

THE STONE BOATMEN

by Sarah Tolmie

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“When all tresores arn tried, treuthe is the beste”
— William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*

“If a lion could speak, we could not understand him.”
— Ludwig Wittgenstein

For Lucy and Will

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THE ANCESTOR'S TALE

It took the senior technician three days to die. Of course it wasn't dying exactly; his life was not dissipating, but flowing from one thing to another. From the beginning he experienced weird sensations, flashes, distortions; he felt wings growing out of his back, like a creature of myth. He had started the process in the city, by himself in the lab. It didn't have to be there; it wasn't a technical process; he had just wanted to make sure he was alone, and he knew the lab would be deserted because the project was over. It was impossible that anyone would believe him, anyway, but he wanted to avoid embarrassing questions.

He had been watching the birds for some time. He would walk out of the hum and noise of the city and into the woods on the days that he wasn't working, into the broad silence of the world that had been there before the empire. He was convinced that this world, indeed the whole world, empire and all, would disappear unless he did what he was about to do. At times he could scarcely believe it, that he had come to this, that his scientific ascendancy, his high office, his years of training, sufficed only to let him see the problem, and that none of it would suffice to solve it. He had spent the previous two years systematically undoing his own work, to the mystification of many, resigning from councils, suppressing his papers, refusing to direct new projects; he had also destroyed, though no one yet knew of it, many machines that he himself had built, even though some of them were for saving people. He was wracked with guilt each time he did this, but he told himself desperately that he did it in order to save yet more people—all the people, and the animals, and the birds, too, all of whom stood on the brink of a precipice that only he was able to see.

By the second day Harel was having trouble telling who he was, or where he was; he found it difficult to hold objects, as their size and weight seemed to change in his hands. His ability to speak came and went. Sometimes he was sure he was in his suite in the palace of government, but trees seemed to be growing over his head and the light was golden and filtered instead of white. His whole habit of mind compelled him to observe these effects, to keep precise records, but he knew that soon enough there would be no one to read them. That was the point of his transformation, after all, he thought hazily, waveringly, at the outside edge of language: that there should be no more men like himself.

On the third day, led by some magnetic force that operated on his whole body, he was pulled into the forest, to a clearing near the colony of the golden birds. He felt as if he were bleeding, but it was not his blood that was leaching away, spreading into the ground where he had collapsed, but his mind. His consciousness lay in a thin film all over his skin, touching the leaves and the grasses, coming into contact with everything. He could not talk. He could not move. Finally the bird came, beating his golden wings. Harel looked at the bird; the bird looked at him; these events merged so that he could no longer tell the difference. He was big and small; his heart beat slow and fast; his body breathed and ceased. The bird rose screaming.

BOOK ONE

THE BOOK OF THE NEW CEREMONIES



CHAPTER ONE

NEREL/*NERELKHO*

The prince with no name gazed down from his tower at the stone boatmen in the harbor. His father had stripped his name from him just before his accession, and the statues he stared at so stonily below had stolen his face. Now he was Nerel: no one. He was waiting to choose his double for the feast of the Perihelion. In a moment the majordomo would enter, heading a solemn procession of merchants' sons vying for the honor of being the prince's *nerelkho*—as if he needed another ghost of himself, there being a hundred and four of them sailing eternally out of the harbor, frozen in their marble boats. He glowered down at them, his loveless stone brothers.

He turned from the window when he heard boots on the stairs. Normally on these occasions anywhere from four to six young men were found who bore some slight resemblance to the prince. It was considered lucky to be *nerelkho*; over the years, many had gone on to become mayors and other city officers. Now instead of the hissing shuffle of many feet winding up the long staircase, he heard one man come bounding up.

His breathless majordomo burst through the dark doorway. "Sire," the usually reserved man said in a kind of whispered shout, clasping the prince's hand to his forehead with trembling fingers. "You will not believe what I have found." He called down into the black well behind him: "Come."

Echoing footfalls rang in the hollow of the stairwell. Nerel was aware as never before of living in the stone throat of the tower, dwelling in the huge concave body of the building like a parasite—or, as he thought briefly of the endless ceremonies of renewal over which he presided, like some tiny, roving organ enacting repairs. His rare and acute anticipation made him feel sud-

denly small, the merest particle of the ancestors' vast monument of stone, no longer its master. The footsteps stopped. From the shadowed entrance, into the light, stepped one of the boatmen. The prince gasped. He felt, for the first time, the same shock that other people felt on seeing his own person: he saw a living statue.

Turning to the majordomo, his hands fluttering open in a gesture of helpless inquiry, he said "Where—?" but was cut off as the young man hurried toward him. The youth with the face of the stone boatmen—Nerel's face—seized the prince's hand and bowed over it as the majordomo had done. Normally he would have snatched his hand away and called for a warding, as was his duty, since only members of his household were permitted to touch him. But that would have been like shunning his own image in the mirror. So, staring into the shocked eyes of his majordomo over the man's bowed head, he did nothing. His household officer, a stickler for protocol, would normally have been about the warding with fullest rites of water and smoke and red thread, but he seemed likewise stunned.

Both prince and servant were overthrown by the appearance of this prodigy—a man who clearly knew nothing about life in the palace, not even its most elementary rules. Nerel recovered first. Seizing the initiative as the young man rose from his bow, Nerel touched him lightly on the brow with his open palm, reversing the hand that the youth had held—the prince touching, not touched—reclaiming his authority and offering the propitiation of order restored. The young man lifted his eyes.

"Who are you?" asked Nerel softly, "How can we not have seen you before? You belong to no guild?" He knew most of the guildsmen by sight, as their ranks were annually confirmed in the palace.

"Fisherfolk have no guild," replied the young man, and one piece of the puzzle that he represented fell into place. Nerel had not, to his knowledge, ever met one of the fisherfolk. "My name is Azul, son of the chief of the fishing fleet, a man you will not have heard of, Sire. I have lived here all my life but never been near the palace before today. Yourself, Sire, I have seen before, at the Perihelion, although I did not know which was you and which the

nerelkho. But that was only because I was so far away. This year, if I am to be *nerelkho*, as your officer says, then surely no one will know at all!” He stared solemnly into the prince’s face—and then suddenly, irrepressibly, grinned.

Nerel met his eyes and felt a new, even greater shock: one not of recognition, but of being recognized. Living as he did behind the boatmen’s face, under the nameless name of the prince, Nerel often felt that he was invisible. But Azul *saw* him. Perhaps, accustomed as he already was to seeing the boatmen’s face in his own, he was able to look right through it, straight to the man. He smiled into the prince’s eyes with an easy familiarity, as no one had done since his parents had died. Nerel wondered if he read his lost name there, so immediately did Azul seem to know him. “Azul,” he stammered. “*Azul*, that is no name. Or, not a usual one—a color-word, is it not? You have no other?”

“It is the fisherfolk’s word for the sea. They prefer not to name it directly—just by its color, you know? I had another name before, but no one uses it anymore, not since I came of age and people saw how much I looked like...” He shrugged, gesturing toward the window. “We do not speak of it, but I believe I was named again after the boatmen’s element, as a warding.”

Nerel remembered the whispering at court during his adolescence, when his freakish resemblance to the boatmen had become apparent. It was ritual to say that the stone boatmen—the ancestors—looked like the prince, their chief descendant, but it had never before been so true. His father’s face had not really resembled the face of the stone boatmen.

But Nerel took after his mother, a woman of massive repose with a trick of staring into the middle distance that made her look like the figures on the votive bronzes that were dipped into the harbor every spring on Ebb Day. Hers was a statuesque family. Her massy frame had much longer withstood the influenza that five years before had swiftly carried off his father. The death toll in the palace had been high, over fifty people in the end. His mother’s strength combined with his own youth had allowed the heir to survive. Her blood in Nerel had also produced, in her only

son, a face that was so much like the boatmen's it was almost a replica. By the time of his accession the uneasy whispering had settled into a general rumor, supported by the sage nods of the court ceremonist, that the young prince who so favored the ancestors would have a fortunate reign, despite its dark beginning.

Nerel understood at once that what was lucky in a prince was unlucky in a fisherman. He marveled that he and Azul were alike even in this, their birth names taken from them. He stared back at Azul, trying to see the missing name in his eyes, and caught a vanishing trace of a familiar anger and bafflement. His heart surged, and he said to Azul, "I was born under another name also. But now I am only Nerel the prince."

The majordomo glanced sidelong at him, startled. In the features of Azul he detected a hitherto unknown sympathy, the sense of a shared secret.

"And do you," asked the prince eagerly, "consent to be *nerelkho*?"

"I consent."

"Then bow—the short bow," came the hectoring voice of the majordomo behind Azul. He was evidently returning to his duties with the zeal of one who had been neglecting them. Azul, glancing at the majordomo, bowed. So did Nerel. As the two young men straightened up, their noses almost touching (the majordomo, watching from the side, saw the same profile repeated and felt giddy), Nerel said formally: "I have seen that which is hidden, the part that is given to no one to see." Thus he accepted the offering of the *nerelkho*—the only offering in the long list that the prince knew in which no other ceremonial object figured, for the offering of the *nerelkho* is himself. Azul looked briefly nonplussed. It is hard to be the object of a ritual about which you know nothing.

Yet to this empty and officious formula, as the prince thought it, Azul had a response of his own, unprompted, quick, and subtle: smiling faintly, he covered his eyes with both hands. The majordomo looked at once confused and scandalized. Nerel understood the gesture instantly; he had seen it before. Two old women, and once a young woman with a baby, had covered their eyes before him in the street the previous year. It was the sign made by the

people in the winter offering to the boatmen, a city ritual that he recalled vividly from childhood, when he had stared down at the beach from his room, which faced west. His father had held him up to the window until he was tall enough to see out past the sill; he could still feel his father's warm hands on his cold legs. He remembered the gathered people in their heavy clothes setting their small boats on the water, covering their eyes as soon as they had released the little craft, turning their backs on the tiny waxen lights as the boats floated out among the marble shadows at mid-winter dusk, running for the road that topped the beach. Not until the foot of every man, woman, and child was off the pebbly sand would they turn to watch. It was said that if you kept your eyes on one light until it was extinguished, you could make a wish on it. Nerel had never been clear as to whether this was part of the ritual or just some childish superstition. He could not remember where he had learned it. The city rituals were not contained in the palace books. He had strained his eyes to follow the bobbing lights, though he was always too far away and wasted many wishes. Every year he had watched that surging line of heads run up the beach, matching the pace of the fragile sparks as they were carried away by the tide, a dark wave and a light wave parting at the shoreline. As he grew older he wondered more and more what the people wished for when they got to the road and whether their wishes came true. All this came back to him in a flash at the sight of Azul's covered eyes.

Nerel was shaken. For him, it was rare that one ritual spoke to another; they were separate in his mind. The fisherman's casual ability to link them together was foreign to him. It was as if Azul spoke another language.

Azul, uncovering his face, peered at the prince sharply. As his fingers parted to reveal his blue eyes, Nerel felt their gaze hit him as if on new skin. He felt that he had changed drastically in moments, old inner certitudes breaking up inside him. Azul seemed to register a difference. He tried to gather his fragmented thoughts: "Go with the majordomo; he will instruct you. We have three days before Perihelion, and there are palace rituals to be performed

before the ceremony itself. It is all written in a huge book that we have in the library—we consult it every year, even the master of ceremony, as there is so much to remember.” Azul did not look pleased at the prospect of spending three days in the condescending company of the majordomo (Nerel had a wry vision of that paragon of formality arriving in a street of fisherfolk hovels), so the prince continued: “I can never recall it all myself, but I know it begins with a cleansing bath and a breakfast featuring hare. I will meet you later in the morning for the presentation.” Azul relaxed visibly. He nodded, turned on his heel, and without bowing or offering any other sign of leave-taking, rapidly descended the stairs. To Nerel, accustomed to the slow theater of court exits, it was as if Azul had suddenly dropped through the floor. The majordomo lingered by the stairwell, hoping for acknowledgment.

“How did you find him?” asked Nerel abruptly.

“A rumor reached me in the market, about a man who resembled the boatmen, what a stir he had caused among the fisherfolk. You know how they keep to themselves, so I thought he must be quite remarkable for such news to get abroad. He lives in what passes for a fine house down west of the water, among those wretched dwellings there. His father is a sort of chieftain among them. Is he not—” the majordomo hesitated—“remarkable?”

“Remarkable? Yes. I doubt that there will ever have been a Perihelion like this one, not in a thousand years. . . . You have done well.” The majordomo flushed slightly and gave a short, stiff bow. Nerel waved him absently away. His gaze was drawn back to the window, back to the boatmen, his stone kin—his, and Azul’s. For a long time he had felt that the boatmen were inimical, diminishing him in their identical multitude. Yet he had not felt the same about Azul’s living face. Knowing that he was not the only one who bore the weird imprint of the boatmen lifted a burden from his heart; he was not alone in this fate or bond or chance likeness, whatever it was. Not the only one from whom the boatmen had stolen his name. Lately he had felt their lifeless weight in everything, in everyone; a growing coldness as if the world were turning to stone around him. Now when he looked down on their

inert figures sailing away to the horizon he saw, all around them, the changing play of water.

His restless mind ran over the list of rites that would now occupy him, many more than would occupy the *nerelkho*, including one that did not appear in the book of the palace ceremonies. It was one that always struck him as macabre, and it would have to be attended to that night, after dusk had fallen and Azul had peacefully eaten his dinner in the great hall and retired to the prince's bedchamber.

Nerel corrected himself: although it was likely to be the best meal Azul would ever have eaten, it would not be peaceful at all for a man of the fisherfolk surrounded by courtiers. All had uncomfortable duties at the Perihelion. The servants carrying the heavy tub of Azul's bathwater with its grit and clippings down to the harbor were performing a task no less necessary to the whole, the book of ceremonies assured him. Necessary to the whole of what? the prince wondered: of some great series of ritual correspondences the ancestors had imagined for this day, for this feast, for the whole calendar, the world? To what end? Sometimes Nerel tried to picture what these links might be, their order and power and scope, but his mind would get lost in spiraling immensities.



The prince's own Perihelion duties were not so much arduous as arcane. For most public purposes, the *nerelkho* would be the prince for the next three days—presiding over meals and palace audiences, dancing at an afternoon ball arranged by the merchants' guild—while the prince-that-was took care of a multitude of small rituals hidden from the public eye. Nerel remembered himself as a boy, reading endless volumes on protocol and heraldry and the language of flowers, wearing out his elbows on the wooden table of the library as he tried to decipher dance notation; the majordomo was probably digging out those volumes even now.

Nerel suddenly wondered if Azul could read. What call would a fisherfolk man have for reading? Who did he have who might help him? There was no one except the royal schoolmaster, now el-

derly and deaf. And, the crucial thought came to him with a pang, what if Azul couldn't swim? Surely the son of a fisherfolk chieftain could swim. The drowning of a *nerelkho* would be a terrible omen. For himself he felt no fear; he had been swimming practically from birth. It is a skill all princes learn, because of the Perihelion. He glanced down again at the distant boatmen, anchored fast on their marble pillars, and felt a flash of his old resentment: *they* need not fear drowning, he thought. But I would rather one of them foundered than that any subject of mine should die in their service. He could not recall ever having thought this before.

He turned his back on the boatmen and walked into the adjoining chamber, facing away from the harbor and toward the town, where he drew the heavy blinds and lit the first of the ceremonial candles. These came from a special supply made every year according to an ancient recipe; a candle only a hand's-breadth long would burn for six hours with a strange blue flame. The secret of their making was recorded in the book of ceremonies, although their use was not. Their use, indeed, was the object of much speculation among the candle-makers, the majordomo, and the master of ceremony. They had concluded that the prince burned them in some private meditation, as no trace of them had been found in the public ceremonies.

Nerel placed the candles in the hidden wells and lit them, noting the time on the clock nearby; he would return in six hours to renew them. He opened the window slightly, as his father had always reminded him to do, for the fumes of these candles were strong and in a closed room would leave one breathless. He placed the warding of fine red thread across the door, leaving the glimmering dimness of the room behind him, and went down to breakfast and his duties of the morning.

After the series of meetings that took place this morning every year in the presence of the recorder, in which the prince formally delegated the powers of the palace to the majordomo, of the city and gates to the master at arms, of royal justice to the peace warden, and named his heir (childless, it was his first cousin, a quiet man ten years his senior, renowned as a hunter), it was time for

the presentation. Nerel, always feeling after this particular morning's events that he had just presided over his own death, usually attended this ceremony in a state of subdued depression. Normally he felt empty, as if he himself were the *nerelkho* and his ghost the real prince: he supposed this was the point. Unlike many ceremonies that he performed, this one usually made itself true, to his own mind at least: it drained the power from him and poured it into the *nerelkho*, a man lively and fresh to the ritual, usually in a state of wild excitement, where Nerel was dull and dead from its repetition. Not so today. Nothing was dull about this Perihelion; it seemed to him that the very air crackled around him. The ceremony would work in quite another way today.

Nerel stood quietly in his suit of sea blue with gold thread, screened from the waiting crowd of courtiers by the majordomo and the master of ceremonies, waiting near the floor mark for the sun to hit noon. The patch of light on the floor cast by the round skylight above brightened and dimmed as clouds passed over and slowly centered itself on the golden disc embossed into the dark marble. Hot light flared from it in the dim coolness of the hall. The master of ceremonies silently touched Nerel's hand, and Nerel stepped past him onto the solar mark, his feet making a slight ringing just discernible to his ear. At the same time, from behind the warden and the recorder, stepped the *nerelkho* Azul, identical in his suit of sea blue and gold, placing his feet carefully on the disc. Back to back he stood with the prince, their matched arms outstretched. A rushing whisper passed through the hall like a soft wave striking the beach. A dead silence fell, and in that silence, unbroken by the usual coughs and mutterings, Nerel and Azul performed three shuffling sun-wise rotations. As his light-filled gaze slowly passed over the crowd, Nerel saw shock on the faces hanging like pale lanterns in the gloom. He felt their awe deep within himself, as behind him he felt the back of Azul, his shoulder blades pressing exactly into his own, the points of their skulls touching, the backs of their hands meeting precisely, to the same finger lengths. He felt the quivering tension in his neck and the tiny movements of his hamstrings as he moved his feet, as if

they were one body. It seemed to him that everyone in the hall felt at the same time, the same thing. Not only was he joined to Azul, but both of them to the crowd; they were all one being.

In their three rotations, it seemed possible that three days had passed, which as the master of ceremonies had explained was the meaning of the rite, marking the days until the Perihelion. The life of this great being of which he was now a part ran fast, ageing and changing with each breath. It was born and lived and died like a mayfly in the space of those three rotations, and Nerel mourned it as he and Azul spun and marked its time, this expanded consciousness that breathed through the throng and fled just as it was discovering itself. People awoke as if from a dream when the prince and his ghost came to a stop, with Azul facing them. Nerel stepped away from his back like his shadow detaching itself, except that he could have no shadow at noon, and Azul was the prince. All eyes were on Azul, fixed on his perfectly familiar face, as Nerel left the hall. Courtiers closed in around the man he left behind.

Feeling strangely light and euphoric, Nerel walked the halls back to the tower chamber to check the draft of the candles in the wells. Servants passing averted their eyes from him and kept their faces still, as was prescribed for the prince-who-was-not-the-prince during the reign of the *nerelkho*. So blank were they, and so powerful his feeling of lightness, that he wondered if he had truly become invisible; he felt as if the slanting light from the high windows was falling through him. His emptiness was liberating. Yet his emptiness was not complete; rather it was a feeling of division or partition, for part of himself yet stood in the throne room. Even as he broke the warding thread on the door and entered the glimmering chamber, his mind's eye saw Azul on the majordomo's arm, struggling to make light conversation with the press of merchants and lordlings in the great hall, vainly saying in answer to sly questions that no, he was not the prince, such jests were forbidden during the high feast of the Perihelion.

All through the afternoon, as Nerel went about the prince's private ritual, unobserved, checking details in the book, he led this

double life: now Azul is leading the procession into luncheon, now with his stomach tightening he is hearing the orchestra tune up for the ball, with hesitating feet he leads the maiden of honor onto the floor for the first dance. He took the inventory in the room of instruments; with the help of the book, he located the sextant, the astrolabe, and the other devices yet more obscure, dusted them and oiled their tiny and complicated moving parts. He placed new parchment in the wooden box on the table with the star chart engraved on its surface. He sharpened the quills, as he did every year, so that all stood in readiness (though readiness for what he could not imagine). These customary tasks absorbed one level of his attention, but all the while he listened to an inner voice that told him, minute by minute and hour by hour, what his counterpart was doing: now the master of ceremonies plucks his sleeve at supper over some slip in etiquette, now Nerel's sometime-mistress arches her plucked brows at him in bemused invitation, now at last he retires to the royal bedchamber and lies alone and unsleeping, his mind awl. Only when he judged that Azul was finally asleep in the early darkness of night were his thoughts able to break free to concentrate on the day's last and strangest rite, the one his father had called the Light of the Mind.