

Conversation Pieces
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Distances

A Novella

by

Vandana Singh





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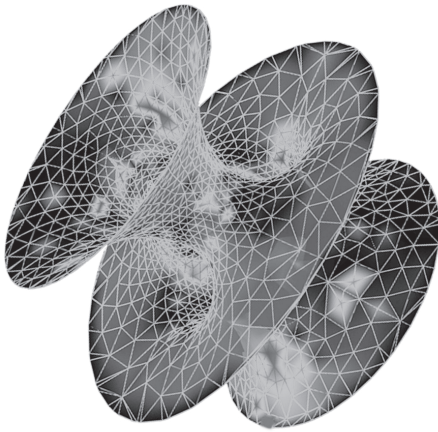
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Anasuya walked up the dim hallways of the Temple of Mathematical Arts toward the central atrium, her favorite place of repose. She had been three days in the amnion, and the abrupt return to physical reality always left her feeling disoriented and vaguely claustrophobic. The narrow stone passageways seemed to press in closer; the upward slope made her thighs ache. She felt the full weight of her body, slight though it was, as a new burden. For three days she had been soaring in multiple dimensions—now she was back to crawling across a two-d floor like a little desert roll-bug. But strangest of all was the solid presence of things, the way they were weighted by their physicality. Going up into the light, she had to touch the cold stone walls, pass her fingers over the carvings on the archways, brush the soft tapestries—as though to remember the world again.

But for now the world seemed too much with her, the walls too close. She fought the impulse to run—up the passageway, out of the Temple, into the hard light of the bone-dry City, the desertscape, the empty, waterless sky, where she pictured herself falling to her knees in the sand, the air seeping out of her lungs, the

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blood drying in her veins. She caught her breath, quickened her footsteps, passed under the frieze of the great god Anhutip and into the atrium.

Here her breathing grew easier. The atrium was the highest point of the hollowed-out mesa that housed the temple; its ceiling arched into a vast, soft darkness, below which mica windows let in the autumnal light. Above her the rays crossed each other, tilting imperceptibly with the movement of the sun. She walked among the tiers of light, the pools of light on the stone floor, among the stone sculptures and holographic illusions, until she reached the center of the atrium. From the ceiling above, which was lost in darkness, a long rope hung, bearing a complex, translucent sculpture in shards of colored glass. It moved slowly to and fro, driven by an invisible mechanism, dappling the atrium with a kaleidoscope of turquoise, mauve, and yellow light. Already she was feeling calmer. She sat down on the circular stone bench below the sculpture. There was a small, bubbling fountain in the space enclosed by the bench, from which she took a handful of glittering water that she splashed over her face and neck-slits. She looked into the tiny pool, where bristle-worms swam in the near-dark, all aglow, and felt the familiar comfort of their presence. She smoothed the thin shift she wore over her slender green body, stretched her legs, raised her arms above her head. As the light washed over her in great, slow waves, she was reminded, inevitably, of Sagara, the distant sea—the underwater caves and cliffs and seaweed forests of her childhood.

She lay in the shifting light, her thoughts wandering to this last session in the amnion. She had completed the task that had been assigned to her—it had taken a long time and a lot of tedious work, but it had been easy. She was beginning to fear that in just four years of exile she was already getting tired of things. Was it that she was coming to the end of something? Would she find that her life here, her mates, her work, had been some kind of mirage?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the doorkeeper Amas, who moved through the columns of light and darkness like a nervous fish, his wide, brown face reverent. He held a bowl of steaming tea in one hand, while his other hand fumbled with a small holo. She took the tea.

“Do you know,” Amas said in a conspiratorial whisper, “we have sky people visiting! The Master’s been with them all afternoon.”

Off-world tourists, she thought, probably from the moon-world of Sarakira, or the planet Charak, where there was a large mining colony. Or maybe they were from a trade-ship. Before she could ask what the Master was doing with them, he held out the holo to her, half-apologetically.

“Show me?”

“It is a dance of hyperbolas, Amas,” she said gently. “See? Put your finger against the side, like this. In a moment the hyperbolas will morph. Watch with me.”

It was the sort of mathematical art that the Temple gave to tourists and pilgrims—pretty, but with no

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subtlety. Amas — some called him Poor Amas, or Slow Amas — watched with awed, round eyes. “Oh,” he said. She knew he didn’t understand her explanations, but he liked to hear her say the words. He gave her a quick, shy, worshipful glance that made her sigh inwardly and left her to her solitude.

After he left she sipped the bitter tea, stretching her bare legs. The soliforms that gave her skin its green, exotic tint opened their microscopic petals to the light. She brushed her long black hair away from her neck and examined a tiny scattering of brown flecks on her shoulder. She had first noticed them four days ago. She thought about her mother Lata’s body, Lata on the reed-raft that had been their home, Lata in the water, sunlight gleaming on her green skin, pointing out to the young Anasuya the mathematical harmonies of the world. Lata had been old then. I can’t remember, she thought, whether Lata had brown spots on her body. As always, thinking about Lata made the old grief come alive again. Her hand shook; she set the bowl of tea beside her on the bench.

A senior acolyte passed by in a swirl of robes, ghost-like among the long rays of light, fractured momentarily by shadow and brightness.

“Have you heard,” he said to her in passing, “we have off-worlders visiting. Not tourists — some kind of official delegation from Tirana! Traveled on a ship for eighteen years to get here. I wonder what they want.”

Before she had time to make sense of this startling piece of news, they were upon her, the Master with

the off-world visitors in tow. She stood up and made her salutation, palms crossed on chest. The strangers mimicked her, fumbling the simple gesture. There were eight of them, bare of face, with black, thick hair in elaborate coiffures. They wore bright tunics over close-fitting trousers and jewels hanging from their ears. Standing beside them, it was the Master who looked, at that moment, strange to her gaze, with the jade plate on his left cheek, flush with his brown skin, and a ruby cranial plate with ridges and pleats that glowed in the light.

“An official delegation of mathematicians from the Lattice of Tirana itself!” said the Master sibilantly. There were introductions, voices that echoed through the vast stone hall and were lost; she tried to shape her tongue around unfamiliar syllables, realizing with some incredulity that here were people more foreign than she, people from the stars! Kzoric: largeness, roundness, loud voice, spherical geometries on the outside, including the enormous round bun of hair, but her gaze was prickly, sawtooth. Vishk: small, thin, skulking in the shadows, parabolic stoop of back. Tall Hiroq: long face, almost an ellipse, almost bilateral symmetry, long hands fumbling shyly with a neck-clasp, voice deep and rich, quick, shy blinks, glance a sine wave—smooth, curious, and shy all at once. There were three others whose names she forgot, who remained standing at the back, deferentially. But the person who registered with her most was Nirx, who had an unconscious air of authority, for all she bowed and smiled and looked around with childish wonder. Nirx was small and com-

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pact, her hair in a braided bun of pleasing symmetry, her face old and wrinkled in complicated and interesting ways, like river mouths bifurcating, entering a sea. Her gaze was sharp, but with a kindness and a reserve. To Anasuya she was like a two-d projection of a multi-dimensional object—a lot was compressed into what she spoke, the way she looked at Anasuya. A woman of secrets, not immediately decipherable, Anasuya thought.

Nirx held in her hands a crystal bottle filled with an amber fluid.

“...Mathematician Nirx here,” said the Master ponderously, lisping through his terrible teeth, “Mathematician Nirx has discovered a new sthanas—a new geometrical space! One that is complex beyond understanding! She has condensed the poetry of this space into a series of elegant equations. But so far these equations have not been solved, for they are intractable to an unexpected degree. Thus Mathematician Nirx and her team have traveled for years from the planet Tirana to see whether our mathematics can help them.

“It is only right that the Temple of Mathematical Arts, first Temple of Anhutip, who knows all forms and relations, should be chosen for this honor. On all of Sura, there is no place more sacred, more famous, for the solution of mathematical poems. And you... You are our best rider, Anasuya, for all that you are young. I offer you this...this poem, with the hope that you will accept.”

The Master took the bottle of amber fluid from Nirx in his trembling, parchment-like hands and held it out to Anasuya. His humped, twisted body, with the bulbous nose and long-drawn-out face, cast grotesque shadows around him. Under the brilliant crimson skull, his shadowed eyes watched her. She had never been able to read the Master. He was like a carelessly assembled mess of contradictory geometries, all jagged, moody edginess and abrupt changes of behavior; his intensity alternated with apathy and aloofness. But she forgot him as she took the bottle in her hands.

What new sthanas was this? What undiscovered mathematical country lay within?

She felt an anticipatory tingle of excitement. Maybe this was just what she needed.

“I am honored to accept,” she said at last.

“We admire greatly your analog methods of computation,” the Tirani woman Nirx said in a little, piping voice. She spoke the language without hesitation but with a lilting accent that was quite foreign. Her hands fluttered like insects, a pleasing harmony. “We have heard about it from travelers and traders and old records from earlier visitors to Sura. With our scant knowledge of your techniques, we constructed molecules whose interactions mimic the behavior of the new equations. But our reaction vats are crude compared to yours! Nor are the molecules very stable, being tremendously complex—so we must reconfigure the solution every few days from the seed...”

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Each mathematical poem had its secret, inner space, its universe, nestled within its equations the way meaning was enclosed by words. That inner space or solution space—the sthanas—was the poem’s regime of validity, the place where the poem came true. Holding the bottle up to the rays of light, Anasuya felt the familiar mixture of anticipation and exhilaration—and a curious switching of realities, as though the external world of people and lovers, the weight of her own incompleteness, her hopeless, endless nostalgia, had lost all definition, and the abstractions of mathematics were once again the things of true substance, tangible, real.



She was a rider like no other. Her function was to lie in an amnion that had been specially constructed for her, with her neck-slits open. The sap that was exuded by the feathery organs inside her neck-slits and by the undersides of her fingernails and the tips of her breasts—the sap her people called *vapasjal*, that which is given back or returned—contained microscopic organelles the chemists at the temple called spiroforms. The spiroforms tasted the molecules in the mixture; as they interacted with the chemical stew of the amnion, a space blossomed in her mind, the most abstract made-world there could be: the sthanas itself: the solution-space of the mathematics. The tiny, invisible machines that swam in the fluid recorded the chemical

changes wrought by the spiroforms and transmitted to the Temple's data banks a holographic representation of this inner space, brick by proverbial brick. Other holo-riders had to sit directly in front of a display that recorded the chemical reactions in the standard vats, and, through a complex science of interpretation and analysis, including trial and error and constant tinkering, they had to attempt to fill in the solution space of the given mathematics. For Anasuya this process was like a blind person mapping the contours of the world with a stick, and it horrified her because for her mathematics was experiential, a sixth sense that bared before her the harmonies, natural and artificial, that formed the sub-text of the world. Floating in the amnion, she entered unmapped territory; she was a speck, a ship lost in vastness, a rider on waves of maxima and minima, an explorer of a space that, but for her, would remain only guessed at. She entered this mathematical country as an explorer would enter a new land: she looked for singularities, skated over manifolds, sketched out the abstract, mountainous terrain of bizarre mathematical functions; she sought branch points and branch cuts and hidden territories bearing algebraic surprises. She took the esoteric world of the sthanas and made it her reality.

The molecules that Mathematician Nirx had brought gave her dream-like glimpses of a deep, cerulean darkness, fraught with hints of strange regularities, punctuated by fine silver lines and complexly looping tangles. This mathematical country lay spread

in several dimensions; she would have to visualize it slice by three-dimensional slice. During the preliminary session she explored, soaring and swooping, tasting this new sthanas. It was beautiful, beautiful! This would take days...months, maybe a lifetime! Even at low molecular concentrations, which blurred details, she could sense shadowy structures pricking out of the darkness. There were layers and layers here, patterns that promised to be astonishing. Exploring this sthanas gave her a rush that was better than anything she had experienced in a long time. This was what it was like to be in the great saltwater marshes of the home she had left behind—to taste the richness and complexity of the universe through this most astonishing of senses—this was what it was like to be Anasuya.

After the preliminary session she scrubbed distractedly in the shower and let herself be subjected to the ministrations of the temple chemists, who pronounced her free of toxic remnants and the brew safe for further study. They handed her a tall glass of thick protein shake, which she drank down in a few gulps. She emerged still shaken with the wonder of it all.

There was a flurry of activity in the analysis room. The Tiranis and temple chemists were already working on reconfiguring the molecules. A holo showed a real-time image of what Anasuya had seen. Anasuya sat down before it, acknowledging the greetings of her colleagues. It was a good replica for an initial survey, needing only a few edits. “Every analogy has its limits,” she remembered her old teacher Bakul telling her, when

Anasuya first started her studies at the Temple. “The analogy is to the true mathematics what your shadow is to you. So after the work is done, you must study the holo and employ the art of mathegraphia — rebuild the sthanas — look for errors, artifacts, places where the information is incomplete. Use your mathematical knowledge to fill in the gaps!”

Bakul was dead now, but her student remembered. An initial coarse-grain survey of the solution-space was unlikely to have major detectable errors, if the chemistry was any good. Anasuya made the few edits needed and got up. She looked at the great stone bulk of the amnion, with the data pipes snaking from it, and the fat chemical feed tubes and breathing apparatus...and suppressed a sigh of longing. Turning away, she caught the eye of the old Tirani woman, Mathematician Nirx.

“We sent you to a strange place, I think,” Nirx said, smiling. She had an oddly penetrating gaze. “It will take us perhaps two days to reconfigure the mixture and make some adjustments to your...what do you call them? Micro-machines? We will be using solutions of greater concentration so that you can see more details. Then we proceed, yes?”

Anasuya nodded, smiled. And thought to herself: two days! How was she going to wait that long?

She went up to the atrium, all her old restlessness displaced by the excitement of this new project. Draping herself by the little central pool, she took a few deep breaths, leaned over to look into the water. The bristle-worms blinked messages at each other in rapid

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light-flashes, as though mimicking her hastened breath, her new exhilaration.

Suddenly a shadow fell across her, and the water was tinged faintly red. She turned, startled.

The Master stood before her, made monstrous in the ever-changing light, his crimson cranial plate aglow.

“These Tirani strangers,” he said in his harsh lisp, speaking low, bending toward her so she shrank back a little. His metallic, fringed teeth moved sibilantly over each other. “This Nirxian poetry, these new equations. I do not trust them. Nobody but Anhutip could breathe such a sthanas into being—it is too complex! It must represent something, some physical system we have yet to discover. A highly sophisticated machine, or an alien being of great complexity—who can tell? I want you to find out what it is. What use it could be put to. Don’t tell anyone but me. Will you? Will you do this, Anasuya?”

Anasuya had also wondered whether this sthanas of Nirx was the representation of some physical system. But correspondences to reality, or what others narrowly defined to be reality, were less important to her than the mathematics—and the uses of things were not even of peripheral concern. She opened her mouth to argue this, realized the futility of it, and instead nodded her agreement. He was the Master after all. She was discomfited by him now as much as she had been when she first came here.

After he left she remembered how it had been for her, meeting him the first time. He was, like her, from

another place, already bent and old and ugly when he came. Even after years in the City, his speech was guttural, betraying his origins in Ifara, on the other side of the planet. He had smiled tentatively at Anasuya the first time they met, and she had nearly screamed when she saw his teeth. There were two small humps on his shoulder blades, and it was said that he was a genetic splice of the great winged gwi, a deep-desert sapient-worm, and a human, although nobody had seen any evidence of wings or fins. Everyone knew that in Ifara the soulless witch-folk performed horrible genetic mutilations as part of their religious customs. She knew she should feel sorry for him, but he disturbed her too much, even for that. What kind of thing was he, not human, not gwi, not worm, but a bit of each? At least she knew what she was...

So when first he tried to take her under his wing (so to speak), mumbling eagerly about her amazing natural talent and how he would hone it and train it into something pure and beautiful, she was frightened and a little horrified. Fortunately it was easy to find other teachers. In any case, the Master was too old for real work. In his autumnal years he dabbled in mathematical art and let the temple high directorate do the work of running the place. His art was on exhibit in the public halls of the temple; there was an exhibit even here, in the atrium. All his work was minimalist, strange, consisting of representations of mathematical functions floating in a white space. Operators fluttered through this space, and as they grazed past the functions they transformed

them, introducing discontinuities and reducing their domains of definition. After some iterations nothing but the white space was left, whereupon the initial configuration reappeared and the cycle began again. The City's critics called the effect meditative, transcendental, but to Anasuya the holos were horrifyingly sad. She avoided them much as she avoided the Master.

She got up. The Master had disturbed her mood of elation, breaking it up as certainly as one of his little function-destroying operators. Making a mental note to avoid him over the next few days, she walked quickly to the great temple doors. Perhaps she should go home to her mates, whom she hadn't seen now for four days. At the door she turned around to see the little doorkeeper come running, holding her gray cloak that she had forgotten. He was out of breath, his broad, bare face crumpled with concern. "Forgetting your cloak. Evenings are cold," Amas said, arranging the soft folds around her shoulders, reaching up to do so, stepping back in confusion because he had dared touch her skin. She knew he wanted to hear all about her day and the wonders she had seen. "They say it is the most important, the hardest poem ever," he said in awe. "And you'll solve it." She smiled, moved despite herself. "I'm tired, Amas. I'll tell you all about it later."

She stepped outside into coolness and a red sky. The sun was setting behind the mesas; the first stars were out. Around her the city had come alive, as it did every evening, surprising her even now—tiers of lit windows in every mesa, every made-house, the walk-

ways and speeder stations aglow, crowded with citizens. A broad flight of steps led from the ornate pillars of the Temple to the plaza below. On the roof behind her, the god Anhutip's giant image perched, his ruby eyes burning. She stood in the deep pool of his shadow, halted by a familiar hesitancy.

She had never gotten used to the great stone city. She had traveled on its walkways, wandered between towers of granite and red sandstone, gone to the tellings at the public temples on every festival day; she had admired the stark beauty of the arid gardens with their wind-sculpted rock formations and the stone fountains in every plaza from which flowed—not water, but light, a marvelous illusion wrought by technology. On the sides of mesas and made-houses, waves of light flowed like water over the pebbly bed of a stream, illuminating mica and feldspar and quartz buried in the stone. The citizens went about their business as though unaware of the beauty of their environs—they wore loose, flowing clothes, gemplates on their faces and scalps, and their skin was brown, not green like Anasuya's. The City had made her welcome; she even had a proper House to belong to, and companionship and intimacy, instead of the crowded anonymity of a Temple common-house where she had first lived after she left home. Her House was a pentad: she had the love of four people when some had none. She didn't know why, despite all this, she felt like a stranger here, after all these years. Perhaps it was simply that the spiroforms sang in her blood, locked in symbiosis with

the soliforms that greened her skin and marked her always a foreigner: a woman from the remote edge of the continent where saltwater marshes bred a folk stranger than the humans from other worlds.

But also there was an alien quality to everything here: the air was thin and dry, the stars seemed bright and close in the cold nights. The vastness of the sky was overpowering. The city itself was an artifice; other than the hollowed-out mesas and the stone building materials, everything here was made by human hands or their proxies. There were few animals besides the small desert crustaceans, the roll-bugs and flying stingers, and the wide-ranging gwi, the intelligent, winged reptilian creatures of the high mountains, seen rarely outside the migratory season. When they cried in their strange, harsh voices, Anasuya felt an answering, inexplicable sorrow.

Only twice a year, when the City played host to two great migratory gatherings that had (in some forgotten past) birthed the original habitation that was to become the City—only then did the character of the City change. The severity of the mesas and made-houses was softened somewhat by the skin-tents of the perihumans, the roosts of the gwi atop the mesas. Then the streets filled with strange beasts, exotic music and languages, and there were trade-stops on every corner and, if needed, new wells were dug into the great underground aquifer that made life possible in this barren place. As was appropriate for visiting deities, the guest gods were taken in processions to meet the old gods

of the desert, Anhutip and the Two Lovers, Ekatip and Shunyatip, and there was much feasting, badinage, and material exchange between their respective followers. Those who wished to lie with followers of the strange gods went to the Temple of the Two Lovers, where few things were taboo. There, under the stone images of Ekatip and Shunyatip, who always sat back to back, facing away from each other and gazing into time in opposite directions, the priests ladled out festival stews, blessed the couplings, and comforted the lonely. It was there that Anasuya had stayed when she first came to the City. Even the followers of Anhutip were welcome at the Temple of the Two Lovers, despite the fact that Anhutip was the one who had played a trick on the two gods, sundering them in time, and stealing from them all knowledge of Number. Anhutip the Mathematician, the mischief maker, who had breathed the world into being. There were elaborate dramas and street shows in the plazas commemorating the old stories. The scant desert rain fell at this time, too, filling the air with the moist aroma of memory: the desert remembering water. These were the only times that Anasuya felt as though something in her was coming alive, unfolding petal by petal.

But now she stood outside the great, closed doors of Anhutip's Temple, looking down into a cascade of lit stone steps, thinking she couldn't go home after all. Not just yet. She couldn't bear the long trip over the walkways, the presence of other citizens so secure in their belonging to this place, so nonchalant in their

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happiness. Like her mates... She had not seen them for four days—another two or three days would surely not matter. Besides, she had the new sthanas to wait for...

She sighed. There was a faint haze over the city, which always caused a certain odor to hang in the air: a smell of stone and metal, the invisible effervescence of the machinery that smoothly and silently underlay the city. She found the smell vaguely disturbing; it emphasized to her the absence of water. It rained here only about twice a year, and each time the brief rain was like a mockery of the endless bounty of the sea.



The first time that the harmonies of the world became clear to her, she was in her fifth year. Her birth-mother and other mothers had been anxious for her, muttering to each other when they thought she was not listening. “The child, Anasuya,” they said, “will she ever be gifted by the sea? Or will she be forgotten?” But the gift—what her people called *athmis*—was in her, waiting.

Growing up on the sloping beaches of Sagara—amid the phallic pneumetaphores of the marshgrove trees, on the slippery, matted floors of the raft-islands—swimming in the green, dappled light of the seaweed forest, she had always suspected that there were hidden patterns underlying the variegated splendor of the world. The *athmis* came alive in her while

she was swimming underwater between rafts on a perfect, ordinary day. Years later she could recall it with clarity: the feel of salt water in her mouth and neck-slits, a singing in her veins that made her prickle all over, and the new sense awakening inside her like a window opening in a blank wall. Then the sudden crescendo of mathematical harmonies in her mind, as she floated in the marsh forest: in the fractal landscape, a shimmering of sinusoidal disturbances as an eel swam by, the delicate exponentiation evident in parthenogenic two-fish birthing in the water, each daughter fish budding off two more daughters before swimming away. Gazing at ripples cross each other in ever expanding circles, she realized with a rush of delight that the book of knowledge had opened to her, revealing the secret relationships between things: the length and undulation of waves and their speed, the height of a falling rock and the time it took to splash into the sea. The myriad geometries surrounding her became readily apparent: the smooth swell of the waves, the hollows between them, the dimpling of tiny whirlpools as the water swept between the weeds. She had no names yet for so many things, but she sensed the mathematics of the world as a young child knows colors before it learns the words. The realization swept over her that everything in the world was in constant conversation with every other thing, that all was flux and play. Swimming in the green and gold light, she knew she would never be alone in such a world.

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Going back to her mothers, rendered nearly speechless by excitement, she had looked for a way to tell them what she had come to understand. One of her mothers had picked her up, saying: Little Fish, what are you trying to say? And she had found her voice in her first mathematical poem.

Fish!

Fish fish!

Fish fish fish fish!

And the women had laughed in delight. But Lata put her face close to the child's and looked gently into Anasuya's eyes.

“What happens after all those fish?”

Anasuya, recovering breath, said

“More fish!”

“Child, if your poem were true, not just Sagara but all the world would be running over with fish!”

Anasuya's eyes filled with tears. Had she spoken a false poem?

“Your poem is true,” Lata said, wiping her tears, hoisting her up on a broad hip and walking away over the beach. “But it is only a small part of a greater truth. The world is not over-run by fish because there are other things in the world than fish! The big fish that eat the little ones. The seasons when the water turns too cold or too warm. How many kiputi pods are in the water. So know this: that no poem we can speak is ever a complete poem. No truth we can utter is ever a complete truth. Everything is what it is because of other

things as well as its own nature. So there is no thing removed from other things. Thus you are Anasuya, but you are also the sea, and the fish, and the athmis that is in us all. Remember this! Thus we end all poems with the phrase: My poem is incomplete!”

Days later Anasuya lay floating in the green water, idly watching darters swoop in the translucent depths below. Then a poem more true than the first one came to her.

Fish

Fish fish

Fish fish fish fish

Fish fish fish fish fish fish fish fish

Big Fish!

My poem is incomplete!

Her mothers were grateful that the sight Anasuya had been gifted with was both beautiful and harmless—and relatively common among their people. There were others whose gift was less benevolent; there were people who could sense the dreams of others, or see alternate worlds that defied logic and common sense. There were one or two every year who came to understand, with the flowering of their athmis, the language of those ponderous creatures, the seaphants; these children would leave their homes with a seaphant pod, ranging up and down the coast, coming home once a year after the season of the rains. But in that time they would have become more seaphant than human, losing knowledge of their own language

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and unable to communicate fluently with their own mothers. And once there was a young boy who turned inward, became mute, his eyes gone blank and opaque, seeing something nobody else could see. Once every few years the light would return to his eyes, and he would speak the words of some unknown tongue. So the gift was not always kind. But in some unfathomable way all forms of the gift were necessary, her mothers told her. The gift was part of the great circle of living and dying, giving and receiving.

In her fifteenth year Anasuya joined, for the first time, the women in the skin tents; she learnt the use of herbs to prevent or enable pregnancy, and she learnt to anticipate the long boats of the Sunset Clan men, as they came swiftly, urgently over the water. She came to know the men by their individual geometries, their particular graces of speech and movement, the delicacy with which one touched her, the dark pools of another's eyes. She learned the language of bodies, men with women, women with women, joining and coming apart. But most of all she learned the young man whose name was Hasha.

He had long limbs, and his eyes were as green as his skin, and he did not braid his black hair but let it fly about his face. The *athmis* was strong in him, but the visions it brought him made no sense to him or anyone else, however grand and strange they seemed to be. He liked to tell Anasuya about the things he saw: great, gleaming structures moving through emptiness, filled with people as a pod is with seeds; gold-colored

oceans that did not move, upon which tiny people crawled, erecting massive structures of stone. There was a restlessness about Hasha that disturbed and excited her. He wanted to roam the world and find the places he saw in his visions, even though the elders said those places didn't exist except in his mind. Don't let the Trickster take you, boy, they said. To leave, to step out of the circle—that is not the way of the children of the sea. But Hasha couldn't stop dreaming of what lay beyond the known world. The two of them would lie in one of the numerous hollows made by the roots of wind trees, where they were sheltered from the wild whipping of the broad, wing-like leaves, and there they would talk and make love.

Later that year Anasuya left the leafy canopies of her mothers' home and went with Lata to live on a raft above the seaweed forest so that she might better learn the use of her gift. Life with Lata was early rising into pink dawns, the taste of fresh-caught fish, the slippery feel of the reed-mats under her bare feet, and the teaching, learning, and classification of harmonies, their secret inter-relationships, the means by which they gave order and beauty to the world. Anasuya had already learned some of the words that enabled her to describe mathematical relationships; now she learned the language in greater depth and more formality, learning to weave concepts into songs. She learned the art of rendering abstractions into visual symbols drawn on wet sand with a finger—spirals, circles, lines wavy and straight, fraught with meaning. She

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sang with Lata, their voices rising over the constant wash of waves, the sound of the wind, and the raucous cries of the flying fish.

Their reed island swayed and floated lazily over the seaweed forest, anchored by a tether made of fish-antennae. At night they watched the two moons follow each other across the sky, and Anasuya understood with a shock of joy that the harmonies she sought existed not only in the sea but everywhere, expressed in the precise orbits of the moons, the wheeling of the distant stars.

Raindrops on still water.
Circles, ever expanding.
Only the Great Proportion
Stays the same.
If the circle were to spread
Across Sea and Earth and Sky
Would the Great Proportion remain?
It remains the same and yet
It contains infinity...
My poem is incomplete.

It was Lata who told her about other peoples, other worlds, thus confirming Hasha's visions. People of stone living in oceans of sand; star-people making their way from world to world in the sea of the sky. And from Lata Anasuya heard again the familiar stories of childhood: the Trickster Wave and the Three Women, the Cave of Delusion, stories about the seaphants, the leviathans...

“Tell me about the leviathans.”

Years later Anasuya would remember what it was like: lying beneath a sky full of stars, the water aglitter with moonlight, the squeaking of wet reeds rubbing against one another as the swells gently rocked the raft, the faint, pungent smell of fish drying across the doorway of the reed cabin. Lata’s voice in the darkness.

“What the leviathans are, nobody knows, but there are stories about them. You can tell a fish by the shape of the water that closes around it as it swims. All we are is impressions on the water, ripples in the sea. All we are—circles, feedback loops, cycles of the seasons, of being and becoming. The leviathans were once travelers in the seas of the sky, and there are stories about how they came to fall into this sea. Some stories say that they were struck by lightning from the stars and thus fell, and becoming immobile, learned to live at the bottom of the sea, spawning the sea-people among other living beings, becoming takers and givers of life. Other stories say that the leviathans, in their journeys across the starry reaches of the sky, were pursued by Darkness and Light and found escape here in the warm waters of this ocean, our Sagara. In these stories the leviathans were not all of one kind; the elders, who were a slow, gravid species, wished only to spend their lives in endless contemplation. The young, of various species, wanted to go out into the world, to seed it, to explore. So the younger species left and populated the sea, but they did not forget the old ones, who still dream on the ocean bed, who need them and give back

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to them even as they lie like great, drowned islands, their wide mouths sea-weed fringed, ever open, like caves. Yet other tales tell the opposite: that the humans were the ones who crashed into these waters from the sky, and the sea creatures, like the seaphants, came to them and aided them. But the humans had no athmis in them. So the sea creatures mated with them and gave them the athmis, and in return the humans gave them their abandoned sky vessels, which lay at the bottom of the ocean like a small mountain range, forming the reef we know today. The reef became a place of shelter for the great beings of the waters. In time the great beings lost their need of the open sea and grew large and heavy, and felt no need to go out of their shelter. The sea creatures of the open fed them with their own bodies when their bodies were of no use to them (as we do even now) and in their slow dreaming the leviathans did not forget the green sperm, the athmis, which they released into the water as a gift, as the vapasjal, that which is returned. As is the sap of the people of the sea also called vapasjal, because that, too, is returned to the sea and returns to the person so that in its signatures the person may read the sea's tongue and take part in its endless conversation."

Anasuya, listening sleepily, knew the sea was within her, as she was in the sea's embrace. Perhaps one day Hasha would understand too, that like her, he was part of the great system of interlocking circles. She thought of his restlessness and couldn't connect with it. In that moment of contentment she knew she would never leave.