if they were treasure?”

Tracing idle patterns in the dirt with a brittle twig, the old man says, with slow finality, “What is precious to you I regard as garbage.”

He speaks with some effort; he is so intrigued by his meaningless inscriptions that the distraction of speech is a burden.

Further along in our journey there are no more bones but other, equally haphazard rubble, a meaningless jumble of discarded artifacts from lives lived long ago in far off places, bereft of context or interrelation. A World War One photo of a German soldier mingles freely with shards of pottery crafted thousands of years previous on the Anatolian Plateau. A wooden Siberian mask hangs from a bicycle's handlebar, a faded advertisement for a beauty product withering on the ground below.

This is no ruin. These things never had a place here. No life ever united them. We have reached a *terra incognita*, a land whose laws are not written in the same book as those of the land from which we came. Here it is wrong even to speak of laws. According to no pattern or purpose, these things were gathered and littered across these hills by the invisible arms of whatever crazed demiurge

shaped them.

We are the first people to ever set foot on this ground, and yet someone has left us a sign, something unmistakably placed among the dry grass and mute pebbles as a personal warning. It is a framed picture, slightly obscured by cracks in its semi-transparent glass, of the members of our expedition drowning in the river to which this path leads.

“What is this?” someone asks.

“It is our fate,” another replies.

It is suggested, without conviction, that we turn back, but we know we cannot.

“Even though we have yet to drown,” one of us says, “this picture represents something that has already happened. If we continue, we only suffer the peril of death—if we turn back, we will force the universe to contradict itself, and forcing such a contradiction, we risk destroying all creation. We risk negating existence.”

Without another word, the light fading, we file past the picture toward the river.

We are the first people ever to venture into this land, and yet we are walking on a path. How can this be? How is it that the ground is so weary, as if from enduring the weight of many feet like our own for centuries, if it is untrodden ground?

From behind me, someone says, “This path contradicts itself, and yet it remains.” There is

bitterness in her voice, perhaps even envy.

And I reply, "The path is created by the fact of our taking it, just as the picture of us drowning is created by the fact that we will drown. Here the final consequence of a sequence of events is the means by which that very sequence is initiated."

Someone in front of me—I am not certain who, as my eyes are fixed on the ground—says, "Had we not recognized our own faces in the picture, we would not be consigned to the fate it represents."

"It's true," says another, and hearing her I realize that, although we have been traveling together for many days, everyone is taking on an unfamiliar quality. "Perhaps we could have turned back without consequence if we did not *know* that we can not turn back. But we have contaminated our fate with awareness of it, and this awareness pollutes us with fear. The risks are terrible. We are presented with an insoluble dilemma."

"There is no dilemma," I say. "We simply must keep walking."

"Must we?" the man behind me says. "Would a single impossible bird negate the sky?"

In indirect reply, someone far away from me, perhaps the foremost of our party, says ruefully, "It must have been fated that we would have this very conversation about fate."

The weight of his words settles into us and we fall silent as the path begins to descend sharply. We walk more and more slowly, increasingly aware that even the subtlest deviation from our fated course, a single slightly misplaced step, portends catastrophe. Our movements take on an agonizing, infinite precision. We can no longer speak for fear it will prove to be a fatal distraction from our inconceivable task.

A warbler cries out from an oak above us, its shrill notes rising in pitch and intensity toward their decisive crescendo. Its call has only ever signified for me the forest's gentlest aspects, but now it seems to be giving voice to our anguished desperation, acting as a surrogate for we who wish to cry out but cannot. I can sense my cohorts, who have become faceless to me in the exhausting tedium of our march, sharing this thought with me.

Weep for us, little bird, lift up our suffering to the sky with your delicate song.

Ceanothus bushes border the path, behind them the trunks of trees declining into the deeper hues of the evening's half-light. Crickets sing. The red streak on the horizon, suffused with the light of the dwindling sun, has the appearance of an injury in the sky, the color of blood. So too does the black band on the warbler's throat, as if its throat has been cut. So too does the bird itself, its flight from the branch overhead injuring the emptiness of the sky, scarring nothingness.

Later on in the night, when the crickets have fallen silent, a predator approaches. We have all taken on the likeness of statues. Each footstep requires infinite caution and consumes an infinite duration. We do not look up. It does not know how to hunt us; we are not dead but do not move like the living because we are frozen in time. Its skin touches the skin of one of us, who makes no response. Then, so occupied are we, the threat is forgotten. At some point much later I am fleetingly aware that the creature is gone and we all still live.

Morning comes with the sound of rushing water growing closer. We have entered a fertile land. I imagine in my sleepless delirium that it is we who have brought, with our heroic vigilance, the rain. Each footstep takes an hour but the hours are no longer an anguish. Our focus is impeccable and all-consuming and our infinitesimal progress is no longer a torment; on the contrary, this effort is the only form of existence we can conceive of.

When the sun is high in the sky, I take my first step into the water. I recall some fragment of Heraclitus, something about never being able to step into the same river twice, whose vague meaning seemed at the time like it could possibly be profound but was also possibly trivial.

Waist deep, I become aware, with unequivocal certainty, that what we are doing is far more than merely refraining from an act of destruction. We are creating something. I realize that I have been clutching for this entire journey a handful of seeds, and now I feel the prodigious potential they contain. Chest deep in the river, my legs straining against the current, my foot planted precariously on that slick riverbed rock it was always fated to cling to, I cast my seeds onto the far shore.

Though we drown in the river, we cross the river.

I yield to the current. When my head is submerged beneath the water, my all-consuming thoughts of fate and our perilous effort to adhere to it are negated entirely, replaced by a single unifying truth: I know nothing but this beautiful sound.