

Sari still remembered the last time the mountain began to smoke. The ground had moved, knocking bowls and water jugs from the wall of the house her father and his family had built from clay and mud long before she was born. The rumbling that came down from the mountain had sounded to her childhood ears like a great and hideous laughter. And to this day, when the rumble came again, ten years after she had first heard it, she still imagined that was what the rumble was: Father Paga and the other gods of the smoking mountain laughing at her village and its silly, insignificant problems. As a child, the thought had filled her with wonder, images of gods feasting on goats and fish and even the ill-fated villagers foolish enough to venture too high up the mountain's slopes, and drinking their wine which she had heard was a deadly poison to all but the immortal. But now that the smoke was again rising from the mountain and the rumble had returned and the bowls and jugs of the village again crashed to the floor, the sound was far from comforting.

She had first heard it the day before, just as the sun was setting into the ocean. The messenger ran by their house, shouting to the village that smoke had been seen on the mountain. The few chores that remained to be done before night came were put aside and all the people of the village went to the square to see for themselves and whisper in muted and knowing tones about what they had done to incur the gods' anger. Sari was there, straining her eyes like all the others, trying to see some of the smoke which was supposedly rising up from the mountain. Behind, someone had shouted, "I see it," followed by several shouts of, "Yes, there!" Someone else had said, "I don't see," and Sari had not felt so bad. Maybe it's not there, she thought. Maybe it was only a black cloud like we see sometimes when the nights become long, or maybe just a flock of birds that someone had mistaken for smoke. Maybe the mountain isn't alive again. But then the rumble had come. She had heard it coming, they all had, but Sari especially had felt the tingle in her ears. She had thought that the sound she had so loved years ago would bring joy to her now, but when she saw the trees far outside the village trembling, she had been filled suddenly only with fear. Fear, perhaps, that the gods were now laughing at her. It had come quickly to the village, but to Sari the wait had been unbearable. She had been

sure the quivering ground would split open and swallow her into its belly, where Little Ti, the trickster, would tease his dogs with her liver. The rumble came at last and many villagers fell from their feet and many more would have if others had not caught them as they fell, but the ground did not open for Sari, for which she had silently thanked the gods of the mountain.

There had then been no doubt that the gods had returned to their feasts on the weathered mountain ridges. Luzah, the holy man, had appeared and announced that the lottery would be the very next day when the sun was high.

The next day, the villagers were trying to go about the daily business of living on their island, but they could all see the blackness seeping into the sky above them, and it is difficult to live in such a shadow. There had been another rumble, a smaller one this time, just as the sun had approached its highest point, and all chores were immediately forgotten as all the nervous villagers took the slight quake as a sign that it was time for the meeting in the village center. Even Luzah had apparently come to the same conclusion, for he was waiting for the villagers when they came. He was dressed in full ceremonial garb, befitting the solemnity of the occasion. The three robes he wore trailed behind him; the first white, the second black, the third red. His headdress was made of the same coarse cloth as his robes, wrapped around the base of the headpiece itself which was carved out of bleached whale bone and had a large, smooth black stone set in the center. His staff was a simple, wooden rod, sharpened at one end. At the top was tied a leg bone taken from the dog that had been sacrificed to the gods of the mountain during the holy man's initiation ceremony, with two feathers from a rare sea bird hanging from it. A quarter of the way down the staff was the skull of Luzah's teacher, the holy man he had replaced upon the former's death; the hollow sockets of the dead shaman's eyes watching everything on behalf of the gods he served. The dried skin of a spotted snake was wrapped around the remainder of the mystic staff, which the holy man wielded with unmistakable power as he stood at the center of the crowd of villagers that had gathered for the Lottery.

The Lottery was the oldest tradition of their island; the first, it is said, to be created after her ancestors had arrived from across the ocean. Seeking to please the

gods that lived in the smoking mountain, those ancestors had established the Lottery based on the suggestion of Kylra, the first holy man of the village. It had not always worked. Some of the oldest villagers still told stories of when the Lottery had not been sufficient to appease the gods' anger and most of the village had been destroyed as a consequence, but the gods, generous as they were, had allowed enough villagers to survive so that the village could be rebuilt.

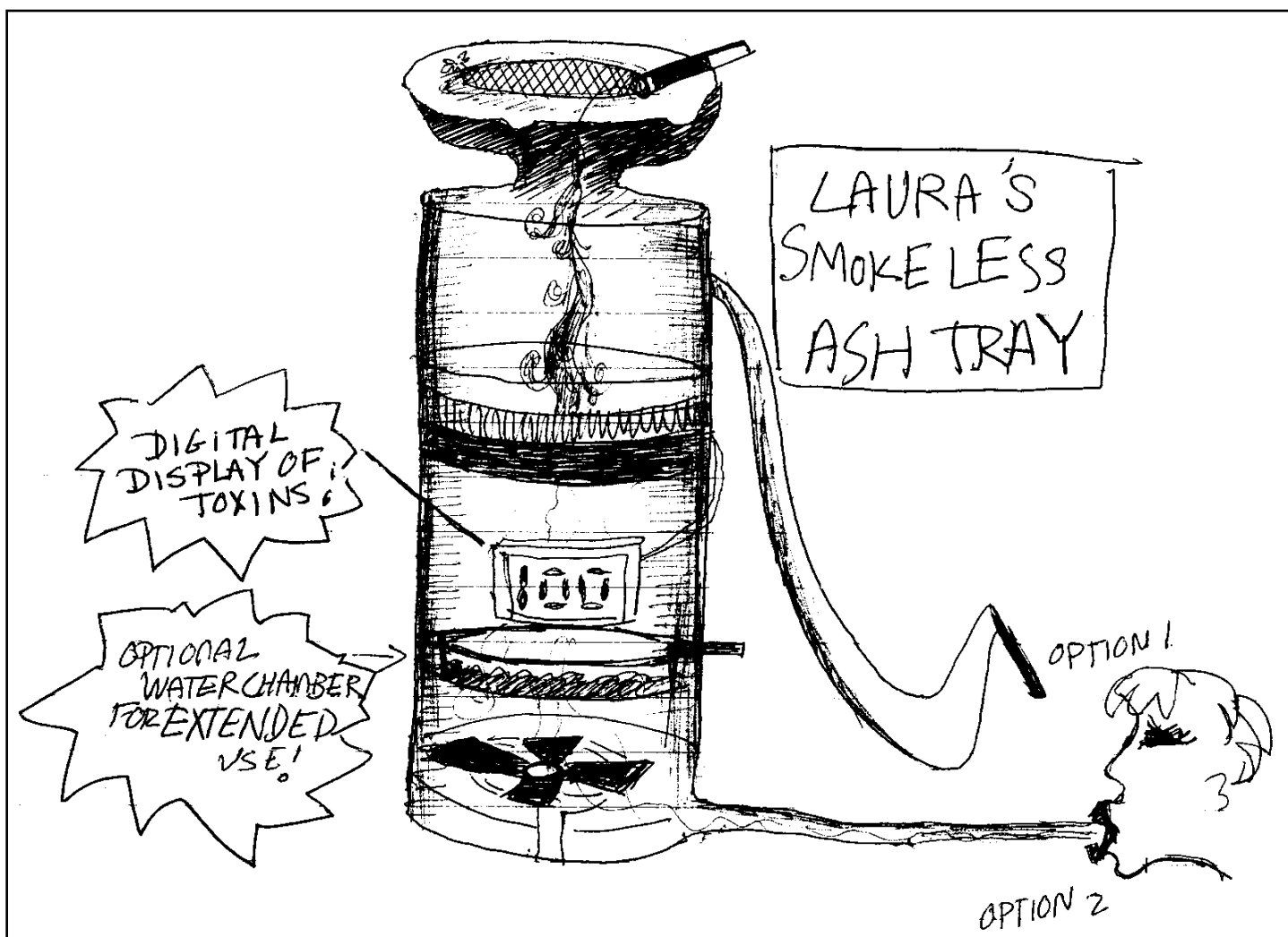
The ceremony of the Lottery was simple and even beautiful to watch, in Sari's eyes if in no one else's. Upon reaching the Age of Rights, every villager's name was written on paper made by one of Luzah's apprentices from the bark of one of the trees common to the island. When a person grew too old to do their chores or died, his or her name was removed from the list of villagers. Luzah used the same paper to record the island's history, as the other holy men had done before him, so that the past would not be forgotten. At the time of the lottery, held whenever the black smoke marked the awakening of the gods in the mountain, or so the holy man taught, all the names of the villagers were placed in the Lottery bowl and Luzah took a name from it. Whoever was chosen in the Lottery would then be treated to a great feast and then sent off up the mountain to please the gods by offering his life in place of the village.

Now, with the village gathered around him, Luzah spoke, saying in his most commanding voice (and commanding it was), "The gods are again dissatisfied. The black smoke is rising into the sky and the ground beneath our village is trembling. The time of the Lottery has come again!" There were some cheers here, but mostly the crowd was dumb with fear. They knew death was close, and at any moment their village could burn and tumble around them. Luzah sensed this trepidation. "I know some of you fear that the Lottery may not be enough, and well you should. But I also know others of you question the purpose of the Lottery. Do you not see the fire in the mountain, threatening to burn us all? Do you not fear the power of the gods? You should fear these things, all of you! Father Paga, for all he had given us, could just as easily take away our homes, take away our gardens and even the fish from the ocean. In his anger, he could destroy every one of us and leave no one to rebuild! Surely you all see how fragile we

are before the power of the gods. The Lottery, however flawed, is the only thing we have to protect ourselves from their wrath. It is what has been done in our village for many years, hundreds of years, since before any of our grandmothers were born. It is the way of our ancestors and it has kept us safe for that time, kept our village alive. The Lottery is not barbaric, as I have heard whispered among the fishing boats. It is necessary. We must bring the favor of Father Paga, and the Lottery is the only way we can do that."

No one spoke, but nor did anyone seek to protest what Luzah had said. As it always had, the Lottery would proceed. "Bring the bowl," Luzah cried, and the oldest apprentice merged from inside Luzah's temple carrying a great clay pot. Inside the clay pot were the names of all able-bodied villagers, all who would make a proper sacrifice to the gods. With very little ceremony, Luzah reached into the pot and withdrew a single piece of paper. He said, "The Lottery has been chosen," and then read Sari's name to the villagers. There was a cheer and Sari felt her heart rise. To be chosen for such an honor! The crowd parted as she made her way to Luzah. He greeted her warmly, taking her hand in his and, turning to the Village, said, "The Lottery is over. The feast will begin." The cheer was deafening, but all Sari could hear was her own blood rushing with excitement and her heart pounding in her chest. The crowd dispersed to prepare for the feast. A great and strong dog was found and killed. A fire was built in the village center on which the dog's meat would be cooked. Everyone was excited as the feast approached. Dog was a rare delicacy in the village, eaten only at the initiation of a new holy man of the village and on the night of the Lottery. Barrels of wine made from the juice of the berries that grew far from the village were brought out, for there would be much merry-making tonight. When the sun was low, Luzah's apprentice began to beat a rhythm on the ceremonial drums, signaling the time of the feast. Sari had spent the day inside Luzah's temple being blessed and prepared for the journey ahead. Luzah had stressed how important her sacrifice was to the village and how the gods would welcome her for her courage. The people of the village gathered outside the temple and Sari heard them feasting on fruit and fish and passing around the meat of the dog, indulging themselves in a manner permitted only in the face of the smoking mountain. They drank the wine gluttonously and were many of them drunk already when the sun finally set below the horizon and Sari emerged with Luzah. The villagers cheered at the sight of her and beckoned her to join the feasting, but Sari was nervous and ate very little.

After the sky had darkened more, Luzah rose to his feet and called for silence, which was duly granted by all but the most inebriated villagers, and even their shouts were reduced to whispers. "For many hundreds of years," Luzah began, "our village has thrived on this island. For all that time, we have lived in harmony with the gods of the mountain. They have, over the years, demanded that some of us give ourselves to them, willingly and without fear. They speak their will through the rumbles of the ground and through the Lottery. Now, through that sacred vessel, our beloved Sari has been honored with being chosen by the gods. Tonight, she will leave the village and climb the mountain and shall by morning be in the company of Father Paga. We honor Sari with this feast, and also honor Father Paga, who brings us life with every fish in the nets and every fruit on the trees, Shimara and the three goddesses of the night, and Little Ti, the mischief-maker and overseer of the Land of the Dead." Luzah paused in his speech,



took a cup filled with wine and, raising it above his head, said, "We drink to Sari!"

There was a great cheer from the villagers. Sari could not help but take a tiny step back, wishing she could block out the sound of the villagers, certain she was not worthy of their praise. Luzah again called for silence and she turned to Sari. "Goodbye, Sari. The gods are indeed fortunate," he said. This struck Sari as a peculiar thing to say, for why would the gods rely on fortune? Then, Luzah leaned close to her and she managed to suppress a shudder of revulsion as he pressed his cracked, trembling lips to her cheek. He then took her hand and began to lead her from the village. Once they were on the path that leads to the mountain, Luzah stopped but indicated that she should continue, which she did. Luzah watched her go, then turned and walked back to the feast which would continue long into the night.

The jungle, strange in the darkness, surrounded Sari as she walked. She knew dimly where she was going, she had followed this path before in the daylight, but she nevertheless stumbled several times. At her back was the steady sound of the villagers in celebration. She knew she should be proud of what she was about to do, and for some time she had been. But as Luzah had rubbed fragrant oils over her body, chanting prayers to all the gods and goddesses, it had occurred to her that it was now her time to die. And she did not want to. In all the stories told of those chosen by the Lottery, Sari had never heard of anyone who had rejected the call to the gods. But now here she was, scared to go forward to the mountain, but too ashamed to turn back to the village. No one denounces the Lottery. The people who went to the gods were regarded with great esteem in the village and the stories of their lives became the stories told to the children. But, Sari thought, what good is honor after I am dead? Still, she did not slow her step, continuing more from shame than from any sense of duty.

She was questioning the beliefs of the island; the beliefs of her parents and friends. What gave her, a woman in the eyes of the village but still young, the right to question the will of the gods. And here, at last, she saw her mistake. What gods were these that they followed so obediently, like a pup after his mother? Where had they come from? Sari had been taught that the gods had always lived on this island, but who among them had ever set eyes of Father Paga? Even Luzah had never claimed anything so outrageous. For the first time in her life, Sari doubted the very existence of Father Paga and his children. The fierceness of this new resolve surprised Sari. In the span of just moments, everything she had believed, everything she had learned, disappeared, leaving her with nothing. If there were no gods awaiting her in the smoking mountain, what purpose would she serve by throwing herself into it?

The jungle disappeared suddenly from around her and she was staring at the long path that twisted slowly up the mountain. Against the dark blue of the sky, she could see the blackness of the smoke rising still from the mountain clearly. It did not come from the mountain's highest peak, but rather poured out from the right side. If she were a goddess, she would make her home on the mountain's highest peak. She decided then to go to the mountain and see for herself if it truly was the home of the gods so that she could return to the village and tell all who would listen of she had, or had not, seen.

For no reason she could see, a memory suddenly drifted through her head. She remembered herself as a young child and praying every night to the goddess Shimara. Her mother, when she was very young, had told her of how long ago the children of the village had been plagued by terrible nightmares in which spirits of the dead crowded their dreams. The villagers had not known what to do, their children

were becoming sick from the nightmares. So the holy man had journeyed to the mountain to ask the gods for help, but before he reached the top, he'd been confronted by the goddess Shimara who protected the gods of the mountain from intruders. The holy man told Shimara of the nightmares and it is said that Shimara took pity on the suffering of the children and had promised to protect the good children of the village as they slept. It was for that reason, Sari's mother had told her, that she should always pray to Shimara before going to sleep, and if she was a good child, the goddess would protect her from nightmares.

The thought of a goddess controlling her dreams seemed strange at the least to Sari now, having shed the burden of unquestioningly piety, but she enjoyed the thought of her mother telling her stories before bed. She wished suddenly for her mother to be there now, walking the rocky path beside her, telling her a story that would magically make her fears melt away. She was alone, though, except perhaps for a wild pig rooting through the trees for dinner.

The thought of the pig brought to mind the village and the village brought to mind the Lottery. Why was she suddenly questioning such an ancient tradition? The Lottery had existed since long before she was born, and regardless of what she said or did now, it would certainly exist for centuries to come. It was such a part of the village's life, of its stories, of its most secret thoughts, that Sari doubted the village could exist without it. And even if it could, what would happen the next time the mountain threw its smoke into the sky? Would the villagers feast, as they were doing tonight, or would they throw themselves into the ocean out of fear of the fires that may come and consume the village? Still, these questions were nothing more than idle thoughts to Sari. She did not fear that her impiety would bring the wrath of the gods, because the gods she had not long before worshipped and had been willing to die for were now nothing more than stale thoughts in her mind. It was liberating in a way. She did not miss the gods; did not miss Luzah's pretty benedictions or play at piety. The only thing she missed, and this thought struck her so suddenly that she had to stop for a moment to consider it, was Shimara watching over her dreams and keeping her safe as she slept. She knew then that she could never be a child again, a loss she felt more deeply than that of all the gods that were said to live on the mountain.

Sari began walking again after a moment and as she did so, she heard a slight rustle from behind her, only slightly louder than a breeze blowing through a tree. Sari turned and saw a woman walking beside her. She had skin slightly darker than Sari's and her face was the most beautiful Sari had ever seen. Her dress was brilliantly colored with all the colors of all the flowers that glow on the island. Sari knew everyone in the village and knew that this woman was not from there, and so she suddenly grew very afraid.

"Don't be afraid," the woman said gently, her voice sounding like the smell of the sea after a storm. "I will not hurt you." The way she spoke the words, Sari knew she was telling the truth; knew, in fact, that the woman was incapable of lying.

Sari studied the woman's face carefully, studying the lines around her eyes and the smooth skin on her cheeks. She was the most beautiful woman Sari had ever seen. Her hair fell down past her shoulders, farther than Sari's even did. Her dress was equally beautiful, as though it held in its colors the spirit of the whole island. Sari realized suddenly who it was that she was talking to, and so realizing, stopped walking and dropped to her knees, her face turned downward to the dust of the trail. "You are Shimara," Sari said, the awe in her voice matched only by the fear she felt.

She had been foolish to doubt that the gods did exist and were watching her every step, she saw now, and now she knew she was to be punished. Expecting fire to consume her for her insolence, she was startled when she felt a hand gently touch her shoulder. She dared a glance up and saw Shimara looking down at her with a smile free of malice.

"Stand up," the goddess said, amused by Sari's actions. "I'm not here to punish you. I'm here to guide you."

Sari slowly got to her feet, her legs as uncertain as a newborn's. So this is why no one has ever refused the Lottery, she thought. Who would dare deny a goddess to her face?

"You were beginning to doubt that we exist," Shimara said. Hearing the words spoken, Sari heard their defiance and again feared that Shimara sought to punish her. Again, she was mistaken, and Shimara's next words put her fears to rest again. "It is nothing to be ashamed of," she said. "Many in your village doubt. At least as many that believe without question. I tend to like those who doubt. They have a stronger spirit."

"I thought you would punish me," Sari mumbled. "Punish me for not believing."

Shimara laughed, and it truly was the laugh of a goddess; full of music and shaking leaves from the trees around them. Oh, that everyone could live to hear a goddess laugh! After a bliss-filled moment, the laughter passed and Shimara said, "Why should I punish you? Do you think I concern myself with whether or not you believe in me? I brought it up only because it is the first time I have seen such a doubt cross your mind, which is surprising in one so strong."

"But," Sari said, trying to think of a defense against what she saw as an attack against her, "I've been taught to obey the laws of the gods from childhood. That cannot be wrong. How can we believe in you if you do not want us to? That is what you're saying, isn't it? You want me to question you, but now I see, I've felt your touch and heard your laugh. How can I not believe?" Then, another thought came into her mind. "Why do you never come to the village? Let everyone see your beauty! Come back with me now, show all who doubt that you are real!" Sari realized the that she was giving orders to a goddess and fell silently. But Shimara was not angry. Instead, she smiled.

"When your people first came here many hundreds of years ago," the goddess said, "we came down from the mountain to help them build their village. But they became frightened of us, so we left, though we were happy that your people remembered us in legends and songs. But since then, we have never visited your village, nor will we. You are a people who cannot live except in fear, an oddity that we find both funny and sad."

Sari did not know how to respond to this, so she remained silent for a while. The trail was twisting as it rose onto the mountain, like a great serpent seeking to devour an even larger dog. Sari looked up at the giant sea of night above with stars speckling the expanse like tiny whitecaps on the black waves. She remembered as a child wondering if the gods used the stars like pinholes in heaven to watch the world below. Now, she had a goddess beside her whom she could ask, but Sari knew Shimara would laugh at her again and while the sound of her laughter was the most perfect sound Sari had ever known, she hated the idea of Shimara laughing at her again. So Sari turned her eyes away from the stars just as she had as a child, and her gaze settled on the black smoke, still visible against the dark sky, that poured from the mountain.

"If you find our fear sad," she said, her boldness surprising her as it must have surprised the goddess, "then why do you threaten us with the black smoke that comes from the mountain?"

"We do not send the smoke," Shimara responded, her voice serious. "The smoke is from the fire in the mountain, very deep inside, but sometimes the fire comes to the surface and the smoke rises. Sometimes, the mountain even explodes from the fire within it. The mountain is very old, it has been here longer even than we have, and we cannot control the fire within it." Shimara spread her arms and gestured to the jungle and rocks that now lay below them as they walked the trail up the side of the mountain. Sari could not help but notice the pinpoint of firelight, like earth-bound stars, that marked her village. "The mountain created all of this island with its fire. It rose from the sea in a great wave of fire and made the island around it. When the mountain chooses to breathe its black smoke, we no more know why than you do. The mountain does not speak even to us."

"Then why must I give myself to the mountain to save my village?" Sari demanded. "Why must I appease you if you do not threaten us?"

"You give yourself to the mountain to appease the mountain," Shimara said simply. "So," said Sari, "by giving myself to the mountain, I will be able to save my village?" She thought she understood at last.

But Shimara shook her head. "The mountain is old," she said. "It does not care about your village. Someday, the fire will come down from the mountain and burn the village and no sacrifices will prevent that."

"Then why do I have to die?"

"Because it is what you believe," Shimara replied.

Very dimly, Sari thought she heard a cheer rise up from the direction of the village. She could picture the villagers, her family and her friends, now mostly drunk on berry-wine, still passing meat around as they surrounded the great fire. Luzah's apprentice was beginning to sing, and soon all the village would be joining in. She could imagine the music of his voice, singing of brave villagers who had challenged the great mythic creatures that had threatened the village, or perhaps of those who had given themselves to mountain. She could even imagine Luzah joining in with a new song, the Song of Sari, who had been chosen by the Lottery to save their village and had journeyed out under the ten thousand eyes of the night and into the black smoke of the mountain, where the gods greeted her happily. Sari wished that Luzah was with her now, to see her walking beside the goddess of the mountain; walking fearlessly with the goddess she had so often prayed to as a child staring at the rising moon.

Because Shimara is a goddess and goddesses are capable of many things which ordinary people dare only to dream of, it should not have surprised Sari that, when Shimara spoke again, it was as though the thoughts had been plucked from Sari's mind. "I remember how you use to watch the stars at night and talk to me," she said. "I even remember your prayers. You would ask me every night to watch you as you slept and your spirit drifted, to make sure your spirit found its way back. I am glad that now I can tell you how much I loved listening to your prayers. Your innocence had an intoxication all its own. Did you ever wonder if I was really listening all that time? I think you did."

Sari blushed slightly. "When the nightmares would come, I would wonder why you let them come near me. And I would wonder if you even heard my pleas."

"Of course I did, sweet Sari," the goddess replied. "But the nightmares were your own. They did not belong to me, so I could not stop them." There was a comfort in Shimara's voice, such that Sari knew that if the goddess had spoken even a single word while she slept, that word would have been enough to chase all the night-

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mares away.

“But,” Sari protested, “surely you could have done something. Are you not a goddess? Did I not pray to you every night?”

“Sari,” she replied, “I am not the goddess of your legends. Never did a holy man come to me and ask me to protect the children of the village. No holy man has ever come up the mountain as you do now. Only those chosen by your village to die have ever spoken to me here, and only a few of those have I answered. I did listen to your prayers, to the prayers of all the children, because they are like a song to me. A song whose magic fills the silence of the night and leads me to my own sleep. Your prayers were always so beautiful, Sari. That is why I listened to them. But we do not interfere with your village, so I could not answer them. That is not the way of things.”

Her answer confused Sari, and her confusion soon became close to anger. “Why do we pray to you then?” Sari demanded of the divinity beside her. “What good does it do if you will not answer them?”

Shimara shook her head. “You still do not understand. It is what you believe. Have you ever wondered before why you believe in us? Why you pray to us if we never answer?”

“Because we believe in you,” Sari responded quickly. “Because we believe that you do hear us, and you do answer. You deceive us every time we pray.”

“But it is because you do believe. That is why you pray.” Shimara stopped now, and Sari also stopped and turned to face the goddess. They were now very high up the side of the mountain and could see only the slightest glow of firelight from the direction of the village. She felt suddenly alone. Alone with a goddess. “You see, it is important for you to believe. You need to believe. Without your myths, you could not survive. We are your myths, but we are finally inconsequential. To you, I am the goddess you once prayed to, and I did listen to your prayers. But you were praying to a myth. You do not rely on us, you rely on your legends. If your mother had told you it was my sister, Loattra, that you should pray to, would it have changed your prayers at all? You would have prayed the same words. Only my name would have changed.”

“But why are you so important to us if you never answer?”

“I cannot answer that. Only you can. Why do you take such comfort in us? We do nothing for you, but you feel better when you ask us for guidance or aid. It is simply what you believe, and what you believe keeps you company in the darkness.”

Sari pondered the goddess’ words, trying to think through them to some final conclusion. Her eyes drifted from Shimara’s face to their destination, the smoke billowing forth seemingly from solid rock. Sari knew now that it came from the fire within the mountain, but the knowledge did nothing to ease the thought of her fate. She realized all at once what Shimara was trying to make her understand. She was about to die for gods that did not exert any control over the mountain. She did not have to die! She shouted this proclamation aloud, but Shimara shook her head again, her long hair moving with a music all its own.

“If you return to the village, you will be shunned by all whom you love,” Shimara said, her voice thick with sadness. “You will be seen as a coward and a disappointment to all of your village.”

“No,” Sari protested. “I will tell them of you and all you have taught me. I will make them understand.”

“They will not believe you,” the goddess pointed out.

“But it is the truth.” Desperation filled Sari’s voice. “I’ve seen you and heard your words. I will tell them what you told me.”

“What I have told you is not what they believe. You will challenge the beliefs of

your village and for that alone you will be shunned. Remember what I have told you. It is the belief, not the truth, which is valued above all else.”

“Are you saying I must die?” Sari’s eyes became blurred with tears of epiphany and loss.

“No, I am not saying that. The choice is yours. I am only telling you the truth. You see now how painful such a thing can be against the comfort of myth.”

Sari’s head swam helplessly, drowning in contradiction. “You tell me I do not have to go to the smoke, but then you say I can’t return to the village. What’s left? What should I do? If you tell me nothing else, tell me what I should do!” Sari was yelling now; she was beyond caring that Shimara was a goddess. Sari was lost in confusion and building anger.

Shimara tried to calm her. “It is your choice,” she said. The words brought the rage to Sari’s eyes.

“I’m tired of your words!” Sari screamed. “You are filling my ears with nonsense. Leave! I don’t need your advice. I don’t need your truth. I’m tired of you. Go away!”

If Sari’s sudden lack of restraint surprised the goddess, she did not show it. Instead, she said, “Up ahead, there is a fork in the trail. The right path leads up the mountain to the place of smoke. The left path will take you down to the shore. It is your choice. I will love you regardless of what you decide, dear sweet Sari. If you go to the place of smoke, do it of your own choice, not the words of the village.” And, her words spoken, the goddess Shimara disappeared onto the wind.

Sari went on cursing the goddess for some time afterwards. As she ranted, she started walking again, not thinking about her destination. Eventually, her yelling stopped, though her anger at the goddess was still strong. She saw now that Shimara had confused her purpose; she had been playing a game with her. The goddess had told Sari how the village would never take her back only to see her despair when she was told there was no reason for her to throw herself into the mountain. I should be happy, Sari thought. I don’t have to die. But what other choice was there? She knew that what Shimara had said was the truth: Luzah would never believe her story. She would be branded an outcast and when the next storm came, or the fruits refused to grow, or even if the fire should ever come down from the mountain, Sari would be to blame. Even her family would have nothing to do with her. But, another thought retorted, at least you would be alive. Surely there is comfort in that.

Sari had reached the fork by now. The goddess had told her that one path led up the mountain, while the other led to the rocky shoreline. One path was death, the other was life.

Sari started to the left, walking down in the direction of the shore.

As she walked, her anger began to subside. A breeze carried the smell of the ocean to her nose and her mind cleared. Sari began then to understand what Shimara has really been telling her. She had not said it directly, wishing for Sari to

figure it out on her own, but Shimara had been trying to tell Sari that she was responsible for her life. Such a simple concept, but Sari had never until now realized all that it meant. Her life did not belong to the gods any more than it belonged to the village.

All the times she had thanked the gods for their gifts, she had been mistaken. The gifts had been her’s, given and received.

The path down the mountain disappeared into the jungle where the feeble light of the moon could not penetrate. Sari did not slow. Her life awaited on the other side. The shadows did not disturb her; fear held no sway over her now. She felt the power that Shimara’s words had given her grow with every step she took. Sari wondered what Luzah would say if he were here now; if he saw how she had changed. Would he even have words? She imagined that even her face had been transformed by the power within her. She thought she could feel her face taking on the resemblance of the goddess. But, a tiny voice called in the midst of her reverie, if you do not live for the gods, and you do not live for the village, who do you live for?

Myself.

Luzah will never allow that.

I know.

Sari emerged from the forest where the path begins to twist along the shore, the land dropping off sharply beside the path to the ocean. She stopped walking and stepped cautiously to the cliff’s edge. Below the waves slapped loudly against the rocks, the noise threatening to drown out even thought.

She turned away from the cliff and the crashing waves and started toward the village. The path was long, but Sari felt more alive than she ever had. She covered the distance back to the village quickly.

When she reached the village, she feared that everyone was asleep. The great fire was now nothing more than red glowing ashes surrounded by sleeping villagers who had elected not to go back to their homes to sleep. There were no fires burning in any of the houses in the village and Sari heard only snores and the common sounds of the night. She had no wish to wake the village, but she knew that the news of her return could not wait until morning. Such a thing had never happened before. She had denied the Lottery; she had spoken to a goddess; she had learned so much, and she had so much to share.

She caught a shadow moving off to her left. She turned and Luzah was standing before her. Despite the darkness between them, Sari could see the anger in his eyes. She made to take a step toward him, but his gruff, commanding voice stopped her.

“Why have you returned?” he barked. It was a question but he neither expected nor desired an answer.

Still, Sari was determined that she would be heard. “I went to the mountain, Luzah. I saw Shimara. I spoke to her.”

“Lies!” he cried. Then, his voice dropped to a biting, accusing tone. “Do you realize what you have done? The danger we are in now? You will bring the anger of the gods down on us.” Luzah’s words were stirring many from sleep. A

crowd was beginning to gather around them both.

This is perfect, Sari thought. May they all hear the words of Shimara.

But Luzah had not finished. “You defile the scared name of the goddess with your voice. You disgrace the Lottery. You insult the dirt with your steps and all you see with your eyes. Leave this village and never return. Go beyond the mountain and there die alone.” Luzah raised his staff as if to strike her. “Go now, before morning comes! May we never see your footprints on the paths again!” Luzah then turned his back to Sari, but did not move to leave. There were now more than a dozen villagers watching them.

“The Lottery is a fraud!” Sari yelled out. Whispers began to circulate through the crowd. Luzah did not move. “I saw Shimara. I spoke with her. She told me that the gods do not control the fire in the mountain. Not ever Father Paga! The Lottery means nothing. It will not save our village.” Sari felt as though she were pleading to these people, begging them to listen and understand her.

Luzah spoke, but did not turn to face her. “How can you say such things? How can you lie to us? You spread these lies about the glorious goddess Shimara, and you expect us to believe these evil words? You will doom us all with your wicked lies if you remain. Leave us!” His voice softened into regret. “We were proud of you once, but now you have disappointed us all, dear Sari.” These last words called to mind Shimara’s, but there was a great contrast between Luzah’s patronizing tone and Shimara’s beautiful, haunting voice.

Then, Sari knew she did not belong there anymore. She knew where she belonged.

“Shimara spoke the truth to me,” Sari said loudly. “Your lives here, in the shadow of the mountain, are both funny and sad. I pity you, Luzah.”

Her words were more than Luzah could ignore. He turned, furious, and yelled, “Leave us, wretch! Go to your gods, let them protect you! But never return here, or we shall kill you!” Luzah took a rock from the ground and threw it at Sari. It landed wide of the mark, but now the other villagers seemed to awaken as though from a dreamless sleep and they, too, began to hurl stones at Sari.

She knew they would kill her now, if given the chance, so she ran. The crowd of villagers chased her, many of their rocks finding her. One rock struck her on the head and she stumbled. One villager was upon her before she could regain her feet and delivered a sharp kick to her side. Pain shot through her like a flame through dry grass. The villager, a kind man Sari had liked singing to as a child because he had always laughed and his laughter had always been so kind, laughed at her now as she crawled to her feet and continued running as fast as her body would let her. The man’s laugh was no longer filled with joy, only hatred and fear.

You are a people who cannot live except in fear, Shimara had said. And again, Sari saw her wisdom.

The villagers stopped their pursuit, though the rocks continued to fly until Sari disappeared from their sight, into the over-

“Sirens,” a show directed by Spoken Word artist Dave Nader, celebrates women artists and will begin at 8:30 PM on Friday, May 9 at the Above Club (former Coco Bean). Acts include medieval singing and folk music, as well as a poetry performance by Clark senior Rachel Eisner.

**A word about the poet... Rachel Eisner, a native of New Haven, CT and a 1997 Clark graduate, began reading poetry at Grind Central and has featured at the Sturbridge Coffeehouse and earned a semifinalist position in the Worcester Magazine poetry contest. Join her May 9 as she shares her spontaneity in her poetry routine: an offbeat look at her neighbors, her eccentric dad, and everyday concerns from traffic violations to faulty appliances.**

growth. Even then, her step did not slow. She had to return to the mountain and see the goddess again. That was where she belonged now.

Behind her, Sari heard Luzah announce that a new Lottery would be held tomorrow when the sun was high.

Sari nearly collapsed from exhaustion when she finally reached the crossroad. But she allowed herself only a moment to catch her breath before starting up the right-hand path; up toward the mountaintop and the home of the gods. Exiled from the village, this would be her home, now. Sari imagined a great embrace from all of the gods on her arrival, especially Shimara, whom she loved above all the others.

She had not gone far up the path before Shimara appeared before her, blocking her progress along the narrow, rocky path. They stared at each other, surrounded by boulders that towered above them like mimics of the mountain's greatness, before Shimara finally spoke. Sari had been expecting loving words of greeting, but her voice, though still full of music, was cold.

"Go back," the goddess said. "You don't belong here."

"They drove me from the village," Sari said, not believing her ears told her the truth. Was even the goddess abandoning her?

"As I told you they would," Shimara replied. "Did you not believe me? But now you think you can come and be with us, but you are not welcome here, Sari."

"I have no where else to go." Sari's mind filled again with confusion and rage. "This is your fault! You told me many things and now I am no longer welcome in my village. How can you turn from me now? Where else can I go?"

"Dear Sari," Shimara said, her voice softening, "I never said knowledge was an easy thing to possess. It takes great strength to face what you must now face, but I chose you, dear Sari. Do you understand that? I chose you because I know you have the strength to face what lies before you. You must find yourself, which is never easy, but you must do it from here without me. You are mortal. You cannot come any further. You do not belong here."

Sari took a step forward, begging Shimara not to send her away, but rage sprang to the goddess' eyes. "If you take one more step toward us," she said, her voice now like thunder and waves, "we will kill you." Behind the goddess, Sari caught a glimpse of a pair of glowing eyes and knew it was Little Ti, waiting for her to take another step so he could drag her away and punish her gleefully for

her trespass.

Tears of desperation blurred Sari's vision and she fell to her knees, sobbing loudly. She reached out to the goddess, unable to form any audible pleas, but begging all the same. The skin of her hand became unbearably hot in an instant and began to blister, all under Shimara's unforgiving gaze. Sari screamed and pulled her hand back. The heat faded to an echo before Sari even stopped screaming. The wind blew sharply and the goddess disappeared without a word into its folds. Sari was left alone, but she could feel the power of the gods around her and knew they would no longer tolerate her presence. Pulling herself upright, Sari started back down the trail on her final long walk.

At the fork in the path, Sari started again down toward the cliffs. The sky above was beginning to lighten, the stars fading into a clear blue, flawed only by the black smoke that was still coming from the mountain. Reaching the cliff, Sari stepped to the edge and looked at the horizon that was coloring itself with the pastel hues of sunrise.

She remembered in a flash all of the prayer she had ever offered to Father Paga and his children; prayers of hope, prayers of despair, and those offered Shimara for a good night's sleep. She knew now that none of those prayers had been answered. The gods live in silence. The traditions were empty. All she had ever done in her life, all that she had ever overcome, she had done on her own. Her prayers and the advice of Luzah had been worthless. Shimara had taught her that. She had no where to go. The village had cast her out and almost killed her. Tonight she had seen too much to live with the blind. She looked down at her aching, blistered hand. Even the gods wanted nothing to do with her. Death awaited her on all sides, but would she let Luzah have the pleasure of watching her die? No, she could not do that. Would she face death at the hands of the gods? No, that was not the way, either. Shimara had told her to find her own way, even in death. The more she considered it, the more it made sense to her. This, then, was the price of the knowledge Shimara had given her; the knowledge of herself. Rather than live for the gods and their ignorant, self-professed servants, she would gladly die for herself.

With a silent prayer of thanks to Shimara, Sari stepped from the cliff's edge and fell, with the restrained grace of a martyr, onto the rocks and waves below. •

J O T A r e s p o n d s ...

by Karren Young

Editor-in-Chief, Journal of the Arts

This letter goes out to the individual who expressed grave discontent with this year's Journal of the Arts in a letter to the editor printed in the last issue of the *Scarlet*. This individual's perception of the Journal is that of a symbol, a shining neon sign advertising the "self-absorbed [or maybe what the person wanted to say— narcissistic] attitude prevalent on campus." I was personally insulted and extremely hurt when I read these words. However, the author's point was well taken. I can understand how the Journal may seem to lack diversity, but there are good reasons for it appearing as such.

First— as Editor-in-Chief, I am the only staff member who knows the authors' and artists' names when we consider their pieces. So, it just so happens that many of the written pieces (twelve, according to this author who so kindly took the time to tally) were submitted by JOTA staff members. We did not, in fact, sit there laughing away, ripping up others' work so we could substitute it with our own. The pieces got in because the staff believed they were good— it's as simple as that.

Now maybe, as Editor-in-

Chief, I could have taken out some of the staff's work and replaced it with other poems that the group didn't like as much. However, the group discussed it and decided to leave the Journal as it was, without artificially diversifying the content. This whole issue of diversity was a concern to me, and I even took out one of my poems because I felt uncomfortable with having so many published.

Second— art work. Let me just say that every person who submitted art work had at least one of their pieces published in the Journal— every single one. I also "have eyes to see many talented people at this school"— but not all of them are so "eager to express and share themselves." If they are so eager, why didn't they submit?

I suggest that people stop pointing misinformed fingers and maybe communicate the issues directly to the people at the source of their problem. Contact the JOTA staff if you have concerns or suggestions before publicly slamming us in the media. We at JOTA work very hard to publish the best possible work, and these issues concern us all, staff and students alike. •

Winner of the Loring Holmes and Ruth Dodd Drama Contest

## HARVEY by Dave Reed

**Cast:**  
Harvey  
Guide  
Dragon  
Builders (silent parts)

Harvey is in bed in the center of the stage. He wakes up, yawning, looks around confused. Enter Dragon.

**Dragon:** Happy Birthday.

**Harvey:** Wha...?

**Dragon:** Don't ask me anything. I only work here.

Exit Dragon. Enter Guide, holding bundle of cloth that looks like a baby.

**Guide:** Baby Boy! There you are! Come on, get up! We need to get you ready.

**Harvey:** Who are you? What's going on?

**Guide:** What's going on? Why, only the biggest day of your life! So far, at least. Come on, Baby Boy, out of bed! We've got a lot of work ahead of us.

**Harvey:** Baby Boy?

**Guide:** Oh, sorry. Let's see, I have it here somewhere. Ah, here it is! Harvey. That's your name. Harvey. At least, it will be in about twenty minutes.

Harvey gets out of bed. Looks around.

**Guide:** (calling offstage) Let's go, fellas! We don't have all day.

Enter builders, who start building in background.

**Harvey:** What is this place?

**Guide:** Well, it's nothing, really. Not right now. But eventually this is going to be your life. Or at least, the foundation of all you'll encounter in your life. That's what they're building. They're Architects, and they're creating your life. It's something of a rush job, I'm afraid, but I wouldn't worry. Those guys are miracle workers. In the meantime, Harvey, we have to get you ready.

**Harvey:** Ready for what? This doesn't make sense.

**Guide:** For your life, Harvey. Right now, you're waiting, but in a little while, your mother is going to give birth to a healthy baby boy, who she's going to name Harvey. It's your birthday, Harv.

**Harvey:** Oh right. There was this dragon. But he left.

**Guide:** Never mind him for now. First, allow me to introduce myself. I'm your spirit guide.

**Harvey:** Oh, hi. I'm Harvey. I

guess. I kind of have to take your word for it.

**Guide:** You have so much to look forward to, Harvey. Such a journey awaits you. I envy you, you know. That sights you'll see, the things you'll do. You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you Harvey? That's okay. That's why I'm here. Before you go off into the world, we've found it is helpful if we give you a little background. A crash-course in being alive, if you like. It lessens the shock. And you will be shocked, Harvey. There's no way around it. In fact, as time goes by, you'll probably forget all of this. But every now and then, something will happen and you'll realize that you knew all of this before. Before you were even born, we taught you these necessities. It's just a small service that we supply to you, the soon-to-be-born. We'll bill you later.

**Harvey:** Well, gee, thanks. But if it's all the same to you, I'd rather go back to bed.

Builders carry bed off stage.

**Guide:** You don't have a choice in this, Harv. Sure, you get to choose a lot of your life later on, but not this. No one has ever refused to be born. Here, take a look at this.

Guide shows Harvey the bundle.

**Guide:** This is you, right after

you're born. Cute little guy, aren't you?

**Harvey:** That's me? But I'm so small.

**Guide:** You grow up fast. I can't teach you any of the early essentials: walking, talking, burping, the proper uses of a toilet. Your parents will have to do that. Of course, that's their job. All you have to know about your first few years of life is to point and gurgle a lot. Oh, and try not to keep your parents up too much at night. They need sleep, too.

**Harvey:** Hey, look. I'm drooling.

**Guide:** Yeah, all over me. Ick!

**Harvey:** Hey, it's not my fault.

**Guide:** I know. I don't mind much, really. You are pretty adorable. Anyway, let's move on to Childhood. This is a pretty important lesson, Harvey. So listen up.

**Harvey:** I feel like I must be dreaming. But I can't really remember having dreamt before.

**Guide:** It's a little disorienting, I understand. If it will make it easier, we can just say that you're dreaming. Though, to be accurate, that distinction is very difficult to make at this point. Either that or you're a grown man who's dreaming about a conversation he once had with his spirit guide just before he was born, but that idea gives me a headache.

Continued on page 28...