The Green and Growing

Conversation Pieces

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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, Conversation Pieces, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The Conversation Pieces series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually-created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what Conversation Pieces is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces
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The Green and Growing

by
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To my family—especially to Andrew

i.

The thoughts of the plants were not green as I expected. They were red like the soil from which they grew, all the colors of red, a monochromatic moving picture. The thoughts shifted and faded, gently, one into another, like leaves in a breeze. Shapes and figures were unfamiliar to me, sprouting thorns and branches unexpectedly. People moved with an aching slowness, flowers blooming at their mouths and eyes.

I sat very still in the midst of the trees. The ambassador had brought me here upon my insistence, and she stood near. I could feel her eyes on me, unblinking and concerned. Ignoring her, I pressed my hands deeper into the soil, and the tendrils of the roots curled closer around my fingers and wrists, drawing me in. It was high moon, and the plants were awake and eager. The trees trembled and turned the silver underbellies of their leaves to the stars. Flowers unfurled. And the insects of this planet—strange to me, tiny golden flies—moved in the unusual light from one plant to another.

Beneath the organic hum that vibrated at the edge of each thought, I heard a hesitancy, a skipping beat, like a gear winding down.

"Ward Miquita," the ambassador said. "It is easy to get lost here, when one is not used to the pace of it."

I opened my eyes, and I struggled to adjust from the red glow to the light of the moon-bright night. The ambassador was bent forward slightly as if to reach out one hand. Her high forehead and smooth scalp gleamed gray. We stared at each other a moment in silence, then she straightened. I lifted my hands from the soil, and the roots drew back like worms into the ground. The small sticky fibers stung as they detached.

"Who gave them intelligence?" I asked.

The ambassador looked to one side. She placed a hand softly on the trunk of the tree nearest her, a trunk not of wood and bark, but thick vines gnarled round each other. "The ancestors. The ones who built the cities."

"Can you talk with them? Can the plants hear you?"

The ambassador turned her eyes to me. The features of her face were hard to read, less sharply defined than those of my own people. I felt a reluctance there, and a coldness. Perhaps she thought I was mocking her.

"They are on their own network."

She walked away, her long legs scattering shadows in more than one direction. The second moon had risen on the horizon, small and red, its light pale in comparison to the first. Our shuttle hovered at the edge of the orchard. She climbed in and waited. My legs were sore when I stood. I looked down at my hands and saw that they were red and blistered.

"I did not mean to offend," I said when I sat down beside her.

"You cannot offend." Her movements were stiff as she turned the shuttle back toward the city.

Even at this distance, I could make out the separate buildings of the city, white and spectral. Lights glowed

along the perimeter of the clustered towers. From here, the crumbling holes in the roofs, the shifting foundations, did not mar the cityscape. Tiny glowing dots marked the movements of gravity-defiant cranes, carrying workers to repair sites.

"Have you ever sat with them?" My vision still danced with red figures wading through red sky.

"No." The front lights of the shuttle illuminated the fast-moving ground, rust-colored rocks and thick, fibrous mosses. "It is dangerous to dwell in the past too long."

I looked at her, almost shrugging. "I do not understand."

Her lidless eyes were wide and black. The distant lights of the city were reflected twice-over in them.

"The *chicheri*, the trees, grow slow and long. They are always, one part of them, in the time that is gone. They remember. They are teachers."

"And you do not want to remember?"

The skin at the corners of her eyes flushed dark. Her emotions were strong; I felt their resonance, though only partially developed in my own mind. The ambassador and her superior, the Prime Minister of Rubrum (named for its color in the night sky of my home planet), were sworn to uphold the conditions of the treaty. My stay here was conditional upon that adherence. And therefore the ambassador was forced to subdue her own instinct to use mental transference. She struggled to find words instead.

"Many things, yes."

I realized I had been tactless. The damage that our attacks had inflicted on the city was more obvious the closer we drew to the perimeter. Through the filigree of

shattered turrets, we could see the stars moving across the sky, faster than the barely perceptible rotation of my home.

"May I ask you a question, Ward, since you are so inquisitive of me?" The title of *ward* was odd to me, both honorific and condescending.

I was almost hesitant to answer. "Yes. Please."

She glanced at me quickly and then back to the shuttle's path. "Why did you come here?"

The question was unsettling. I dug one of my lacquered nails beneath the other. "There are many answers to that question."

"The *chicheri* mean so much to you?"

I leaned my head back into the seat. She was not asking what I thought.

"Our plants do not have AI. In fact, on my planet, we have few trees and even less of any other green thing. You think that your land is barren because you must cultivate orchards out of this red rock." I spread one hand outside the shuttle, felt the constant grit in the air smack my palm. "But our sun is too hot to sustain orchards."

"You remember something of that green, though, and you miss it." The ambassador's voice was unquestioning. She was confident in her assumption.

"There was never any green."

"You remember," she repeated. Her lips curled slightly, the sharp incisor bared.

ii.

I am one of forty-two daughters in the household of Commander Hritar. On my birth day, the first of my mothers spit into her hand and then held her hand to my forehead. "Twenty-seventh daughter of your name," she said. "Blessed be your days." We were at war then.

iii.

"Please, sit." The voice of the Prime Minister was soft, almost feminine, though her features were androgynous.

The sound of the ship's engines while docking still rang in my ears, and the silence of the high-roofed hall was startling. My footsteps echoed on the sanded floor and sent birds fluttering in the rafters above. I looked up, expecting the small white-and-blue-winged birds I knew. Instead, these creatures were much larger, with crested bills and long, feathery wings.

"I apologize if we are all at odd ends," the Prime Minister said. "It is not normal for us to be awake during these hours. Not while the sun is hot." She did not blink as often as it seemed she should, and the effect was unsettling. When I did not move forward, she came to me and tucked my arm under her long limb. "It is too bright for us."

I nodded, shuffling forward under her guidance. The fabric of her short gown was cold against my skin and had the effect of emphasizing her over-tall angular build, her double-jointed legs. Her skin was sleek and gray.

"Ward Miquita, we are overjoyed that you are here." Her face did not show joy.

She led me to a low bench and released my arm slowly as if I might fall. The table before the bench was set with an array of food that I had never seen, though I

sensed it was meant to approximate my own diet, fruits and vegetables buffed into a recognizable shape, gleaming softly in the low lights of the hall.

"Please understand," the Prime Minister continued. Her voice was soothing, syllables hissing to a stop at the end of a sentence, "that you are an honored guest here. We will abide by the treaty in every point."

She sat down herself and placed her hands carefully on the table, long fingers intertwined. As if anticipating a certain response, she stared at me. Her black eyes quivered wetly. I opened my mouth, stuttered, saying nothing. The corner of her lips crooked accusingly.

"As I expect your own house will treat my son." The raised intonation indicated a question.

"Yes. Of course." But I felt the words had been too late for true courtesy. I also noticed now, belatedly, that her pronunciation of my language was very precise, awkward in its neatness. Someone, my father perhaps, had told me that Rubruii did not use their tongues to manipulate sound, but rather only intricate folds at the base of the throat. The effect was a softened, rough accent to the words. To sound as precise as the Prime Minister did must have been the result of great effort. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"I know that you will need time to adjust to the different way of life here."

I nodded and lifted one of the bowls of liquid from the table. The material of the bowl was slippery and smooth, the liquid inside cool and bitter. It occurred to me that the sensation of the bowl was meant to be part of the gustatory experience. The small revelation which, at first, was but a casual observation, gradually grew in

immensity for me as the minutes of silence passed. Such an approach to dining was radically different from my home planet's treatment of food, which involved minimal preparation or attention to enjoyment.

"It is one of our finest drinks, *ivrix*," the Prime Minister finally said. I wondered briefly if she had transgressed the treaty and sensed my reaction. "We take great pains to refine the sap."

"You gather this from plants?" I tapped the bowl with one finger, and it spun on the table.

"Almost all of our food and drink." She stood and moved to the draped windows. When she pushed a small button on the wall, the drapes withdrew, and I could see the city through tall windows. The sun was bright, and the white buildings shone out. In the distance, ships descended into port, their exhaust gleaming blue.

"You do not see it at first." The Prime Minister stood unmoving. The sun cast her shadow long behind her.

My eyes needed to adjust to the brightness after the modulated light of my cabin on the ship, the darkened windows of the shuttle, and the dim illumination in the hall. Beyond the city and the port lay an expanse of ruddy fields stretched to the horizon, broken only by a patch of trees. It was not the time for planting on Rubrum. This made sense as we had been scheduled to arrive when the parabolic apex of the planet's rotation was closest to ours, when it was close to our shared sun. My gaze wandered back to the city again, and now the houses and buildings were distinct from each other, unified but disparate in construction. And then I saw the damage hidden by the glare of the light off the pale tiles and walls. In the recesses of arcing spires and in the hol-

lows of rounded cupolas, there were dark, gaping holes. The damage to the buildings had the effect of wounds, painful and unexpected.

"But we did not drop missiles." It was not the diplomatic thing to say, to speak so directly to the subject.

The Prime Minister lifted a hand and pressed it against the glass. She stared down into the streets below, her body preternaturally still.

"No," she answered quietly. "That we may have withstood."

iv.

The rate of infant mortality on my home planet is very high, and it has become a tradition to have as many children as possible so that some may survive to adulthood. For the ruling classes, this is more tradition than necessity, since access to water and artificial cooling has greatly reduced the risk among this percentile. In recognition, though, that we are one people, unified in the same struggle, my father married many times over and had forty-two daughters, of which I am one. Daughters, because it was the mode at the time to raise a single-gendered household. Forty-two he claimed to be a lucky number, though it is well-known that his attraction to the dancer Ria encouraged him to go beyond the recommended number of children.

I remember Ria more clearly than almost anyone or anything else. Usually, I will have the good grace to be perplexed by this. More than my own mother? More than my father, the Commander? At the dusk of noon, though, when the Rubruii have curtained the windows and there is a quiet of sleep in the halls, I stare up at the rafters, at the birds with their heads tucked beneath the angular drape of their wings. Then I will acknowledge it. When I was a child, Ria was everything.

Ria was one of the unsexed, a dancer from the equatorial steppes, where the scorching heat and other envi-

ronmental conditions affected biology at birth. Unlike my mother and my siblings, Ria had thick plates of skin at her temples, and her hair ran in a thin strip down the center of her scalp. She braided it with needles from the plants of her home region so that her head bristled like a defensive animal. Her eyes were the color of sand. She danced like water.

When my father asked her to, Ria underwent the procedure to become female, so that she could bear children to him. My younger sisters, Ria's daughters, also had eyes like sand, but their skin was smooth like my father's. They could not dance like their mother, because they had never known what it was to want water.

Ria moved like a fierce wind over dry earth, sweeping up the ground around her into tiny whirlwinds. She never lost her balance. She never grew dizzy. When the music grew most frantic, pipes shrilling high and painful, she threw herself into backflips, and the sun shone hot off her golden legs.

When Ria was still, the world seemed wrong and uneasy. And that was how I came to know of the Rubruii threat, of the menace of a red planet that I knew as a small scarlet star on the horizon. I walked into her quarters at the height of the day, when the heat was most unbearable, because my father always made sure her rooms were cool, insurance against her own past. It was my father I saw first. He was stretched out on one of the plaited mats, his shirt off and his skin glistening with sweat. I remember even then that it was strange to not see or notice Ria first, but she sat so still, so silent. Her arms and legs hung limp over the chair. She was looking out the window, so the bright light washed her eyes

out, yellow bleeding into yellow. The long tail of her hair stuck wet to her back.

"It is inevitable," my father said. "Inevitable that we come to blows over this."

"Don't speak of this like men brawling," Ria said. Her voice was raspy. "These are battleships."

"We can hope it is battleships." Ria turned her head and saw me as my father talked on. Her sharp-boned face was tight. She did not silence my father or voice a motherly concern. "They have mental forces the like of which I've never seen before."

"Transference?" Ria asked.

"And protective fields around their cities. Fields that won't be breached by missiles."

Mental transference was a concept almost foreign to me, only understood in the vaguest detail. *I will make you like me, make you give me your* ahni. *You'll feel what I feel*, an older sister said, explaining it to me and trying to practice it at the same time. But I just stared up into her face, feeling her knee pressing into my chest. The stone of the floor was hot on the back of my neck. I did not feel her ravenous appetite for sweets. Transference was the stuff of stories, like the idea that if one went out at night, in the darkest part of the night, water would collect in droplets on your skin.

My father sat up and saw me. "Miquita." He was dismissive. "Go away."

I felt anger. I wanted to go to Ria and have her stroke the skin on my arms and belly, to whisper little songs under her breath. And I tried to make my father feel my anger. I stared at him, at his face textured like cracked earth. He frowned and grunted in preparation for stand-

ing up. How could this be the planning for war, two people talking in the sun, their voices almost drowsy?

"I want Ria," I said, petulant.

"We all want her," he answered. I looked at Ria, and she met my eyes. I felt something, the rage of a *ratla* forced far into its hole away from the sharp sticks of hunters. The feeling scared me, foreign and intrusive. When she turned her head away, the feeling subsided, leaving behind it the trace of almost-physical pain. I sucked in my breath, on the edge of tears.

I turned and ran, my father laughing humorlessly, muttering something under his breath to Ria. The words of her reply were too soft to make out, but I recognized the buzz of her voice. I fled from the halls into the atrium. There, the stone was almost too hot for my sandaled feet. All of the plants bordering the open square were closed up tight, waiting for the gardener to bring water in the early evening. I glanced up into the sky, searching for stars I could not yet see.

I remember my childish conviction that if only Ria knew how much I loved her, she would never look at me in that way again. I would show her, was what I thought. I would bring her buds tightly folded, bowls piled full of crystallized *ahni*, water sweetened with crushed *spir* leaves. These were the things I dwelled on most, having just learned of and dismissed a distant red enemy.

V.

"Our ancestors had technology we no longer have." The ambassador's voice was very low and I knew this now to be a sign of both sadness and trepidation. "They had a dream of cities connected by common intelligence over the whole surface of our planet, across planets."

We sat on the edge of a cliff, having reached the height by way of the repair cranes. From this vantage point, we could see over the whole city and, beneath us, the docks. There were a number of bulky freight ships that maneuvered with care between the shuttle stations. There were fewer of the sleek passenger vessels like that upon which I had arrived. In the repair yard, a swath of red clay surrounded by blinking beacons, an array of antique ships sat dormant. The city rose up white and overshadowing beyond the docks. I understood that what I had previously taken for tiles on the walls and roofs were rows upon rows of pale panels hiding a dense network of cables.

"I do not understand how. How have you lost it?"

The ambassador rested her head on one shoulder and blinked her eyes slowly. She had become relatively talkative since our visit to the orchard, but the question made her hesitate.

"You speak as if we have misplaced it. This is not what has happened."

The starlight was bright enough that I could make out the intricate wrinkles that circled her eyes, the wrinkles that grew more dense when she was distressed or upset.

"I have eaten the bitter again." It was an idiom I had picked up from the ambassador whenever she felt herself to misspeak. I guessed at its meaning, that it was drawn from the eating of a certain green fruit whose rind was very bitter but also very hard to remove completely. The taste of the rind curled your tongue. I bent my head and studied my feet, the ground distant below.

"Always," she said. It was a joke, I thought. Her mouth turned upward, but there was a harsh angle to her chin. "And there are many answers to that question, as you might say."

I drew my feet up and curled them beneath me, feeling strangely exposed. She continued unexpectedly.

"That which we call common intelligence, you call artificial. Why?"

The query unsettled me, and I looked at her. She still did not meet my eyes. The lights from the docks hovered in her dark pupils, almost intensified.

"It is not born. It is a product of craft, of labor." I thought of the servants in the halls of my home, ribs and bones of metal and faces of fine filigree. Their fingers had been coated in a synthetic plastic so that their touch would not burn us in the hot day. They were not programmed to speak or feel emotion, but their eyes of burnished glass sparkled with an approximation of intelligence. Orders were processed and understood with rapidity. "It is unnatural."

"There is a difference between us." This statement was odd to me since it seemed so obvious. I stared again,

as if anew, at her slick gray skin, her sharply sloped forehead, and disproportionate eyes. "You create something separate and different from yourself. We create something a part of ourselves."

"No," I said. "The artificial cannot be the organic."

Now she finally turned her eyes on me. "You are insistent, Ward Miquita, yet you sat in the orchard."

I had asked to go to the orchard, because I had been amazed at the idea of so many green plants in one place. The Prime Minister had been reserved at first in response to my request. *You will not understand*, she had said.

"The ancestors embedded a common intelligence at the core of the orchard, hoping that the plants might approximate our own ways of communication, hoping that we also might be able to talk with them. They found that they had underestimated the *chicheri*, for the trees already talked with each other. So perhaps this intelligence you call artificial is simply the act of uncovering what is already there."

"How may you argue this for your houses, for your ships?"

The first moon was rising, washing out the silver of the ships and the white of the city until the entire horizon glowed with light.

"They are extensions of ourselves, of our instincts to find shelter and to seek outside resources. It is we who are uncovered."

I pushed myself to my feet. The bare skin of my legs and feet was covered with a thin layer of red dust. Seeing one of us rise, the worker on the repair crane moved the rig closer.

"Our brightest minds were lost to us in the attack." The ambassador did not change her position or get up, but her voice rose a fraction. "And this is one of the answers to your question."

I expected her to apologize, to claim the bitter, but she did not. Turning my back on the crane, I looked out over the plateau of the cliff. There were some houses here as well, made of the red clay upon which they stood. There was also an observatory, a domed edifice, but there were no lights shining out from the many-paned windows.

"We fear the age of ships is past." Her voice was hollow behind me. "And the age of knowledge. To fall so quickly, we did not think it possible."

My stomach was sour, and I could taste it on my tongue. "All your AI has failed you?" I assumed a tone of skepticism.

She now stood up, moving gingerly as if her bones ached. "It is a fragile network," she said softly. "And it has received a dying blow. We cannot find the wound to heal it."

She was taller than me by two heads, and her silhouette eclipsed the waxing moon. The glow of the city, of the ships, of the stars was suffused around her shoulders. We felt two strangers again. Despite the conversations and the meals shared, there was a darkness between us that the lights could not touch. I had learned an idiom, and that was it. And in that solitude, I felt accused.

"Do you think that I can help you? Is this the reasoning behind your treaties and your promises, your exchanges? Am I meant to fix what has been broken?"

If there had been anger or judgment in her face and eyes before, the ambassador's expression was unreadable

now. She made a fluttering sound in her throat. She raised her hand to the worker on the crane. With a faint grinding of metal on stone, the rig bumped up against the cliff.

"You are younger than I thought," she said as she stepped onto the crane. She moved back, waiting for me to join her. "Or is it that you think us so foolish? Your people and your ships have wounded us. That does not mean we think that you can fix us."

The blood rushed to my cheeks, and, even in the cool breeze of the deepening night, I felt warm. I was almost afraid to step onto the crane. The worker stood impatiently over the controls. I glanced up again, quickly, at the ambassador's face. Her own skin was flushed.

"It takes little enough skill to destroy," she added, as if she could not keep the words inside.

vi.

When I was little, beginning to walk, my sisters taught me that *ratlas* were easy prey. Squat, stubby reptiles with clicking scales on their tails were easy to sight and simple to track due to the distinctive noise of their retreat. My sisters would sharpen into dangerous points sticks that they had broken off the brittle trees and shrubs around the atrium. These they held in one hand and a clanging bell in the other so as to make a hideous frightening noise. It was easy to find where a rattler has passed. In addition to the tell-tale tracks, they left behind a distinctive musk that smelled like fetid water.

Once a rattler was sighted, my sisters rang their bells with energy and ran behind it, chasing it to its hole. In the hole, the rattler was faced with no means of escape, and my sisters used their sticks to stab at the cornered reptile.

This was an activity I had very much enjoyed.

vii.

When I visited the orchard again, the thoughts of the plants were different. And, at first, the difference was impossible to describe. They were still red in color, people, plants, and rocks alike. The pace of the moving people and animals was measured and methodical as if the trees were looking slowly back over the events of days past. In unexpected places, leaves and flowers had sprung up, shaking with new life. The most unusual instance was when a vine, heavy with dark red-purple flowers, twisted its way free of a woman's ear. Then the difference struck me with an almost physical force. Despite my immersion within the orchard's common intelligence, I felt my body shudder and my lungs gasp for breath. My eyes were wet.

The flowers clung close to Ria, curling around the needles in her hair and crawling under the plates at her temples. Even in the red gloaming, I knew that she was golden, her eyes yellow. She was dancing, though her movements were more languid than I had ever seen them. I wanted nothing more than to run to her and nestle into her rounded belly, to feel her sharp nails stroking my hair and scalp. Then Ria faded, like an image slowly overturned. In her place, Rubruii stalked with long strides across the red planet. They seemed to cover leagues of ground in too short a time, though their pace

was liquid and slow in the plants' mind. The *chicheri* were fond of these figures, because they shone slightly, the edges of their forms fuzzy. One of the Rubruii carried a small box in his hand, a dense item with gears and wires. Entangled with the wires were the tiny offshoots of a climbing plant. Leaves unfurled and waved. As if planting a seed, the Rubrum knelt down and dug a hole in the red dirt. Then, he pressed the box into the earth in the midst of a grove of trees. The ground shifted and rumbled beneath him. He quickly returned the earth he dug up and tamped it down with one long-fingered hand. A vine sprang out of the ground, too fast to grow from what he had planted. It curled around his arm.

The longer I watched the thoughts of the plants, the more troubled I was. Gradually, the colors grew muted, red grew rusty and then began to gray at the edges. The sky grew black and overwhelmed the rest of the image. As if I were traveling away from Rubrum at a fast pace, the planet grew slowly smaller and smaller until only stars and a red dot in the expanse signified Rubrum's presence in the immensity of space. Then there were ships, more than a hundred of them, stretched in the direction of the red planet, the white-blue blur of their engines competing with the stars. On their sides was the mark of my father's army.

The vision collapsed with a loud keening sound that I did not hear with my ears. I came back to myself in the orchard, my heart racing. The larger moon was setting in the sky, the smaller one rising in its place. I had sat down before high moon. Despite the relative dimness of the light, I blinked frantically. I wiped away the tears stinging my eyes with the back of my hand. I ripped my hands

free of the soil and tiny threads of roots came away with my fingers. I stumbled to my feet.

I could not remember at first who to look for, who had brought me here. The ambassador moved slowly into my line of sight. Her face was dark and shadowed by the leaves rustling overhead.

"Ward Miquita." Her voice was solemn, questioning.

I'd been surprised that the ambassador agreed to take me to the orchard again when I asked. She had not approached me in a number of days, and I had been left to my own devices in the Prime Minister's home. Our recent conversation on the cliff had left an awkwardness between us. I could not decide if this was felt primarily on one side or the other, or equally shared. If I was honest with myself, I had also been startled by my own request to come here. I had been hiding the fear that I felt so fully now.

The ambassador almost laid a hand on my arm as I moved shakily towards her. She paused, her hand hovering above my bare arm. Unlike the Prime Minister, she had never touched me.

"What did you see?"

I looked from her eyes to the flattened grass where I had been sitting. "Ria."

She cocked her head, waiting for me to say more.

"How could they know about her?"

"This is someone from your home?" She drew her hand back, folded her arms behind her. Tilting her head back, she studied the leaves. They rustled and scratched against each other. The little insects, golden and iridescent green in the starlight, buzzed in front of her face.

"Yes." The answer seemed insufficient.

"It is an active intelligence, Ward Miquita, that the plants share. It grows. It learns." She gestured upward at the branches of the tree. "They grow."

I followed her gaze, through the leaves to the night sky beyond. "So they have taken memories from me."

"Taken?" She dropped her eyes, her brow furrowed. "Shared."

I moved away in the direction of the shuttle. The trees had grown or acquired new leaves since I had visited last, and it was hard to move between them without brushing up against branches and vines. There was a sweet smell underfoot from an herb that grew close to the ground.

"Did you see anything else?" The ambassador's voice came from farther behind. She had not followed me.

"What do you want me to see?" I turned to face her. She was standing very still. The ambassador did not care about Ria and her dances. She did not care, or know, about the images of her ancestors, planting seeds of sentience. "What do you hope that I see? Why did you agree to bring me here again?"

She stared at me, her eyes black and wide. The red light of the lesser moon glowed off her smooth scalp. I could not bring myself to tell her about my father's ships. I did not know whose memory I had seen, who had sat in the grasses and shared with the trees the pain and terror of those moments when the ships had approached Rubrum's orbit. For the memory had been terrible and painful. The thoughts of the plants were not images alone.

"You said you never sat with them," I said. The words came slowly, and I watched her face.

"I have not." But she found it hard to speak, the answer catching in her throat.

I turned and shoved my way through the last of the flowering plants. The shuttle was silent and waiting. I climbed into my seat. The ambassador followed, her legs almost dragging as she walked. Her movements were lethargic, like those figures in the memories of the plants, as she pushed the ignition button.

"We carry plants aboard our vessels," she said quietly as the engine rumbled softly to life. "For filtration, for learning." She looked ahead toward the city, not at me. "Our ship was a scout."