

DARK IS A COLOR



FAY LAPKA RICHARDSON

“Why don’t we hear anybody?” I ventured.

Hal said harshly, “Let’s get the back open, *now*.”

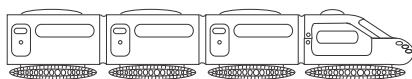
We were stung to life at the urgency in his voice, and Sherri lit the way for us as Ricky and I scrambled to help him open the back gate.

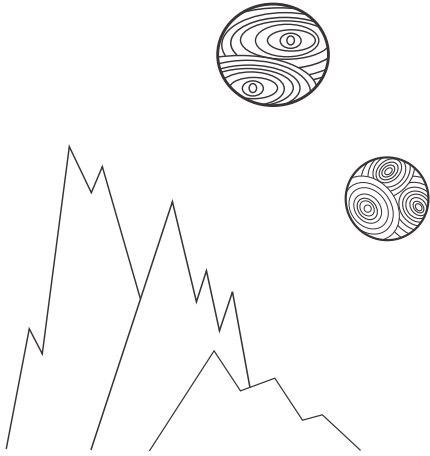
I think we all guessed what had happened even before the gate swung wide open to reveal nothing but blackness.

We were not at the Base; we were not even at a manned field-station. By the thick dark I knew instinctively that we were deeper into the End region than the half-light zone. We might be very near the deep End and very far from the End Base; we were all alone . . .

We stood rooted, staring into the darkness, trying to force our eyes to see something, anything. I don’t know how long we stood there like cold, stone sculptures . . .

Our glorious adventure had become a nightmare.





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FAY LAPKA RICHARDSON

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Dark is a Color
by Fay Lapka Richardson

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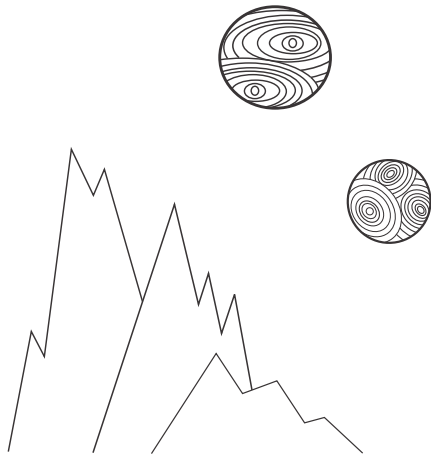
*for Mom and Dad,
who first introduced me
to the power of the Word.*

*This edition is in loving memory of my father,
Michael Samuel Lapka,
to whom passion and faith were inextricably welded,
and who wielded the Sword of Truth with eagerness
to the very end of his earthbound days.*



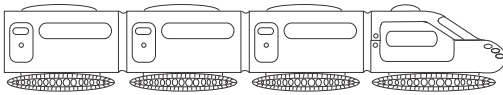
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1

Job's Poem



It was the shrieking of the marquins that woke me. Something, possibly a fluttering leaf, had terrified the high-strung, squirrel-like creatures housed in our backyard. I smiled sleepily as the screeching turned to chattering; quite likely, the pair were now earnestly trying to befriend the object of their panic.

Turning over in my bed, I focused my eyes on the clock and confirmed my suspicions: the alarm wouldn't go off for another hour and a half. I settled down preparing to drift back into my dream, but something in my brain kept niggling me awake. Like a tiny waving flag, it recalled me to the hushed, tense conversations between my parents that seemed to end suddenly when one of us kids entered the room.

This was strange in itself. My parents are not of the variety that feel children should be spared from problems.

Especially me. At fifteen, I am the oldest and quite accustomed to being asked my opinion on everything from Community policy to the existence of God and, lately, why my baby sister, Becca, had taken a violent dislike to the color blue.

But this time not only my ten-year-old brother, Ricky, was shut-out from my parents' conversations; even I was excluded.

From pooling the fragments of sentences we had managed to overhear, Ricky and I knew two things: my mother wanted to conduct some sort of research at the End Base, and my father was dead-set against the idea. I wondered if they would finally let us in on the discussion today.

Suddenly I threw back my pink covers and leaped out of bed; I hadn't checked the sky yet. I pulled back the heavy drapes, but the golden sun, fixed in the zenith, still glared at me from the ice-green sky. The season change hadn't begun yet. I sat on the floor, leaned my elbows on the window sill, and gazed out over the Main Base which is situated in the full-light region of the planet Clytie.

The cool, green atmosphere of the planet reminded me of Christmas on Earth's Pacific northwest coast. When Ricky and I were little, we always watched hopefully for any hint of snowflakes floating through the air, but we were usually disappointed. I felt like that as I looked for the change of seasons to happen; as yet I waited in vain.

In school we had heard about the event when the planet, following its elliptical orbit, would reach the nearest point to the sun and the atmosphere would actually change color for the summer season. My mother said the color change would occur over several days, and that I could hardly miss the occurrence. But she didn't understand why I looked so eagerly for the change. Aside from wanting to see the incredible phenomenon of the sky changing from green to purple from the horizon up, I found the green heavens vaguely anxiety-producing. I wondered what reaction the lavender summer sky would have on me. And for a few hours during the color change, if the weather cooperated,

there would be a blue, blue sky, and I would drink it in.

Many things about the tiny planet Clytie caused my uncomfortable, not-quite-right feeling; not the least was knowing that half the planet lived in perpetual darkness. I had seen satellite pictures showing the very sudden gradation from light to dark; it looked like a hole torn in the sky.

Of course, my family lives in the full-light region, a place of constant day, but after the novelty of looking at a fixed noonday sky wore off, it also had begun to bother me. There were no shadows where we lived—except for those thrown by the flat overhanging roofs of the buildings and the slashing metal blades of the windmills on the Main Base.

I caught my face cracking into a grin as I remembered Becka's initial reaction to the planet's strange half light/half dark split. On Earth, my mom had read us the mythological tale of "Clytie," the ancient Greek water nymph for whom the planet was named. Becka had been thrilled with the story of the little green water creature who had one day risen above the surface of her river home only to fall in love with the shining sun-god, Apollo. Apollo had scorned the love of the nymph, ignoring her worship of him. Zeus had finally taken pity on the withering nymph and turned her into a golden sunflower, so that her face could forever follow Apollo on his daily journey from East to West.

Soon after we had arrived on Clytie, Becka had run off looking everywhere for the nymph-turned-sunflower "Clytie." It had taken Dad hours to explain to her that Clytie-the-planet was simply named after Clytie-the-nymph because one side of the planet always faced the sun.

It had been six months since our arrival on Clytie, and a year before that my family had begun to plan for the move from

our home on Earth. It was primarily because of my mother's research in agriculture that we were allowed the opportunity to relocate on Clytie. I remember the day when Mom burst into the house, waving the official transfer papers, her grey eyes sparkling and round face beaming. She was speechless with delight, but the rest of us made up for her silence. My little brother shouted so loudly that Becka awakened from her nap, calling for me, "Caro, Caro!" I, as usual, forgot the gravity of my five year's seniority over Ricky, grabbed up Becka, and joined in the shrieking. Dad, still wearing his protective netting, rushed in from his beehives, fully prepared to rescue us from burglars or axe-murderers, and promptly joined in the celebration.

To be offered a position on Clytie is one of the highest honors a scientist can receive. My mother's research paper on "Embryo Transfer in Dairy Animals Using Unrelated Surrogates" had prompted the attention of the not-easily-impressed Central Scientific Community.

The governing body on Earth and on Clytie, the Community ultimately decides who does what and where. The Community was very interested in Mom's work because, although the focus of research on Clytie is for humans to be able to live off the planet's natural resources, the scientists and their families need to be able to survive without absolute reliance on supply shipments from Earth. Mom's work proposed that goat and cow embryos could be frozen, shipped to Clytie, and implanted in "browsers," large grazing animals native to the planet. The idea was that eventually the science and security Bases on Clytie could have their own fresh meat and milk and other dairy products.

"Browsers" are large, slow-moving, gentle animals that live in herds and graze on the short-curling, grey-green

vegetation that carpets Clytie's rolling hills. Browsers are considered mammals because they bear and feed their young, however they look more like reptiles. A browser has slanted, soft eyes, small, tight flaps of ears set close on a round head that abruptly tapers to a narrow nose and jaws shaped like calipers. Its thick, long neck is covered with plates running down it—resembling a strange mane. Encased in folds of silvery-grey skin, they slowly wave a rope-like, longish tail, and stomp from side to side on six thick legs like posts. Back on earth, whenever Mom viewed videos of Clytie's browsers, Becka's grey eyes would grow dark with horror and she would screech, "Dragons!" and run to her bedroom.

I shifted my position on the hard floor in front of my bedroom window. Pulling the dark blue drapes completely to one side, I squinted in the brightness of the sun. There were several distant, moving objects on the khaki-colored hills behind our housing project, and I thought they might be a herd of wild browsers. At this distance, and in the hazy heat waves, it was hard to identify anything without a viewer, and I, of course, had left mine downstairs on the kitchen table. It seems as though whenever I need my viewer it is in some other part of the house. I rested my head on my arms and thought back to our family's transfer.

We all had different reasons to explain our eagerness for a move to Clytie. Dad is a scientist, too. Instead of animals, however, he studies insects. On Clytie, there would be several lifetimes of "new" bugs for him to name. Ricky longed for adventure and travel. Although he, like the rest of us, is addicted to all creatures, Ricky has a true pioneer spirit; he yearns for discovery. Becka, then four, was excited simply because the rest of us were filled with electrified enthusiasm. Me, I wanted thrills

and to see strange creatures; but most of all I could hardly wait to see my best friend, Sherri Silverton, whose family had been transferred six months before ours.

Sherri and I are opposites—both in appearance and temperament. My parents and Sherri’s parents had all been college friends long before they married one another. Even though Sherri and I virtually grew up together and are the same age and height, we have always been very different.

Sherri is beautiful. She has huge, deep-brown eyes and long, radiant, brown-black hair. Her fragile-looking oval face has deeply etched cheek bones and a classic nose. Sherri always looks as though she is thinking wonderful thoughts, and she even smiles when she’s sleeping. With her light figure and graceful step, she is still appealing dressed in old cut-off jeans and a wrinkled tee shirt.

I have a square face with a slightly prominent jaw, and my nose is a nondescript lump. My eyes are hazel-brown with flecks of green and yellow, of all things. My hair is brown, flat, and fine-textured. The only thing that can be said of it is that it is there: fringed and layered, and just touching my shoulders. I tend to look grim—not because I’m in a bad mood, but because that’s the way I look when I’m thinking.

We are also different when it comes to school and likes and dislikes. Sherri is an artist. She pencil-sketches animals and flowers and has done some wild, expressionist-type paintings which, at her home on Earth, she used to hide under her bed. I was the only one she showed them to, and I liked them very much. Sherri gave me my favorite—a bright, swirling pink and blue landscape—as a parting gift when her family left for Clytie. I have it hanging above my bed now. Sherri is very popular, and the whole room lights up when she bounces in excitedly

to tell everyone her latest adventure. And me? I have trouble simply tracing maps for geography classes, and I can be in the classroom for twenty minutes before anyone really notices I'm there. I love science and find math less interesting but quite bearable. Sherri barely scrapes through math and science, but she has often tutored me in languages.

Although we are so different, we were close friends and I missed her very much. There was no regular mail service from Clytie to Earth, so I hadn't heard from her since she and her family left. I could hardly wait to see her again.

The month-long journey to Clytie had ended with all of us—including Ricky—praying never to see the inside of a space vessel again. Our cabin, like everything else aboard ship, was dull-grey and tiny; in one room our entire family ate and slept. There was only one very small, round window. The voyage had been exciting the first week and mildly interesting the second week. By the third week it was boring. The fourth week found us climbing the walls, and Ricky and I squabbled continually over the window seat and floor space, games and books. I found myself longing for the outdoors: for wind, grass, animals and birds, and for sunshine that I could feel. I was sick of eating lukewarm reconstituted food on small, green polymer trays. The crew had been pleasant, but their first concern was their work. They were more worried about the condition of their freight of scientific equipment and supplies than about us. Space travel, I quickly decided, is anything but exotic.

Once we were established residents on the Main Base of Clytie, I had a more realistic view not only on space travel but of the planet itself. Clytie was strange and rather wonderful in its eccentricities; however, I was homesick for Earth.

Although on Earth we had lived in a largely scientific community, we had still been part of a normal village. Every day on the way to school, Sherri, Ricky, and I had passed the neighbors' wood-frame houses and cut through the fields of the busy farming cooperative. The community offices and the Communications and Network Station were next door to the old grey-stone school, and I used to stare at the slow-waving wooden windmills in the power fields on the outskirts of the village from the window of my biology class. Our classmates' parents were farmers, Community officials, technicians, laborers, teachers, or scientists. We were a diverse and, for the most part, a happy crew.

The Main Base is no Earth village. The Air Vessel, Transportation, and Communication centers are located several kilometers from the core of the Base, and so is the power-field with row upon row of flashing turbine-shaped windmills. As you pass through the security station, officially entering the Base on the main track, you see Agriculture Research, with its long, shiny barns and glittering fences, where Mom works. The next building, about a kilometer along the track, is the two-storey hospital building and a complex of various research laboratories and offices all of the same dull rose-stone with flat, white overhanging roofs. When he isn't out in the field collecting insects, Dad works in a lab there. The offices of the Central Scientific Community are located adjacent to the hospital.

There are three smaller tracks running perpendicular to the main entry track. These lanes provide access to family housing units. At the end of the third small track is the Main Base Educational Facility, where we go to school. No one quite knows why the school building is so far away from everything else. Mom and Dad were quickly, and gratefully, established into

the neighborhood driver pool to chauffeur us back and forth.

Clytie is cream-of-the-crop elite. Everything new in scientific theory, technology, and education is layered into our lives. Instead of old farm trucks we have crawlers: yellow utility vehicles with caterpillar treads that can be linked to pull any number of box-like container units. The long rows of engines and containers remind me of centipedes crawling over the grey-brown hills, around and between the rings of Jonah trees that pattern the surrounding region.

Here, school is more like college. The first two weeks we were here, Ricky and I took test after test to establish our aptitudes and various subject levels. Virtually all the kids in our new school have scientist parents. Although we take most classes in groups, we are encouraged to study independently and are assigned mentors for our areas of special abilities.

All the conditions here are new and strange to us: the peculiar animals and plants, the intense scientifically-minded community, the curious stone buildings with their uniform porch-like roofs, and the glaring yellow crawlers that roar along the tracks. But there were other things besides these and the green-colored sky that bothered me on Clytie. One was the weirdness of perpetual noon-day brightness.

At first I thought it would be great to live in a place that had no darkness, especially after the blackness of space during our long journey to Clytie. But I soon missed the cool brilliant starlight and the thick moonlight of Earth's nights. I dreamed of night campfires, orange sparks rising and popping, and story-telling and star-watching. It wasn't until much later that I learned that we only truly learn to love light by experiencing the lack of it.

We grew used to our own type of “night” on Clytie, but I didn’t like it. Mom and Dad told us of the earlier studies indicating that people just couldn’t handle eternal day. Apparently, running a Base where people worked in shifts around the clock had resulted in extreme mental stress and breakdown among personnel. So, long before we got to Clytie a law had been formed which was strictly enforced, called the PM Shift. It worked by pretending that a twenty-four-hour day existed. It designated eight of these hours as PM, or “night.” No one— except security and hospital personnel, of course— was allowed to work or require anyone else to work during the PM. From 22:00 to 06:00 every house had heavy blinds drawn on the windows and the tracks were silent.

The End region of Clytie had the opposite problem, and this seemed to me to be far worse. There, it was always night. And in the deep End, it was blackest black, for not even starlight or light from Clytie’s two moons could penetrate the thickened, frozen atmosphere. There were many myth-like stories about the dark frosted desert and the strange creatures who inhabited it.

Animals and all creatures have fascinated me for as long as I can remember. So at the first opportunity I turned a school assignment into something I was desperately curious about: the End region creatures. I found it hard going because not much research had been conducted in that hostile environment and the available literature on the region was either too technical for me to understand or too vague, and reminded me of fictional stories—like the ancient Tolkien fantasies on Earth. I grasped fragments from the first and thoroughly enjoyed the strange speculations of the second.

All the creatures in the End region are truly, and permanently, nocturnal. A few pictures show strange beasts with huge eyes glowing red, reflecting and magnifying the small portion of light they received. These animals live on the border of the half-light zone. There are scattered drawings among the speculative literature suggesting eyeless beings, or creatures with only a rudimentary eye-spot like Earth's humble planarian. Unlike planarian, the sensitive pigment would not lead the animal toward light, but warn it away. Our light is their darkness.

I was both revolted and fascinated by these weird beasts, and so I was thrilled when I overheard my parents discussing a possible venture into the region. I hoped my mother would win the argument and that, by some miracle, she would take me along with her.

Just in time I glanced at my clock and leaped to hit the button before the alarm went off. Every morning I had the same contest with that alarm—it has the most horrible “BBuurrRR!” *Guaranteed to put anyone into a mad mood*, I thought, and wished for the millionth time that Clytie had music radio.

I made it into the bathroom just as Ricky came out of his bedroom. He scowled blackly at me and turned to go back in; I heard the thud as he threw himself on his bed. Mom was waking Becka, and Dad was clattering plates and cutlery in the kitchen.

As I brushed my teeth I stared solemnly at the mirror over the sink. I had read somewhere that every woman—no matter how plain—has “spots of beauty.” Apparently, if a woman can find out what these are, she can use them to her advantage and make people think she is attractive. I unwound the towel from my freshly-showered head and viewed the dark, medusa-like snarls. My hair is certainly not a “beauty spot.”

“I’m out, Ricky,” I called. He stomped morosely out of his room. Poor Ricky hates school on Clytie. His teachers make him work to his potential.

I didn’t mind school. That is, the learning part of it. I thought it was great to be encouraged to research whatever I was interested in. There was only one thing about school that I dreaded—seeing Sherri. Still, we had worked the matter out civilly, although we hadn’t spoken of it at all. We simply said “Hi!” briefly and casually and went our separate ways: me, usually alone, and Sherri, always surrounded by the most popular crowd. It reminded me of old Earth movies in which distant acquaintances bump into each other, smile with their teeth, and say, “We really must get together, soon!” knowing that they never will.

So that was the final thing that bothered me about Clytie: Sherri and I were no longer friends.

I pulled on snug, black jeans and a peach-colored sleeveless sweater. My hair was almost dry, and I pulled it back into a high pony-tail, the fringed layers falling out of the thick wooden clasp. I looked at myself critically and pulled out a few more wisps here and there. I didn’t think that the style really did all that much for my squarish face, but the ponytail and the black jeans were considered regulation.

“You look nice in peach,” Mom greeted me, as I sat down to breakfast. Becka was refusing to drink her morning milk out of the blue cup, and Mom, who had finally given in, was transferring her milk to my yellow mug.

“This blue phobia is driving me to distraction,” she said to me through gritted teeth. “Are you sure you don’t have any ideas about it?”

“Nope,” I answered cheerfully. I rinsed out the blue cup

and filled it with reconstituted fruit juice. I hate milk.

"Maybe you could ask her teacher," Dad suddenly said to me. "She might have some clue as to its origins."

"You make her sound like a dinosaur, Dad," Ricky remarked. Dad grinned and adjusted his glasses.

"Not Becka's origins, we already have a pretty good theory about that. I mean The Great Blue Phobia's Genesis."

"Speaking of Genesis . . . you have this morning's reading, don't you, Caro?" asked Mom, smacking my dad on her way over to the table.

"Oh," I said, "I forgot." I ran upstairs to my room and pulled my Bible out from under my bed. Most mornings we take turns reading a section from the Bible or some other religious writing. I had been so busy trying to figure out what Mom wanted to do in the End region that I forgot it was my morning.

I flipped through the pages and came to my bookmark. I paused where I had been reading about Job's suffering and his reaction to the unfairness of life. Did I dare to read it out loud?

From downstairs Ricky shouted impatiently, "Come on, Caro, hurry up! I want to check on the animals before school."

I ran back to the kitchen and said firmly, "I'm reading from Job, third chapter." Mom looked a little puzzled, Dad attentive.

*Damn the day I was born,
The night that said, "A boy is begot."*

*That day—let it be darkness.
God above ignore it,
No light break upon it,*

*Darkness and gloom claim it,
Cloud settle over it,
Eclipse terrify it.
That night—gloom seize it.*

*Include it not in the days of the year,
In the roll of the months let it not enter.*

*Yea, that night be sterile,
Let no joyful sound come in.
Let the day-cursers damn it,
Those skilled to stir Leviathan.
Its twilight stars be darkened,
Let it seek light in vain,
Nor see the eyelids of the dawn—*

*Since it closed not the womb's doors,
To hide suffering from my eyes.*

There was silence and I knew, suddenly and overwhelmingly, that it had been a mistake to read it. Then Dad cleared his throat. “That’s certainly a powerful poem,” he said.

“Sort of makes you glad to be alive, doesn’t it?” Ricky muttered sarcastically, looking at me in disgust.

Mom still looked amazed, her grey eyes round. I felt myself redden and pretended to wipe crumbs from my Bible as I closed it. They hadn’t understood at all why I had chosen it.

I wasn’t all that clear myself why the poem hit me so hard, but I knew that wrapped up within it were all my forebodings about Clytie and, most of all, about the loss of my friendship with Sherri. I suddenly felt even sillier. Read out

loud about the bright cheeriness of our honey-yellow kitchen table, with the sun pouring through the window, the poem seemed ridiculous. It sounded as if I wanted to commit suicide or something—and, even more embarrassing, it seemed to say that I blamed Mom and Dad for even having me.

There was a knock at the door, and I jumped up to let Hal Rokmanoff in. Everyone seemed glad for the interruption, especially me.

Hal and his dad live next door. Hal is in the same grade-section as I am and is part of our neighborhood driver pool to and from school. It was Dad's week to drive us all to school.

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Hunter. It's just me this morning—the Lindells are going to the dentist. They tried to call you but couldn't get through," Hal announced.

My mother, hustling Becka into her shoes, paused and said suspiciously, "Becka, where is the linker? Hal, I think Becka knows why the Lindells couldn't call through."

Becka read the look on Mom's face that translated: *Enough is enough!* "It fell in the cupboard," she mumbled, pointing.

I pulled open the pantry doors, and there it was under the bags of pasta—a bright blue linker. Mom sat back on her heels and shook her head. Dad just laughed.

Hal and I wandered out to feed the animals while Dad finished his breakfast. Hal wears glasses, like my father, and is built something like Dad, too. Hal is a head taller than me, and very skinny. His dark hair is a little on the long side and curls on the very ends; when it is messy, it flips up in the most hilarious manner. Hal was a newcomer to Clytie—even newer than we were. He and his dad had arrived just a month before. Hal had, even in one month, become a good friend, and he knew about

my desire to be a research veterinarian and about my fascination with the End region animals. Hal is a good listener; Mom says that he is very “steady.” We hardly ever see Hal’s dad, who is an engineer and works at the power station. When Dr. Rokmanoff drives us to school, he never says a word. Hal almost never mentions his mother, but somehow, from the few things I have heard, I think she is still alive.

My warf owl, Brun, was sleeping, and he looked at me sulkily when I knocked over his water dish. He pretended to slash us with his beak and then turned his back on Hal and me. I refilled Brun’s water dish while Hal dug some fresh sod for him. I sprinkled some dead bugs on it for him. Brun looked at us suspiciously over his shoulder until we moved on to the next cage. Then he hobbled over to the dirt and started rooting around in it.

Barry and Harry, our marquins, were running in circles after each other. They were extremely pleased to see us and screamed, “Hee, hee, hee!” in their high little voices. They are like ground squirrels, only bigger, and their bushy tails trail limply behind them instead of curling up over their backs. They have very loyal, optimistic personalities—anything we put in their cage they try to eat. They, like Brun, refuse to go back into the wilds. We cage them only to keep them out of the house.

Ricky was hovering over his latest acquisition. It was about half a meter long, with a grey-green oblong carapace. I thought it looked like a long skinny turtle. Ricky rolled it over, and we saw that there were openings for three appendages on each side.

“I found it by a Jonah tree pool,” he said.
We nodded.

Jonah trees are a common sight in the country surrounding the Main Base. The trees are a khaki-grey color and remind me of oversized horsetail plants on Earth, with one expanding stalk and slight feathery-looking branches all the way down to the ground. Jonah trees grow as tall as ten meters, but their trunks are never straight. They always bend defiantly into the wind. When you come across Jonah trees you watch your step; they border strangely circular, nearly bottomless, murky pools of water.

Ricky had sunk a wide bucket into the ground, filled with the grey muddy water from one of the Jonah tree pools that dotted the hills around us. He set the strange reptile on the edge of the bucket and let it go. In a dark streak it disappeared into the water.

“Wow! It can really move!” I exclaimed. “Did you finish with the lab animals?”

Ricky nodded. Lying on his stomach, he groped in the tub for the strange beast.

Hal once asked what my parents think of all our pets. He looked surprised when I said that, within a certain number, they really don't mind as long as the animals are happy and well looked after. My parents themselves keep an assortment of animals and insects for research. These “lab animals,” as we call them, are never tamed. Mom and Dad hold them for observation and cataloguing and then release them from wherever they were collected. This is not officially part of their jobs; it is simply something they enjoy.

My mother, although her research is in agriculture, is a veterinarian, and my father is an entomologist. When either of my parents voice the odd complaint about the assortment of chirping, clicking, and purring creatures that Ricky and I seem

to collect effortlessly, we blame them. My mother smiles, but my father sometimes looks pained. “At least most insects fit into a jam jar,” he usually says. “Try and do that with your owl,” he had added yesterday, as he spooned a stray feather from his morning coffee.

Mom called for us to get our books together and warned us that Dad was leaving in three minutes.

“I guess Mom’s going in later,” I said to Ricky as we walked back to the house.

“Or catching a ride with someone else,” he replied.

Breaking into a run, Ricky went to wash the mud off his arms. I heard Mom scolding him for getting so filthy before school.

In a few minutes we were all in the crawler and I hadn’t even had time to tell Hal about the possible venture into the End region.

For the first time that morning I noticed that Dad looked worried again. Maybe things in general also bothered him about Clytie: the green sky, the utter division of light and dark. But I thought it was more likely that he was concerned about my mother. I was sure that he would have liked to discourage Mom from ever going into the End region of Clytie.

My mother, once I thought about it, had been especially bouncy that morning—that is, until I had read Job’s poem.

Mom loves a challenge, and moving to a different planet is like an exciting game to her. She also loves her work, and to combine adventure and animal research is for her the ultimate. My father is the balancing, common-sense one. So far, up until that morning, anyway, he had been successful in raising enough objections to stop Mom from starting research in the End region. That morning, my mother did not quite meet

his eye when he kissed her good-bye. She can never hide her emotions—she seemed lit from the inside out with excitement.

If her request has been approved by the Central Scientific Community, she will go to the end region, I thought. If she does, somehow, someway, I have to go with her.

Only then did I notice that Hal seemed to be in a suppressed state of excitement as well, and I mouthed, “What?” at him. He widened his eyes and made it clear by gestures and grimaces that he was waiting until we were alone to tell me news of massive proportions.

Dad caught some of this in the rear-view mirror and asked Hal, dryly, if he was suffering from space trauma. Hal blushed and stuttered “N-no, sir.” Hal is easily embarrassed and turns bright red over anything.

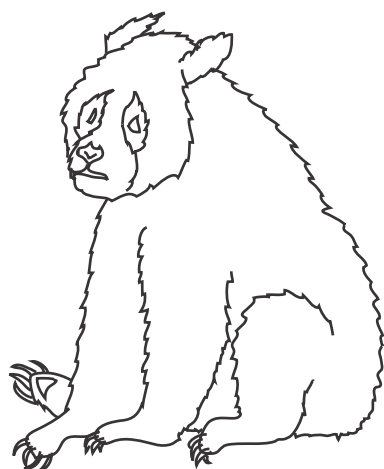
We pulled into the drop-off lot, and my Dad turned to ask the question that all of us are sick of: “Got your respirators?” We chorused “Yes” in bored voices and then were out of the crawler yelling “Bye.”

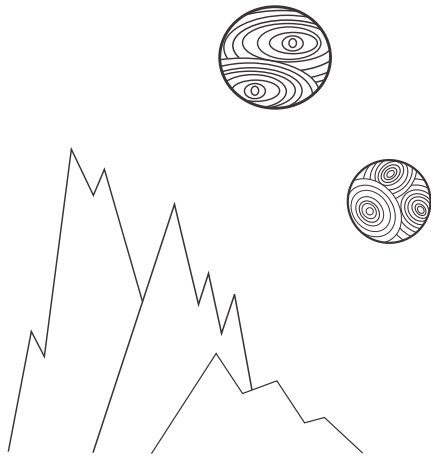
Clytie’s atmosphere, although breathable, is a slightly different proportion of nitrogen to oxygen. At times, depending on the weather and our own biochemistry and exertion, we need extra oxygen. I hadn’t used my respirator yet, but Hal has had to a couple of times. *Just like Hal’s luck*, I thought. My father explained that if Hal hadn’t used his respirator as soon as he felt the heady breathlessness come on, he would have experienced something like what scuba divers on Earth call “the Bends,” which can be fatal.

We heard the bell almost as soon as we tumbled out of the crawler. Hal groaned, knowing that he’d have to keep his news until lunch period. I said, “Meet you under the fire escape at noon,” and hurried to home room. Hal carefully walked

toward the school building. He is always late now because he will not run when outside for fear of an attack.

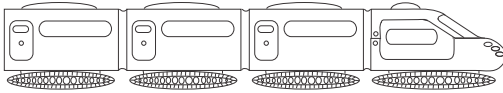
I passed Sherri on my way to class but pretended that I didn't see her. I wondered, affecting a great show of looking at the hall clock as I dashed past her, why she was all alone.





2

“That Day”



As I sped down the green, plasti-coated hall, the familiar school essence enveloped me. I think that you could blindfold me and ship me to any planet in the universe, and if you set me down in a school building, I would know where I was by the smell.

I entered my Biology class and took my usual seat. Glancing out the window, I grinned. Hal was just now slowly climbing the stairs to the main door of the school.

The classroom was buzzing, as little groups clustered around the few people at their desks. I heard someone say, “Ask Caro,” but before I could find out what was up, Dr. Lutes entered the room and everyone scattered to their seats.

White-haired and white-coated Dr. Lutes ignored the flurry and immediately began the lecture. Everyone scrambled, frantically grabbing pens and notebooks, leaning over each other hoping to see what they had just missed. Lutes is my assigned mentor and my favorite teacher, but he isn’t easy. No one can get away with anything in his class. He never yells or sends notes home; he simply ignores anything he considers to