



Fairwood Fantasmagoria

Tam Fairlie

the fl@ubert duck series

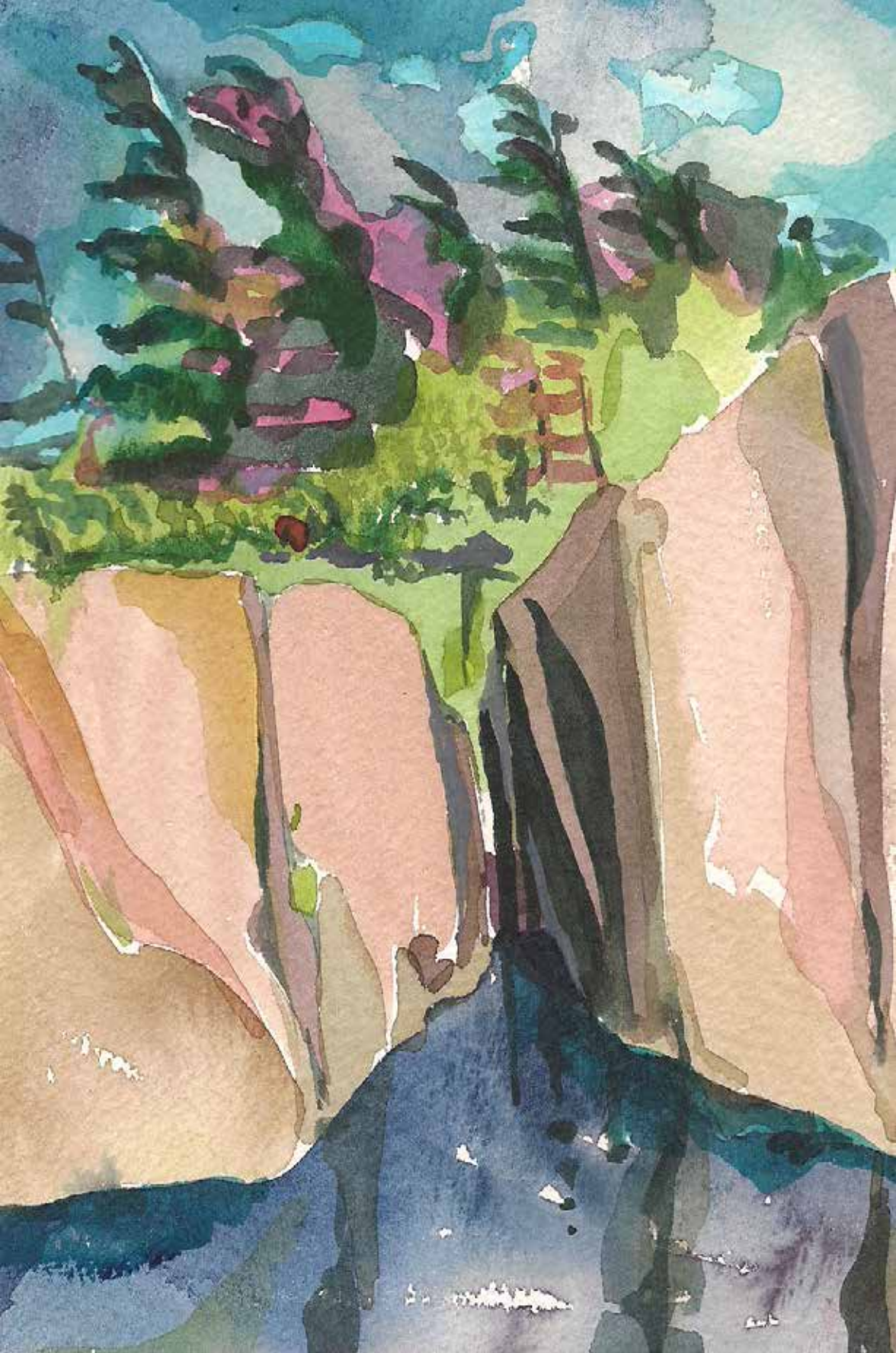
for Sarah, Johnny and Andrew
and all lovers of Fairwood

Premonitions

With a horrible grating shudder the green canoe came to a soft halt over a shoal that was barely awash. The bow paddler had been daydreaming again, staring at the clouds flitting by high overhead surprisingly fast considering the total calm around them. The canoe deposited a streak of green paint on the rock as Johnny and Andrew pushed themselves backward with their paddles, muttering about Sarah's lack of concentration under their breaths.

The river, which had carried them many miles inland and linked up with a network of lakes and tributaries, no longer looked like a watercourse from their canoe. They had left behind the rapids and waterfalls, the endless leaping in and out of the canoe to portage around obstructions. There was no apparent current or falling of contour written on the land. Rather it seemed that the earth had just split apart along an irregular line and the water from the open Georgian Bay had flooded back into the seam.

The three hikers were now travelling without any reference to a map. A few remaining legible shreds had floated off unheeded the last time they had upset the canoe. No one had noticed the loss until long after when the sleeping bags and tent were being spread out over hot rocks to dry. As a result, they frequently found themselves diverted around what appeared



to be an island only to find their channel trailing off into shallows clogged with reeds where large shiny insects would jump into the boat and run self-importantly up and down the gunwales. Then as they were obliged to turn back the two brothers would comment critically on Sarah's lack of foresight in not packing their map in some sort of water proof folder.

The adventurers were on the last leg home and had been eking out their remaining supplies. They were short one paddle which, imaginatively employed in suspending a cooking pot over the camp fire, had succumbed in a moment of distraction. As a replacement Andrew had laboriously whittled an old piece of flotsam. The improvisation was prone to shed splinters and a lot of time was given over to surgical extractions - considered with suspicion by Johnny and Sarah as a tactic to evade the full responsibilities of a midshipman.

The bright orange pup tent which had seemed so cheerfully unassailable in a distant campers supply store in the city had been battered beyond recognition. At one stage a camouflaging technique had captured Johnny's imagination and splodges of boiled lichen dye and bacon fats for waterproofing were applied over the material. The cover sheet had been lacerated by a delighted bear during one of the more eventful nights of their trip. The mosquito net windows were now stitched with zig-zags of string.

It was late in the day and the three canoeists were beginning to eye the shoreline, searching for a

site that would meet everyone's criteria for stopping off. No one wanted to be the first to admit exhaustion but each was looking for a plausible reason to get onto dry land.

These mutual criteria were often difficult to reconcile.

Sarah liked protected coves with open flat rocks nearby, where there was some escape from the wind so that she could sketch wild flowers without having her equipment blow off. It seemed that a rogue breeze leapt up every time she pulled out a piece of sketch paper. Johnny preferred more mysterious terrain with gashes and gulches where bears and wolves might lurk. Sheer cliff faces beckoning for rock climbing exploits also appealed. Andrew on the other hand kept his eye on the bottom looking for ideal fishing holes where he could cast his lures late into the evening.

The river was an ancient watercourse which drained the overflow from a filigree of lakes laced across an almost uninhabited land. It appeared to have changed little since the time that it shed its heavy burden of ice ten thousand years ago. Even the trees seemed to be fixed into immutable formations determined by the few pockets of earth in the smooth grey rocks. However changes were on going, and over the millennia even the most permanent of rock formations was blurring into new configuration, eroding, roughening or splitting off. The black silhouettes of the forest on distant shorelines had massaged the landscape over thousands of years and periodically the ragged antique growth would be

smoothed out by the even new growth following some calamitous fire.

Sarah mused dreamily, “If we were transported back ten thousand years, none of those rocks over there would look so very different.”

Johnny seemed excited by a sudden thought. “Ceptin’ there would probably be a sabre tooth peeking out and sizing up the Dude for a tasty snack.” His eyes went quite squinty as he tried to visualize this scene. “I wonder if there were stone age hunters in these parts, like the ones that hang out at the museum.”

Johnny continued on the same theme. “Just imagine if we were stalked by a sabre tooth. We’d have to make a circle of spears pointing outwards”. The thought unaccountably pleased him.

Andrew had given up paddling for the moment and was following the bottom for likely fishing habitat. The depths were strewn with gigantic boulders, some of the purest white quartz, massive and mysterious in the slanting late afternoon light. Veins of black and white rock seemed to collide at great depths.

The shoreline alongside was a high level plateau of smooth rock which fell off precipitously in steep and roundly contoured banks. At the water edge there were broad ledges strewn with colossal boulders, sheltered from the wind by the rock faces behind. Though the clouds were skittering frantically overhead the wind had died down as if a change of weather were imminent. In the glassy water against the shore Sarah tilting her head to one side was trying to make out totem poles



faces of warriors and animals composed of the rock crevices and striations reflected symmetrically in the water.

“I see an evil sorcerer with blank, baleful eyes and hideous wrinkled face ... horrid straggly hair and feathered headdress ... and look below him are all the people and animals that he has bewitched. They look terrified - a wicked beaver, a crafty mink and a fat beaked bird. See the character with the crossed eyes and the dopey hat” Sarah pointed excitedly. “He looks just like one of you ... perfect brother material, I’d say” Andrew and Johnny glanced over distractedly and then resumed their scrutiny of the bottom without comment.

“The whole shoreline is a parade of spirits just lurking and waiting for an eerie, calm night like this to escape”

As if to underscore her ramblings, a sudden theatrical shaft of light burst through the purple clouds and cast deep shadows along the shoreline. The effect was so swift and dramatic that it seemed to be accompanied by a mysterious all pervasive snapping sound as if the whole landscape was resonating with the bouncing, reflected waves.

Sarah was staring so intently at the ghostly faces cut into the rock face that she almost missed a particularly deep chasm just wide enough for their canoe to navigate. She back paddled and peered into the gloom. The flat, grey cliffs of rock were deeply fissured with impenetrable shadowed recesses and extended to gloomy depths in the clear water. High overhead they



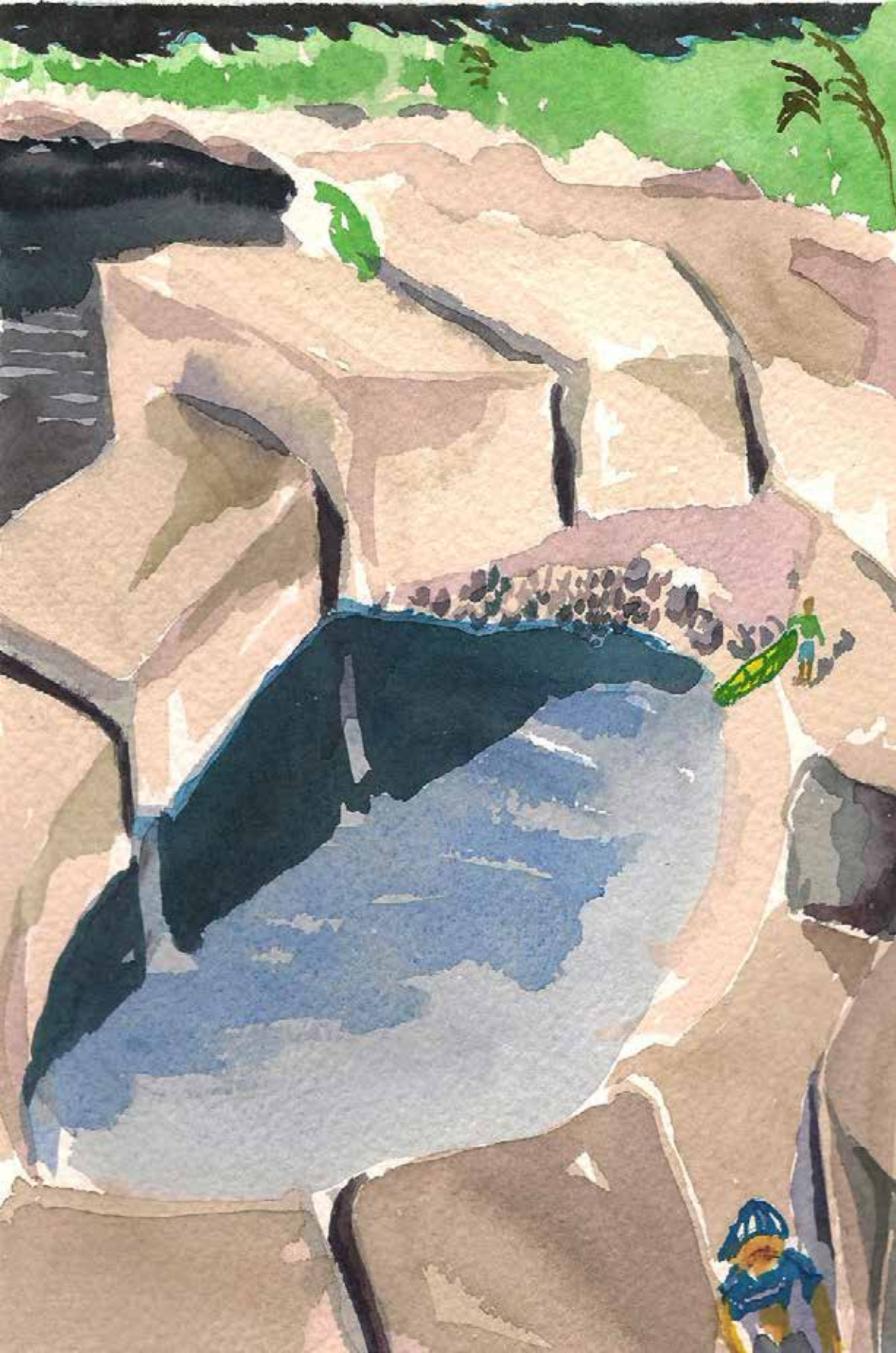
seemed almost to touch and admit only a ribbon of light. Beyond, however there seemed to be a glow of light and tranquillity.

They nosed the canoe through the clammy passage and emerged suddenly into a sheltered cove which was surrounded by protective high cliff faces, a very promising and secluded site for the night's encampment. Had they not been following the shoreline so closely they would certainly have missed the mysterious, narrow entrance into this calm, secret backwater.

The cove was almost perfectly circular in shape with a smooth lip of high rock around the perimeter. Through the still, dark water s Sarah could make out the murky shapes of gigantic sunken logs which might have been floated down the river during logging days In the last century and become trapped in the cove. They must have floated in circles for many years until becoming waterlogged and sinking to the bottom.

This sinister wreckage seemed to be strewn across the bottom like a giant's game of Pick-Up-Sticks. Some were cracked and fissured with cruel jaws like hoary monsters laying in ambush to drag the unwary down to their timeless world. Johnny appreciated the sense of doom that hung over these still depths and tilted the canoe over precariously as he touched his nose to the water. He could feel Sarah's heart miss a beat as she lurched to counter balance him.

Andrew was convinced that he could make out the shadow of a three metre long sturgeon nestled among



the logs. He had never seen a live sturgeon before, but this was exactly what they were supposed to look like. Nearby another cleft log lurked like a monster with its jaws half open and knotty eyes terrifying in the murky green depths.

Sarah could spot some colourful lichen growths on the boulders which would restart her collection which had disappeared in the last dumping. This time she had a screw top jar ready for use.

It was a rare general consensus that this would serve as a possible camping spot. They beached the tired green canoe between two boulders on the broad shelf and felt that they might be the first people ever to have entered this secret cove.

Johnny suddenly let out a hair-raising cry, like a demented rabbit. Echoes of the sound buffeted menacingly from side to side of the cove reverberating for some seconds in the stillness. A frightened bird rose from the bushes nearby and flew off shrieking hysterically.

Johnny in a sinister, hollow voice, "More juicy titbits have just been sucked into the witches' cauldron. This place is like a great big soup pot full of black magic ingredients, old bones and shipwrecks."

Sarah shuddered involuntarily, "Oh Johnny, why don't you go read a book . . . now that would be something really scary!"

The smooth base ledge where they pulled up the canoe was clear of boulders and rubble. A solitary and colossal boulder had broken off from the cliff face

overhead and tumbled down onto the ledge. Its looming mass rested on three points and it was possible to peer under it and see daylight filtering in around the perimeter. The edges of the rock seemed to have become blurred and smoothly contoured over the ages even though the ledge which it had fallen from was still quite sharply faceted. In the fading light looming over them it resembled a gigantic prehistoric animal with a broad flattened head and ponderous flanks. By coincidence it directly faced the entrance into the secret cove and seemed to challenge anyone who dared to enter.

Sarah noticed a mysterious geological freak. The rock seemed to be riddled with deep pock marks and indentations. There were also similar potholes and curiosities in many places dotted about the rock shelf.

Johnny picked up a trunk of driftwood and pushed it up into one of the holes overhead leaving it dangling like some lopsided tusk on a beast. He found a second tree branch for the other side which gave a humorous snaggle tusked look and shouted out "I dub thee Sir Snaggle Rock!" The giant boulder suddenly began to resemble a tipsy elephant.

Sarah noticed that the rock was covered with a curious species of lichen which developed a reddish hue in the evening sunlight and which seemed to grow in an unaccountable, meandering spiral patterns. The centres of some of these spirals were quite clearly indentations, like miniature, forming potholes. All over the surface of the rock she discovered the faint outlines of strange gashes and zig-zags.

“Those were formed by prehistoric hail storms”, suggested Johnny tentatively, but Sarah rolled her eyes around unconvinced.

Johnny peered underneath the rock and found a peculiar indentation, smooth and bowl like which drained naturally off into a fissure. Driftwood had collected there and he and Andrew found a passage at the back to crawl under to retrieve fuel for the camp fire. He liked the feeling of being just the right size to squeeze through the crack. The space opened up into a comfortable hollow where the underside seemed hollowed as a shallow dome of rock. He could kneel at the centre without obstruction. Overhead were hundreds of tons of granite perched on only three small legs. He pictured himself as a sabre tooth cat peering out from his lair guarding the protected cove and ready to waylay hapless travellers on the river beyond and drag back the carcasses to Sarah seemed to have gone into a trance following the curious spiralling patterns on the rock. She scraped back the lichens detect the faintest perimeter ridge and found it all very puzzling indeed.

“Do you ever have the feeling that you have been through some event once before, that you’ve already seen all this long ago but you can only remember disjointed fragments?” she mused out loud.

“Oh Sarah,” Johnny sounded like the voice of doom projected out from under the boulder, “its just that you’ve gone into hyperspace and you end up seeing or thinking the same things twice in rapid succession. I



read all about it in Psycho horror - you know, that story of the man who knew that he had already committed grisly murders in a past life ... in fact he was so sure that he was already guilty, that murdering his victims a second time was no big deal.”

“No, that’s not what I mean at all “, said Sarah despondently. “It’s more like a complete vision. I have a feeling that I have already known this place, that I know exactly what lies behind those boulders over there. Nothing about this place can surprise me, because I’ve been here before. Its map, its memory is already printed somewhere in my mind. I’ve already dreamed about this place, I think.”

“Who are you to talk about maps and memories”, said Johnny, needling. He was reluctant to hear Sarah waxing quite so poetic.

Her normally confident voice faltered somewhat. “It’s strange how some places just seem to have energy of their own, they seem to have good or bad histories, they seem to be filled with natural well-being or else overwhelmed with evil and doom. I’m not sure which it is about this place.”

Andrew looked very sceptical. He had discovered that the fissure directly behind the elephant rock penetrated deep into the cliff face behind. The three of them had become ambitious rock face climbers.

“Look at these rocks; they’re riddled with death defying toeholds.” Andrew almost threw himself onto the rock face in his delight.

Sarah had a sudden further premonition about

tying up Andrew's crumpled leg in painful splints of knotty driftwood, but she wasn't sure whether this was a vision from a past life or just wishful thinking. When she considered the last stretch of their journey to come she decided that on the whole such a dramatic turn might be a bad idea, momentarily satisfying.

Nobody seemed to be prepared to do anything about setting up camp for the night or collecting more wood for the fire. Andrew had already managed to follow his way along the fissure to the broad ledge overhead from where the immense chunk of rock had been dislodged. Two veins of the whitest quartz crossed at the back of the ledge and alongside there were crevices which penetrated further into the rock face. The base of the crevice was lined with smooth flat rocks which formed natural steps up onto the rock plateau above. It was a landscape that so perfectly suited human dimensions that it was hard to believe that it was not specifically designed.

Johnny, having essayed some dare devil straight-up-the-face scaling had followed his brother into the crevice and joined him at the top on a windswept plane of rock backed by a fringe of forest trees. The foresting of the shore line which had enclosed and protected them in their passage down the river was becoming sparse and intermittent. The landscape looked as if it had been scraped smooth and all the debris carried and dumped inland. The river was beginning to open up into a wide estuary which was protected by a series of ledges over which great waves were crashing with a distant roar

carried on the wind. He realized that they were much closer to the open Bay than he had imagined.

Johnny and Andrew watched Sarah down below rolling out the tent and struggling to attach a guy rope around a large stone. They felt a momentary pang of remorse in not being more helpful before they turned purposefully inland to following a crest of rock that seemed to be beckoning to further discoveries.



Sarah was not really as annoyed as she was pretending to be about being abandoned with the chores of setting up camp. They had been together in the canoe all day and she had listened to Johnny's incessant humming and Andrew's chatter about what he and his friends were going to do next year. The sudden peace was exhilarating and she hoped that her two brothers would be kept busy awhile in their explorations and outdoing one another in feats of rock climbing prowess. She worked on the tent unsuccessfully, it really needed two people to hold the ends of the main guy rope, and then abandoning it like a pile of messy laundry she decided to try a sketch from the smooth rock at the entrance to the secret cove.

The sun, now low in the sky, burst through



the clouds again and illuminated the rim of the rock high above with an eerie red light. Her sketch did not begin well. She wanted to capture a sense of the mystery of the place, the greyness of the shaded rocks and the startling light around the upper rim. As she peered into the dark shadows of a dense grove overhead she suddenly realized with a jolt that there was a figure watching her intently from the deep shadow, a dark figure, partially obscured by the branches, immobile. She thought momentarily that it might be a trick of the light but was unnerved by the two glittering black eyes, seemingly unblinking, fixed on her every movement. She waved blithely and called out but the staring presence remained frozen in the deep shadow.

A brilliant shaft of sunlight probed across the rocks and penetrated into the wood. Sarah was temporarily dazzled. When she looked again into the darkening wood, she realized to her relief that the mysterious figure had been transformed into a gnarled and wind tortured stump. But those glittering black eyes, had she just imagined them? Terns screamed with crazy derision at her fright and echoes of their piercing shrieks rebounded within the empty cove.

Suddenly she felt overcome by the loneliness of the location and decided that perhaps on second thought she would follow her brothers and get them to return and join her in setting up the camp properly. She bundled up her art materials, slid them under the confused heap of tent and sought out the fissure through which her brothers had climbed to the upper

rock. She noticed how curious it was that the crevice was lined with smooth flat stones forming such easy natural steps.

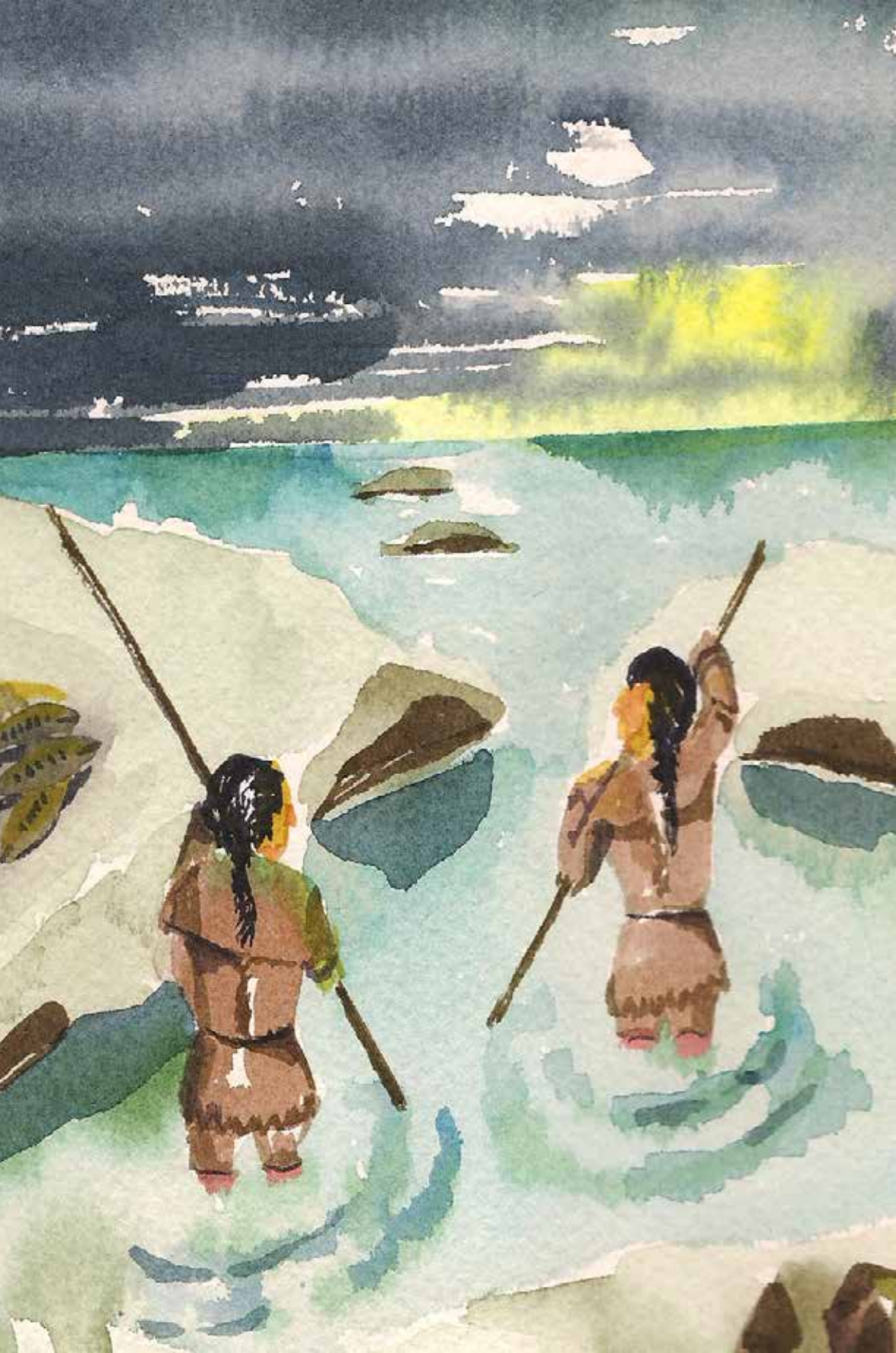
Emerging at the top she could see no sign of Johnny and Andrew. She peered again into the dark copse where she had seen the sinister figure and reassured herself that there was no one there. To the west the sun had just plunged again into a thick bank of clouds above the horizon. The long shadows over the rocks blurred and disappeared. Far out on the reefs she could just make out the silhouettes of the two boys who seemed to have covered an incredible amount of territory in such short time. Typically they seemed to have no comprehension that the sun would be setting soon and that there were many things to do to make the camp habitable. She set out in their direction waving her hands frantically whenever she thought they might be looking her way. They seemed to have acquired two long poles which they were plunging into the water as if annoying a snake. Their concentration was absolute.



Johnny and Andrew had felt marginally guilty that they had left Sarah behind. They glanced at the sun low on the horizon and the waves crashing over the

reefs, then had been drawn inland following the crest of the rock. At places where it dipped through gulleys there seemed to be natural paths maintained by the passage of many animals. From high ground they could glimpse an area inland where the trees seemed to clear away entirely and they guessed that this must be some sort of land locked lake full of prehistoric species of fish with warty bodies and long trailing black whiskers - a very appealing prospect for adventurers. Their initial hunch was confirmed when they reached a high vantage point and found laid out below them an eel like sliver of black water that looked as if crude oil had bubbled to the surface, lying mirror smooth and undisturbed in the fading light. There was little plant growth around its shores.

The pale rocks shed a ghostly radiance and it seemed that even the mosses and lichens shunned close contact with these waters, the rocks were so scrubbed, smooth and deathly grey. The lake was apparently quite shallow and a group of stepping stones white like bleached bones in the black water ranged out to a tiny island commanding a view of the long stretch of water. The same thought flooded into both boy's minds as they rushed down to the shore line - what a perfect natural sentry post. Again they were struck by how perfectly proportioned the landscape was to their adventures. If the rocks had been steeper or further apart passage across this wilderness would have been impossible. On achieving it they were delighted to find that the little sentry post island had a protected hollow in the



middle. With a few cedar poles spanning from lip to lip, someone could create a perfect hideaway, totally undetected as marauders.

The remaining colours drained out of the landscape as dusk began to fall. They realized that they would now have to hurry to make it back to their camp. But they resolved to return the next morning to take up further exploration.

There was an unexpected roll of thunder in the distance.

They gazed down the length of the lake in the direction of the storm and suddenly became aware that a whole section of the distant shore seemed to be moving ... lurching towards them. Enormous, a black shape, towering as high as the surrounding trees, appeared to break away from the shore. Johnny and Andrew froze in a horror of uncertainty unable to comprehend what they were seeing. It made no sense at all. They seemed to be witnessing a catastrophic earthquake in horrible slow motion.

“Cripes, what’s that?” blurted Johnny as they both fell to their knees, hidden behind a fringe of bushes.

“It looks like a whole buncha trees have just broken loose from the land.”

“Maybe they’re dynamiting for a new forest ranger tower.” But Andrew looked sceptical.

But then as details filled in they could make out what seemed to be a gigantic raft with a lofty superstructure which almost filled the width of the

narrow lake. The raft was a massive construction of hollowed out logs lashed together, in the middle of it a tall edifice constructed of long poles was hung with strips of fur and ornamental interwoven leather thongs. As the raft slowly approached they could make out that it was being propelled by a great number of men who seemed to be covered in a patchwork of colourful scraps of cloth. In unison they wielded curious paddles constructed out of bent wood saplings with animal skins stretched between which had been decorated with sinuous intertwining motifs in brilliant colours.

Johnny and Andrew looked at each other in disbelief but displaying as much bravery as possible under the circumstances. Both were thinking that it was extraordinary that while they had been struggling down the river in a battered fibreglass canoe, such a procession was taking place scarcely half a mile inland.

The barge was heading directly towards their end of the lake. With an uneasy feeling that they were unwelcome trespassers, they hugged the ground out of sight.

Meanwhile Sarah was becoming very annoyed at the complete fecklessness of the two boys who seemed to be totally absorbed with their pole fishing. As she struggled over the rocks she realized how difficult it was going to be to return to the camp after dusk. It was only when she was within hailing distance that she realized that she had made a terrible mistake. These were not her brothers at all but two native boys of roughly the same age and stature. As she bravely

approached them she recognized that they must be members of some sort of native revivalist community. The two boys were dressed in skins neatly sewn in large patches and tied with leather thongs at the waist. They had doffed their leather slippers and waded into the water up to their knees. They were indeed fishing with long sharpened poles which they were using with great skill to skewer some of the largest fish that Sarah had ever seen. For all her wildlife expertise she had never encountered such creatures, round and solid like a salmon, covered in large iridescent scales, but with a line of purple dots along their flanks. The boys had had considerable success and there was a pile of these large fish still heaving with suffocating life in a shallow puddle on the shore. Obviously this pool was a favoured fishing ground into which they were able to entice these strange fish with bait and then cut them off from escaping to the open bay with a nets of leather thongs fixed to a permanent stick frame.

The two boys seemed mildly irritated by her presence, but not at all surprised to see her, or in any way inquisitive about her being there. They gestured to her to keep her distance. Sarah, though bursting with questions about the fish, was reluctant to break their concentration. At last they turned to her and said something quite unintelligible. Strangely though she felt that she knew instinctively what they were saying about finishing their day's labours and getting back before sunset. They gathered up their catch in the net that had been barricading the entry to the rock pool and



handed it to Sarah to carry. Sarah was surprised but reluctant to be less than compliant. She felt that they were trying to make her feel useful and comfortable in their company. The three of them set off back in the direction of the Cauldron Bay.

As she walked along behind considering some of the disadvantages of the revival of old customs, Sarah had a chance to admire the beautiful crafted garments worn by the two boys. Their long black hair had been worked into tight braids which shone lustrously catching the fading light. Both of them wore wide belts decorated with huge porcupine quills which had been lacquered red. The quills had been worked into a chevron pattern not unlike the slashes among the curious lichen growths that she had found earlier in the day in the hidden cove. Hanging from these belts were assorted talismans and trophies, the most surprising being tusk like teeth of brilliantly polished ivory almost ten inches long. Sarah could not imagine where they would find such teeth though she speculated that possibly some species of wild boar in Papua New Guinea might carry such lethal equipment. Perhaps they were able to import them from abroad she mused. The spears that they carried were over twice their height and decorated near the sharpened ends with intricate designs. They were fitted with barbs of the same oversized hollow quills.

The sun had now set and she was glad of the company of her two taciturn companions as she stumbled across the murky terrain in the gloaming. Though they had spoken no words, she knew



instinctively that they were chivalrously escorting her back to the camp site.

Suddenly one of the two boys tapped the other on the shoulder and pointed towards the woods. They both froze in apparent terror and Sarah realized that there must be some danger lurking there. Without saying a word the boys grabbed the net of fish from her hands and scattered them frantically over the rocks. They beckoned her over into a nearby crevice in the rocks and the three of them squeezed into a narrow space protected only by the outermost boy who was about Johnny's age and who held his spear outwards challenging anything that might approach. The three of them held their breaths and remained tense with apprehension. Across the rock outside they heard a grunting and scratching of twigs over the rock surface. Sarah craned her head over the two smaller boys to see what they were hiding from. Though only a momentary glimpse she was dumbfounded when the largest porcupine that she had ever seen, the size of an adult bear, lumbered past the entrance. It stopped momentarily to sniff at the discarded fish and, uninterested passed stolidly on its way, its quill burden dragging heavily over the rocks, its breath snorting and wheezing under its own colossal weight.

The two boys were obviously relieved; clearly they had been expecting something much more sinister. Sarah was less reassured. These oversized animals and fish, her mute companions all seemed part of some confusing dream. They emerged from their retreat only

seconds after the porcupine had passed and gathered up their fish. As they proceeded back along the shore, Sarah could hear the receding grunts of the quilled giant and vaguely distinguish the black form in the distance toiling across the landscape towards denser forests.

She was aware of the distant rumble of thunder - a continuous, barely audible throb that seemed to be pervading the landscape. There was obviously going to be a violent storm and she worried that no one had done anything about organizing the camp for the night. Perhaps they should invite the two fisher boys to join them. She knew that Andrew would be boggle eyed when he saw those fish.



In their hidden aerie on the lake Johnny and Andrew were also aware of the constant throb of distant thunder and the approaching storm. They hoped that Sarah had got the camp in order or at least had covered up the bedding, for it seemed that half the nights of their excursion they had retired to bed in soggy sleeping bags. As they crouched transfixed by the approaching

barge they became aware of a rustling noise directly behind them. A native girl of about Sarah's age had stealthily crossed the stepping stone bridge to join them in their covert. She was diffident but did not seem at all surprised to discover them there. She put her finger to her lips, pointed down the lake and silently joined them peering at the approaching barge.

Astonished, both the boys observed her from the corners of their eyes. Though she had a wide face with strong cheekbones she was of slender build with long braided black hair which was interwoven with bits of polished bone and ivory teeth. Her clothing was a patchwork of animal skins meticulously stitched with leather thongs and decorated with patterns of carefully worked quills.

All eyes turned back to watch the extraordinary sight of the approaching barge. The raised platform at the centre of the raft, now clearly visible was piled high with shaggy furs. At the front of the platform two enormous tusks ten feet long and cork screwed were mounted facing forward. The closest thing they had seen were the brown tusks in the dinosaur room of the museum, varnished, brown with age and bound with uneven iron hoops. But these were polished, luminous in the fading light and covered with a filigree of carved patterns. Andrew counted fourteen men on either side of the raft paddling in unison. Their colourful patchwork of clothing proved to be paint applied directly to the skins of the navigators. Their bodies were completely tattooed and embellished with intricate patterns,



crescents and meandering spirals.

There was another deafening crash and they realized that what they had mistaken for thunder was actually being produced by a group of men pounding drums of skin bound around triangular frames seated directly behind the raised platform. At each thunderous roll the paddles were plunged into the water while the smaller drums sustained the rumble. The thunderous roar would abruptly cease and the lake would become absolutely tranquil, so still that they could hear the drip of water from the poised paddles. A second or two would elapse, then a distant echoing drum would return a rolling response. The raft drums would resume again thunderously, a blood curdling effect.

Perched high on top of the fur decked pyramid Johnny could make out a draped human figure who seemed to be surveying the procession and all her attendants with a unworldly disdain. Someone very important was being transported down the lake in an awesome ceremony.

The raft glided into a cleared portion of the shoreline behind their vantage point but the relentless beat of the drums continued as the men inserted poles under the throne on the raft and lifted it slowly onto the shore. The fur swathed figure on top had not moved a muscle. Eyes stared impassively tilted upwards in an ecstatic trance. The revered figure appeared to be some sort of ruler or priestess and they could see that her skin had been tanned to a mahogany brown. The delicate features of her face were painted with



brilliantly coloured designs or tattoos. Long segmented bone earrings dangled from her ears. On her head she wore a headdress composed of giant plumes which fell down the back of the mountainous fur decked throne. Johnny could not imagine what sort of bird would provide feathers of this size. They seemed far greater than any ostrich feather he had seen. At her feet, two white talons seemed to have been bound to her toes undoubtedly making walking very awkward. Fortunately for her there seemed to be a lot of porters ready to carry her around. The huge tusks glowing in the dusk were lifted off the barge by groups of men. Others distributed torches which were lit from a flame at the front of the high throne. Slowly the procession moved upland away from the shore.

The two astonished boys turned to take a better look at the native girl who had joined them in their spying. Though she was Sarah's age and height, her face was round, curiously oriental with high cheek bones and delicately hooded eyes. She smiled ingratiatingly. Johnny assumed his most sensible gravelly voice and asked her where she came from and where she lived. The little girl said nothing but seemed to understand his question and answered by pointing to the distant end of the lake. Then she beckoned to them to follow her, making a sign to be quiet and tread as stealthily as possible. They followed her across the stepping stones onto a discreet path which skirted the progress of the procession over the high rocks.

Just as the sun had plunged below the horizon,



it burst through a thin slot under the dense clouds forming to the west. Overhead they could see that the full moon had already risen quite high but was battling to break through the cloud layer. Occasionally a faint outline and a halo of light penetrated through the covering purple gauze. Crouching down the little group was able to follow the procession undetected. To the immense horror of the two boys they realized that they were headed directly towards Cauldron Bay where Sarah would be setting up camp. What a nasty surprise for Sarah!



Meanwhile Sarah and her two companions were picking their path over the rocky outcroppings in the failing light. She began to realize that the thunderous rumbling in the sky had become louder and more insistent. It seemed to be emerging from the forest on the other side of the camp; her eyes were straining to distinguish what could possibly make such a sound. What she saw in the half-light made her shudder with horror. A sinister shadow seemed to emerge from the woods thrusting itself through the undergrowth parting the tree branches in front of it. The monster seemed to be moving slowly, inexorably towards their hidden cove. The two boys walking ahead turned and perceived her dismay and encouragingly caught hold and squeezed her arms drawing her forward. Soon



Sarah began to distinguish features of the monster that made it less terrifying.

She had no inkling that her two brothers were only a few yards distant skirting the procession on the other side.

When they reached the edge of the sheltered cove, Sarah peered over anxiously and her heart stopped. Ranged below her on the rock shelf where she had abandoned the tent only an hour earlier were scores of women moving in trance-like circles in front of “Snaggle” Rock. The boulder had been transformed and looked even more imposing and sinister in the torch light. Over it had been draped a garment of shorn brown fur plaited in tassels and woven with bleached bones that reflected the light from the torches the women were bearing. The flanks of the stone were dressed with two huge swags of finely wrought porcupine quills arranged in a chevron pattern. Two enormous corkscrew tusks had been inserted into the empty holes where Andrew had inserted the idiotic broken bits of driftwood earlier. What had they made of that sacrilege Sarah wondered? She peered apprehensively among the swaying bodies half expecting to find Johnny and Andrew tied to a stake ready for the soup pot then, relieved that she could identify no fraternal faces, she lay low and observed the procession shuffling about below. Her two companions gestured to her to follow them but she shook her head feeling that she would be most ill-at-ease at this celebration. They departed reluctantly looking somewhat absorbed in other thoughts.

She began to notice all the preparations that had been made for the celebration. The fur draped rock was surrounded by a wide necklace of massive bones. They looked even larger than elephants' femurs. They had been bound with thongs into a herringbone pattern and served as a moat or barrier to keep the ecstatic revellers distanced from the idol. The moving throne which had so terrified her as it emerged from the forest had been brought to the crest of the rock overlooking the bay and set down.

The porters were beginning to dismantle the mounded skins which had been laid over the platform. On top of the platform swathed in furs the wizened priestess seemed to be presiding over the ceremony, staring fixedly at the gathering below her, riveted, impassive, humourless. Her baleful white eyes seemed to pick up the light from the torches and glow like a cats in the dark. The sunburned skin on her face was shrunken over her cheek bones and pulled back taut about her ears like a mask. Her lips were pulled back over her teeth in a hideous desiccated grimace.

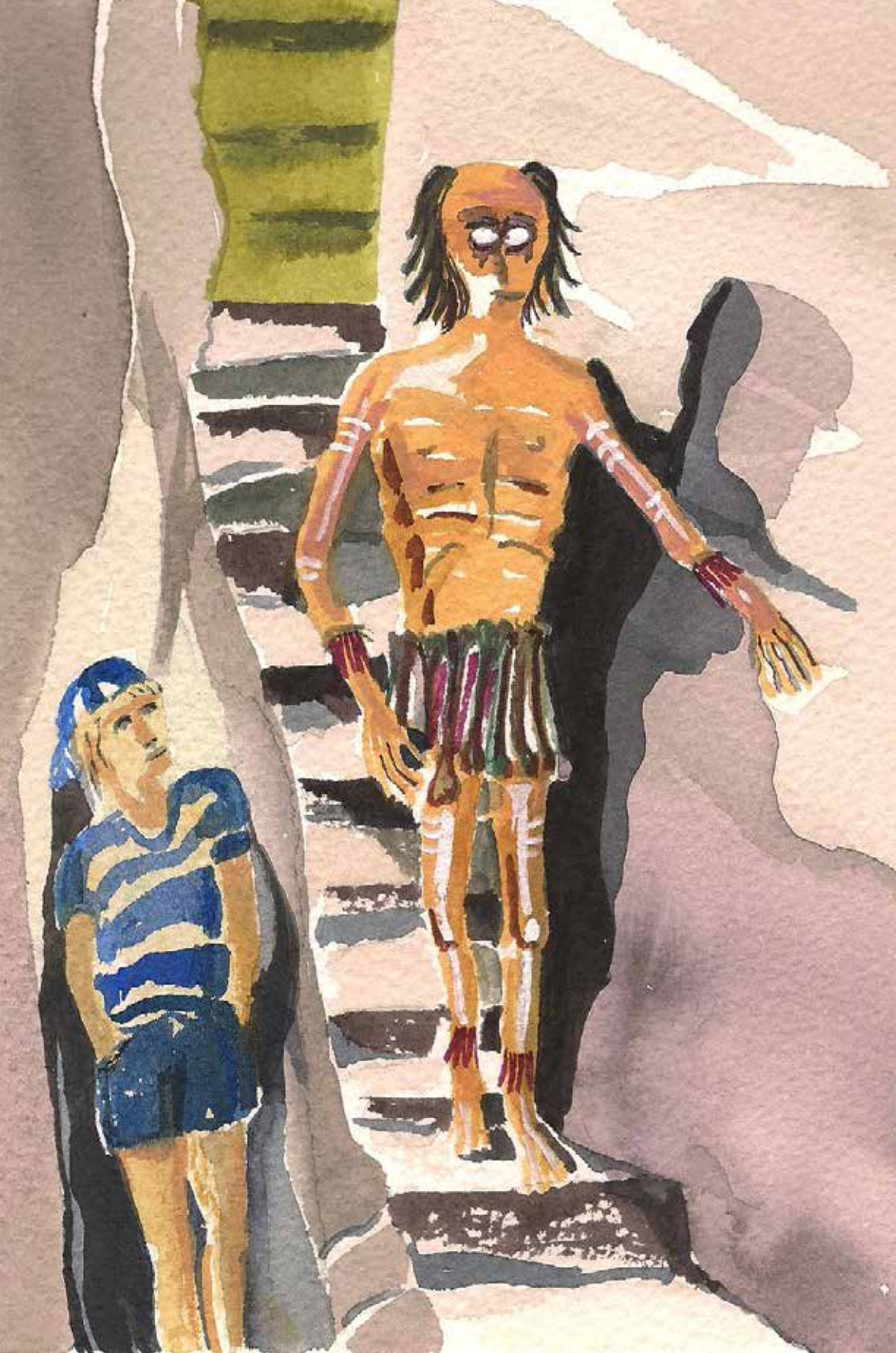
Sarah admired the magnificent plumed headdress which crowned her head and around her neck the strings of jagged teeth and stones that picked up the flickering light from the torches. The porters gathered in a group in front of the throne. Sarah had a good oblique view of the proceedings as she hugged close to the ground among the blueberry bushes.

The torches that the men had lit caught the bead work of the costume of the high priestess making it

dance over her impassive body. The regal figure was now exposed sitting on a throne which seemed to have been constructed of the same massive bones that she saw ranged below in patterns around the elephant rock.

The chair was lashed with leather thongs and the ancient crone seemed to be bound to it with a gauntlet of thongs spiralling from the elbow to the wrist. With sudden shock of recognition Sarah realized that what she had taken for a magnificent cloak was in fact composed of the exposed skeleton of the old woman, each bone carefully wrapped in a casing of quills and bead work and reassembled. It suddenly dawned on her that the people gathered below were either celebrating or in some way commemorating her death.

With a sudden explosive shout the attendants around her throne fell prostrate on the ground as two long, white bony arms extended out from the black obscurity underneath. An emaciated figure emerged from the shadow. His skin seemed to be bleached, glowing with a hideous translucence and stretched taut to reveal the contour of every bone and vein in his body. He groped his way back into his sanctuary like a creature blinded by the light of the torches and then emerged again carrying packets bound in webbing similar to the young fisherman's nets. Sarah could not make out the contents which seemed to glow a dull white in the flickering light. The ghostly white figure returned again and again with similar packets and placed them reverently in a row in front of the throne. She realized that the inside of the throne must be stashed with



these curious net bags. The custodian retreated into his dark sanctuary once more and his twisted fingers pulled closed the flap. No one stirred for some time. Then the prostrate porters raised themselves and set to work distributing the nets and fixing each one to the end of their long ceremonial poles. They began to disperse in both directions along the lip of Cauldron Bay. Sarah saw that a group had already set out in her direction and hurriedly crawled back from her vantage point to conceal herself in the dense bushes behind.

A heavy hand fell upon her shoulder from behind. She tried to wriggle free but the hand held her firm. She looked up to see a grim faced woman whose skin was decorated with a painted triangular motif and sinister diagonal lines under her eyes, suppurating red as if her flesh had been flayed in this pattern. Around her neck she wore a thong of gigantic feline claws, curved cruelly. Beside her stood the elder of the two fishing boys. The younger boy looked on sheepishly but made no effort to escape. Sarah felt that she could no longer refuse their invitation. The little group was guided down the steep steps in the rock fissure into the midst of the ceremony below. Sarah was led into an enclosure with a group of young girls and her companions disappeared elsewhere.

Johnny and Andrew had approached the edge of Cauldron Bay and camouflaged by bushes they too were able to get a better look at the ceremony below. The native girl looked anxious that they should be



caught spying and she made gestures for them to join the group of people below. But when their eyes fell upon the skeleton priestess, her eyes glowing balefully in the moonlight they shrank back into the ground cover. Suddenly they caught sight of Sarah who emerged from a crevice escorted by the grim faced woman. They saw her pushed firmly into an enclosure where other young girls were waiting. Shortly after they saw the native girl emerging from the same crevice and gravely walk over to the same enclosure. They felt slightly reassured that at least she had no fear about joining in the ceremony. The other girls welcomed her, but all looked apprehensive. She walked over to Sarah and gently put her hand on her shoulder to give her confidence that she would come to no harm. Sarah felt not at all reassured. She could see the disguised terror in the eyes of the other girls. She could also see the activities of the old priestess who was pouring clear oil into the indentations in the table rock in front of the fur draped idol. In a swooping hissing voice she was chanting as she purged the rock bowls. The whole cauldron reverberated with the sound of the great drums, one group answering another from positions on the rock ledges above. All the men seemed to be employed with the drums. In front of the idol the women were gathered in an increasingly frenzied dance. Around the lip of the cauldron she could make out the sentries with their poles to which the curious net bags were fixed.



It's a Mammoth! Sarah suddenly realized. The great ivory tusks corkscrewed over wrought bone altar platform in front.

They had been delicately embellished with carved patterns, whorls and chevrons, the labour of a deft craftsman. She knew that the mammoth had not roamed in this area since the last ice age. In the museum the mammoth display was always depicted against the backdrop of the receding wall of ice, the colossal animals gorging on swampy plant life or fending off attacks from organized groups of Stone Age hunters armed with spears and rocks. She could not fathom how this group of people could so accurately recreate a ceremony which might conceivably have taken place in this location ten thousand years ago, millennia before any recorded history. She scanned the crowd trying to pick out some reassuring detail from the twentieth century, a wristwatch or an anachronistic pair of jogging shoes but she could see nothing that was not handmade with fastidious care. These revivalists obviously took their ceremony very seriously. Even their own green fibreglass canoe and camping gear seemed to have been dragged off and hidden somewhere so as not to detract from the authenticity of the ceremony.

The native girl who had abandoned Johnny and Andrew in the crevice on the cliff face squeezed her arm and pointed in the direction of her concealed brothers. From above Johnny saw what was happening and bravely waved to her pointing down to Andrew at his side. No

one else seemed to notice this secret communication, so engrossed were they in the ceremony. But Sarah was greatly reassured that if she was part of some dreadful dreamlike recreation of history at least she was not alone. Never was she quite so happy to contemplate the usefulness of her two brothers.

Johnny and Andrew had moved part way into the gulley where they had been rock climbing only a few hours earlier. In his hoarse voice Johnny whispered to Andrew, "We've got to do something to save Sarah."

Behind them, and overhead they heard the shuffling footsteps of someone descending. They were trapped. There was no way of avoiding an encounter except perhaps to delay the inevitable by proceeding ahead. Whoever it was approaching seemed to be groping his way slowly down the crevice, feeling each step and occasionally setting a pebble rolling down the steep incline. Johnny dared to retrace his footsteps a few paces to find out who or what was following them. Caught in a cross shaft of moonlight he glimpsed a dreadful apparition, a tall, skeletal man, skin bleached white with colourless hair braided into straggling wisps incorporating yellowed bone fragments that fell to his shoulders. Johnny realized that the man was blind.

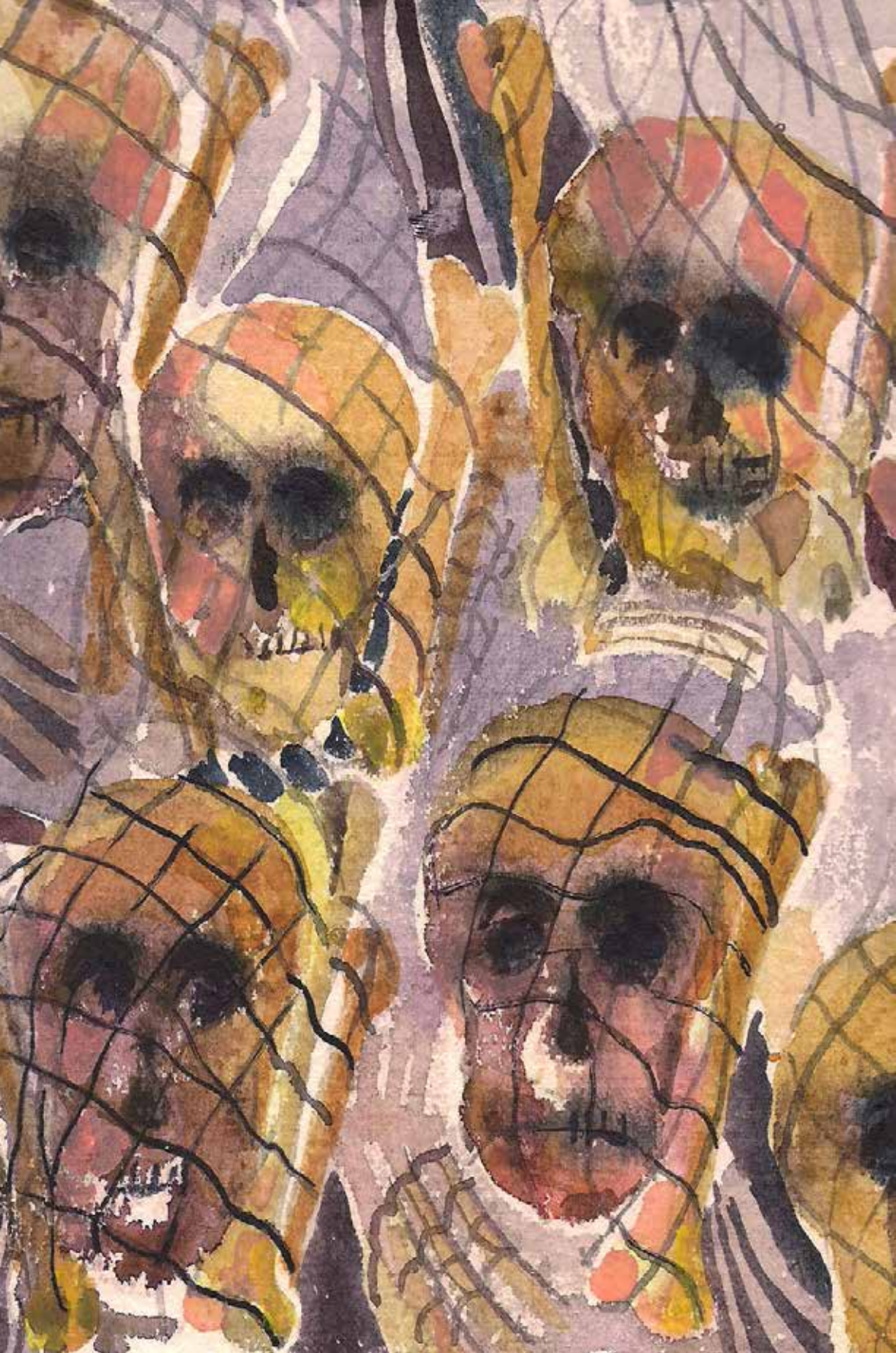
Smooth skin had grown over his eye sockets and seemed to glow dimly in the dark. Around his emaciated waist was a girdle of bleached bones, which clicked as he carefully felt his way down the gulley with long probing fingers of his left hand. In the twisted fingers of his right hand he held up a single spherical black stone

about the size of a small egg, polished and glinting in the moonlight as if this were a precious missing eye.

Johnny held himself perfectly still and crushed himself into a shallow recess in the rock to one side of the path. He held his breath as the dreadful apparition approached. The shuffling figure came abreast and seemed to perceive Johnny's alien presence for a moment. He stopped, sniffed, listened very carefully and began to probe the air with his deformed, quivering fingers. His lips parted in a grotesque smile of recognition which revealed fore-teeth that had been filed into sharp points and red bleeding gums. Johnny retched in revulsion at this sight and made a determined dash under the extended arm of the monster up the path they had descended. The arm flipped backwards with incredible agility but missed the escaping boy by a

Andrew watched this fraught scene from further down the passage and realized that he had no recess to retreat into as the priest descended. Stealthily he descended towards the gathering below remembering the hollow under the boulder. He emerged from the passage undetected in the darkness and found himself alone in a fur draped enclosure behind the idol. With lightening agility he squeezed himself under the gigantic rock into the domed cavity.





Sarah glanced about at her companions in the enclosure. In addition to her confidant who had pointed out Johnny's whereabouts there were two other girls of the same age. All looked very nervous. Nonchalantly she attempted to stroll away from the group to peer through the fur curtains around the enclosure but found her path barred by one of the fearsome faced women. The warders all had similar distinguishing facial tattoos with a red zig-zag pattern cut across their cheeks. Sarah had noticed earlier that all the dancers seemed to display a similar pattern and decided that this must be one of the identifying marks of the tribe, possibly considered a detail of enhanced beauty. Some of the older women seemed to have accumulated additional colourful motifs on the arms and legs, apparently designating seniority and prestige. Sarah felt that the effect was excessively fearsome, yet she could see from their deportment that underneath the forbidding facade the women were generally good-natured, if somewhat firm of hand.

In the middle of the enclosure she noticed a puzzling cleft log with two prongs that bent back like a giant clothes peg and could not imagine its purpose. It had a deep polished patina and was covered with ritualistic patterns where the two legs joined.

The furs parted at one end of the enclosure and a sinuous woman entered and sat down astride the log. Sarah had never seen so many tattoos or embellishments crammed onto a single human body.

The woman beckoned to two of the attendants and they led forward the young girl who had winked reassurance to Sarah only moments before. She was offered a drink from a wooden bowl which she guzzled noisily and then threw her head back in an uncontrollable shudder. The attendants steadied her as she sank to her knees and deftly positioned her head face wedged upwards in the cleft of the log. Sarah could see that her friend was semi-conscious, but trying to be brave.

From a hollow log at her feet the priestess pulled a handful of wooden sticks with sharpened tips and set to work. With practiced skill she began to lacerate the face of the young girl and rub in a red powder sprinkled by one of the attendants. Sarah realized that the young girl was receiving the distinguishing marks of the tribe. Deftly and meticulously the sharpened sticks created dense whorls and patterns of dots in the skin and the girl's face was transformed from the smiling child that she had encountered earlier into something much more fearsome. Despite the anaesthetic drink the eyes of the young girl filled with tears of pain, which were gently wiped away by the attendants.

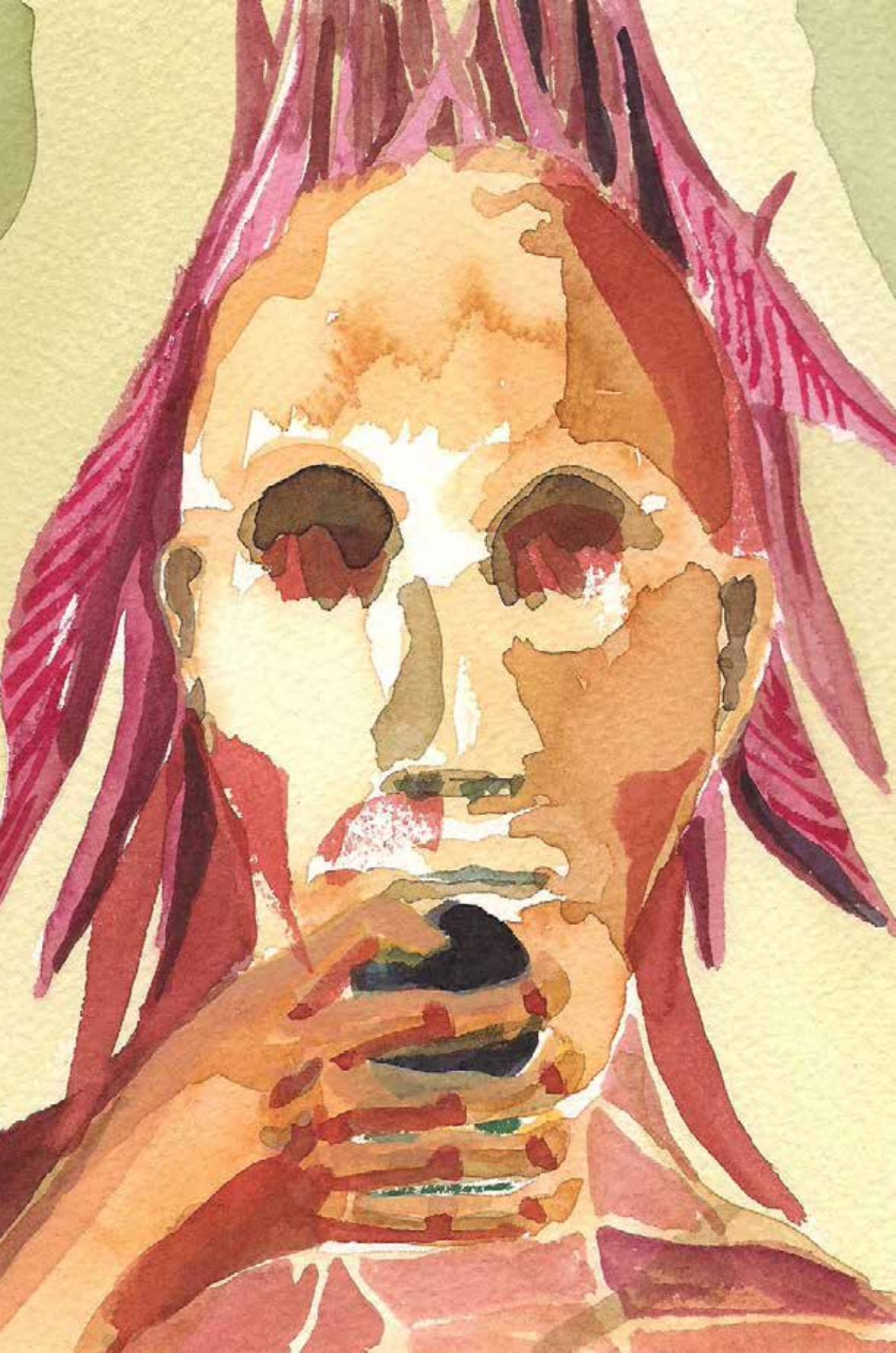
Sarah thought the ritual utterly barbaric. She could not imagine herself permanently transformed in this manner with these sharp insignia. She thought ruefully of her delicate little earring creations and how unsuitably they would combine with these crazy diagonal slashings. What would she explain to her friends and family - that is if she ever escaped this bizarre community. Indications were that they intended

to claim her as a permanent member of their tribe. She also remembered all those discussions about having her ears pierced with Aunt Penny, quite negligible in comparison to this! Perhaps Aunt Penny could adapt to the new look but she was not at all sure about her mother.

She edged uneasily behind the other girls, hoping that at any minute someone would arrive with the cavalry but she had little confidence in Johnny and Andrew's ability to arrange such an outcome.

The two other girls were offered a drink from the wooden bowl which they guzzled greedily. One burst into a surprising giggle and sat down very suddenly, the other began to bob up and down dementedly with the drum beat. When Sarah was offered the bowl she made a great show of eagerness but took care not to swallow a drop. The liquor smelt musky and bitter like old fungus and stump water. She feigned an appreciative slurping sound mimicking the others and then for dramatic effect threw her arms up in the air clicking her fingers and shouted "ole". The older women looked around surprised, then amused they resumed their labours. Sarah pretended to stagger to the perimeter of the enclosure and then collapsed against it with her head turned into the fur. She lay completely immobile, but one eye was open watching the proceedings outside through a gap in the furs.





When Johnny scrambled breathlessly out of the top of the crevice he glanced back to ensure that he was not being followed by the blind bone bag. Then he ducked into the underbrush beyond and as inconspicuously as possible skirted the edge of Cauldron Bay. Down below he could see that Sarah had been led off into a sort of enclosure with the other girls and he felt that this might be an ominous development. He knew that he had to do something but he could not decide what it would be. The only possible option seemed to be to create some sort of diversion and lead everyone on a wild goose chase, perhaps to give Andrew an opportunity to reach Sarah in the confusion.

He arrived at the cleared area where the skeleton priestess was presiding on her catafalque. He guessed that the structure must house something valuable to the tribe; there was a group of men with torches guarding the front entrance. Skirting the back of the edifice he pulled out his penknife and deftly cut a slot through the shaggy furs stitched to the frame and quietly pushed himself through. He found himself in a small space with a corral of grass bedding in the middle that looked like the litter for a large animal. It took some moments for his eyes to adjust to the dim flickering light filtering in from the torches planted in front of the throne. The inside of the fur tent was lined with many more of the same netted packages that he had seen the sentries carrying about fixed to their long poles. The smell was nauseating, even more overpowering than the effect

to his waterproofing of the tent. His curious hands pushed through the netting of one of the packets and groped the contents inquisitively. Then with a sudden sickening realization he lurched back in horror. Staring at him malevolently through the netting he discerned a grinning human skull. Each of the bags contained the neatly wrapped remains of a dead person. Were these sacrificial victims or revered ancestors who were brought out to preside over the religious celebrations? He wasn't going to stay and find out.

With his hand over his mouth he rushed retching to the front entry of the structure and emerged behind a group of startled attendants. One of them shouted angrily and folded him into a locked arm grasp. Johnny thought that he was going to choke to death. Stars swam in front of his eyes.



Peering out from under the edge of the rock Andrew could see the ceremony in close detail. An old priestess was preparing one of the pothole recesses, scrubbing it out with oil, all just within his reach. The women continued to dance in a frenzied circle around the front of the rock while these preparations were taking place and the men continued with the relentless conversation between the two encampments of drums. From a basket of woven twigs the priestess lifted many

spherical white objects, stones or perhaps turtle's eggs and placed them reverently in the scoured receptacle.

Andrew was aware that the drumming was growing into a demonic crescendo of power as both groups of drummers were now pounding in unison so that the cove was throbbing with the reverberating sound. The ear-splitting roar suddenly collapsed when the whole bay was illuminated with what seemed to be a bolt of lightning. A plume of fire broke out in front of the mammoth rock. Total silence reigned. The dancers and the drummers had thrown themselves face down on the rocks rigid with fear and obeisance.

Emerging from behind the boulder Andrew could see the gnarled feet of the bony blind priest, sensitive feet that felt their own way around the edge of the rock to a position directly in front. The priest held his black eye stone high over his head for some seconds directing it to and fro as if surveying the assembly. Total silence reigned. Then he bent over and placed the stone with perfect accuracy in the midst of the white stones gathered in the pothole. He held his two arms up to the sky and turned away from the prostrate, silent assembly. Andrew thought for a moment what would be the effect if he were to grab the two feet of the man and try to drag him back wedged under the rock, but then decided that this might seal his own fate prematurely.

He would bide his time for want of any better plan.

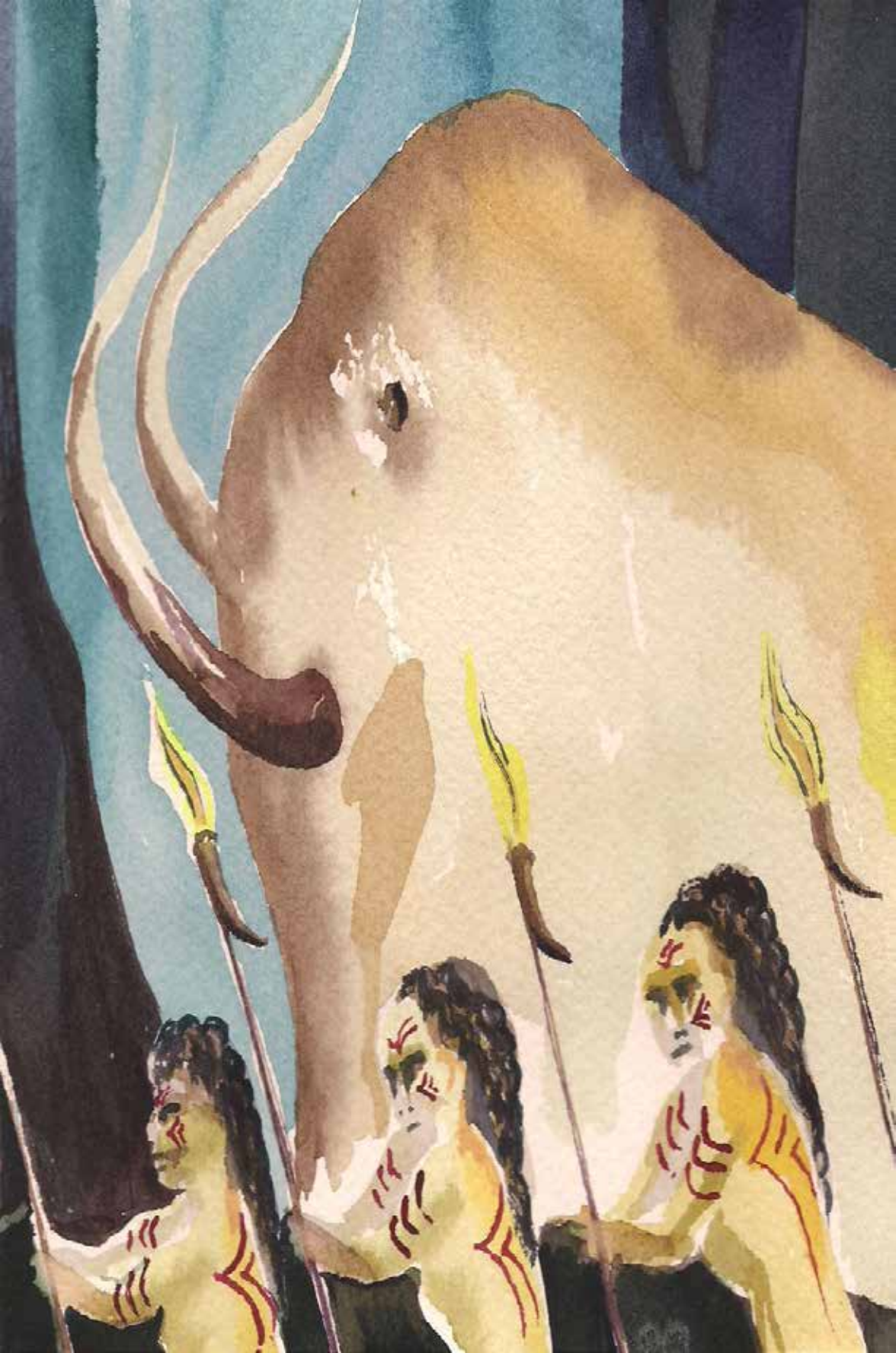
Quietly the drum roll began again and Andrew could see that a group of young boys had assembled in



a semi-circle in front of the rock. Amidst the nervous faces he found Johnny's and realized that he had not made good his escape. Johnny was glancing around discreetly, obviously looking for his brother and sister. The tallest of the boys, one of the expert fishermen that Sarah had encountered on the reef stepped forward and approached the pothole. He sank his hand into the darkness and pulled out a perfectly spherical white egg. An enormous smile of relief broke out over his face, he smiled with pleasure. Another boy took heart and approached the pothole extracting a similar white prize. Others approached and retreated with their white eggs held high like objects of adoration before them. Johnny realized what was expected of him and stepped forward tentatively. Probing the depth of the hole he could feel a number of the objects rolling around the spherical bottom. His hand closed on one and he held it up to show the assembly.

There was a collective gasp, and one of the old women burst into uncontrollable wailing. It was black! - the shiny stone that they had earlier seen being transported by the blind priest. Johnny looked on in bewilderment and with a shudder dropped the stone back into the pothole.

Powerful fingers clamped themselves around his shoulders as the blind priest turned once again to face the prostrate assembly. Johnny attempted to break free but was held in an ineluctable grip watching the crowd cowering in abasement. The priest pushed him roughly towards a group of attendants who seized him



and bundled him off to a cage constructed of lashed together bones at the foot of the mammoth rock.

Dazed Johnny knelt down on a pile of pulverized bones and peered apprehensively at the continuation of the ceremony. He almost threw himself against the cage when what he imagined to be a snake skittered across his leg. The two guards outside looked around alarmed shook their spears and muttered something incomprehensible. Looking around Johnny could just make out Andrew's eyes peeking through the crack under the rock. Andrew whispered to him to make no sign of recognition and continue to concentrate on the ceremony.

"Don't say a word" he whispered. "Can you see what has happened to Sarah?"

Johnny found the presence of his younger brother immensely comforting and vaguely remembered all the times that he pictured him poised precariously on the brink of well deserved doom.



From her enclosure Sarah in a feigned stupor gazed up at the sky and watched the heavy clouds racing across. The full moon which had risen with such splendour only an hour before was increasingly blocked out by the racing clouds. The cove was then illuminated only by the torches of the dancing celebrants. When



the moon occasionally broke through it illuminated the skeleton priestess perched high on her pyramid commanding a view of the ritual. Her eyes seemed to glow and flicker in the moonlight. The blood red bead and quill work meticulously wrapping each bone of her rib cage sparkled momentarily and then was plunged again into the gloom.

At a certain point the drums again developed a thunderous unison and then stopped in eerie silence. In the distance there was another rumble. At first she was only aware of the throb but then decided that this must be real thunder, the storm was finally upon them. At first she thought that perhaps this was the desired effect of the ceremony, an effort to call up rain spirits. The drummers resumed with more circumspection, as if modest in the presence of the greater Being.

There was a sudden arc of light and Sarah could see the first clear fork plunge to the ground not far out in the bay. She counted "One Thousand, Two Thousand, Thr..." and realized that the strike was less than a kilometre away. The sky broke into a sheet of light again. She was starting to count another sequence when a sizzling crack flashed into the priestess at the top of the pyramid perched over the cove. The lightening seemed to hover about her head and gently lick about her throne. Sarah could see it twitching the wrapped skeleton into a hideous lifelike spasm. The baleful eyes seemed to light up. The shrieks of the celebrants below were almost obliterated by a simultaneous crash of thunder. The preserved body seemed to explode like a

giant rippling firework and the bones burst out of their quill-work casings scattering everywhere. The lightening peeled down the supporting throne splintering the massive bone support trunks. The whole edifice shook for a moment then blew apart, toppling and plunging into the midst of the screaming celebrants below.

Total mayhem reigned. Fires seemed to break out simultaneously all over the cove. Johnny's cage was shattered by a falling member and he pulled himself from the debris and rushed around behind the mammoth rock. It took a fraction of a second to squeeze himself through the shallow opening and join Andrew peering out at what was happening around them.

They watched the crush of bodies as all the celebrants tried to flee through the narrow crevice onto the upper plateau. Others seemed to have thrown themselves into the water in terror even though it was apparent many could not swim. They clutched onto each other in a doomed effort to stay afloat. The carnage was horrendous. They could see that many had been trampled in the panic and there were others who seemed to have been knocked unconscious by the thunderbolt. Andrew stared at a decorated ornament just beyond his grasp. He extended his hand to grasp it as a possible weapon and then retched in disgust realizing that it was a decorated limb of the skeleton priestess. He steadied himself against Johnny who was watching the confusion and had suddenly spied a streak of blonde hair. There was no way of attracting Sarah's attention in the chaos and bravely he slid himself out through

the groove at the back of the rock and ran into the midst of the chaos. Sarah was only vaguely aware of his tug on her arm and of a familiar face as Johnny pulled her around behind the rock and forcibly pushed her through while Andrew grabbed her arms and pulled her from the other side.

And then the skies let loose a deluge of rain. Sheets of water poured off the cliff faces. The ceremonial torches were extinguished and the commotion was plunged into total darkness. They lay there in the smooth hollow under the rock breathing lightly, and trying to imagine what was happening in the shrieking, groaning blackness beyond.



A shaft of morning sun penetrated through the portal into the secret cove and under the Mammoth rock falling across Andrew's face. He blinked it away and turned sleepily, then sat up bolt upright in sudden remembrance of the activities of the preceding night. He looked around and saw Johnny and Sarah sleeping quietly in the bed of dried needles under the rock. He peered out through the slot from which he had been watching the ceremony through the previous night

expecting to see evidence of the mayhem, the remnants of the charred structure where the lightning bolt had struck.

The sunlight sparkled on the gentle ripples of the little lagoon and lapped gently against the shore. A dragonfly alighted on a stone at eye level and outstretched its wings in the warm sunlight. Total peace reigned in a landscape where there was not the slightest evidence of the frenzied activities of the night before. The little green canoe had been returned to the position where they had left it though it had taken on a lot of rainwater during the night and a duffle bag of clothing was floating around soggly in the stern. Warily Andrew pushed himself out from under the sheltering rock and crept around the edge of the cove. Then he ascended the cleft in the rock to the upper plateau. There on the lip of the cliff he saw the crushed grass where he and Johnny hidden, had watched the ceremony the night before. He remembered vividly pushing his face down between two tussocks of grass. He could not have dreamed that.

Down below he could see Johnny also emerging from the shelter and looking around apprehensively. He called down to him and noticed that Johnny started uncharacteristically, and then looking up waved back. Johnny then started making whooping noises and threw a flat stone into the water, much more typical of his wonted behaviour. Andrew could not help but wonder whether he alone had encountered all those strange incidents during the night.

Sarah emerged sleepily and appeared very

tentative in her looking about the cove. She began to study the curious spirals on the face of the mammoth rock with rapt attention her finger tracing out the lines and liberating the furrows of lichen growth. She seemed to be even more dreamy than usual at this time of the day.

Johnny went over to the canoe and discovered that the bag of granola was floating sodden in the puddle in the stern, and wondered why someone had not thought to cover up the canoe. No-one seemed to be interested in breakfast. No one said a word about the extraordinary events of the night but each was trying to recall privately the vivid events of that awful nightmare.

With unusual co-operation the two boys dumped the rainwater from the canoe and set about repacking the gear. The soggy sleeping bags were rolled up in complete silence.

A gull passed overhead and shrieked in laughter at the sight of the canoe. The startling sound reverberated eerily throughout the cove. Sarah felt that she had to say something about what she alone seemed to have endured. "I think this is a very strange place - even in the morning light it seems to be haunted by unearthly echoes"

"Oh Sarah you're such a dramatist" said Johnny in his most controlled gravelly voice. He kicked a pebble truculently into the boat.

The three explorers settled themselves in the green canoe and started to push off from the shore with their paddles. Suddenly Johnny said, "Wait a moment,

I want to check something”. He leapt out of the boat almost overturning it again and ran up to the pothole in front of the mammoth rock.

Extending his hand down into the greenish muck riddled with wire worms and black tadpole pond life, he probed the bottom. The sensation was unpleasant - even for him. His fingers closed on an object in the mud and debris and he pulled it out. He gazed down in disbelief. Sarah and Andrew looked on in horror.

In his hand he held a polished spherical black stone about the size of a hen’s egg. The stone fell from his shaking grasp back into the pothole and sank into the depths from which he had disturbed it.





*Yours Truly,
Flaubert Duck*

