



Cloud modest, the planet covers herself.
Our chosen is perfect—more than we could have hoped for. Rolling beneath, she slips aside her creamy white veil to reveal the sensuous richness of blue water, brown and tan prairies, yellow desert, a wrinkled youth of gray mountains hemmed by forest so green it is almost black—and the brilliant emerald sward of spring pastures.

Impossibly rich.

My flesh is partner to the long journey. Like a hovering angel, I look down upon the dazzling surface and yearn. All the springs of my youth flow toward this new Earth. A long limb of dawn in the east—how lovely! Our world turns wisely widdershins—the best of luck. There are two moons, one close in, the second much farther out and large enough for icy mountains under a thin atmosphere. We will explore that other promise once we are established *here*.

We—dozens of us, so many gathering in the observation



blister, finally bathing in real light! There is sweet joy in voices from real lungs and tongues and lips—and such language! Ship language and Dreamtime-speak all musically mixed. So many friends and more to come. Our laughter is giddy.

We want to spread and lock limbs. We want to couple. We are eager to meet children as yet unconceived—eager to hurry them along so they can share this beauty with proud parents.

We!

Kinetic, no longer pent up or potential... The long centuries are over.

We!

We are *here*!

Planters and seedships have descended before we came awake. They have analyzed and returned with the facts. Our chemistry now matches this world's.

Fons et origo.

Fountainhead.

I don't remember the name we've chosen, it's on the tip of my tongue—not that it matters. I'm sure it is a beautiful name.

We form teams, holding hands in waving, weightless lines in the blister, calling to each other using our Dreamtime names and smiling until our cheeks sting. We make awful, funny faces, like clowns, to smooth and relax the muscles of our joy. Soon we will choose new names: land names, sea names, air names, poetically spun from the old.

My new name is on the tip of my tongue—

Hers is on the tip of my tongue. She is nearby, and I find myself strangely embarrassed to meet in person for the first time, because I have known her for all the sleepy ages. We played and learned together in the Dreamtime and resolved our earliest disputes. Making up, we realized we were incapable of being angry with each other for long. She is a master of Ship's

biology—myself, training, and culture. Long, lazy times of instruction and play and exploration shot through with intense training, keeping our muscles fit. There is no experience like it, except for coming awake and meeting in the flesh.

The world, the flesh.

Our lines move toward the chrome-silver gate in the translucent white bulkhead. We are moving into the staging area. Landers await us there, sleek shadows ghostly gray.

Our beautiful Ship is too large to land—twelve kilometers long, huge and lonely. Once she embraced an irregular ball of rocky ice over a hundred kilometers in diameter—the shield and yolk of our interstellar journey. She still clutches a wasted chunk of the Oort moonlet—just a few billion tons. We decelerated with fuel to spare and now orbit the prime candidate.

How long?

The years are spread out cold and quiet behind us, the long tail of our journey. We do not remember those years intimately, there were so many.

How many?

It doesn't matter. I will look at the log when there is time, after the teams are chosen to make our first journey to the planet's surface.

Our new names are called, and we arrange ourselves in the loading bay, ceremonial outfits like so many brilliant daubs of paint, the better to see and be seen.

She is here! Comely in blue and beige and green, her look is bold, confident. Large, deep eyes and wide cheeks, brownish hair cut short—her look my way is a loving, thrilling challenge. She sits away from the others in the lander, by a spare seat, hoping that I will join her. She and I will be on the first team!

We.

I recognize so many from the Dreamtime. Friendly, joyous,

hugging, shaking hands, congratulating. Words spill. Our tongues are still clumsy but our passions are ancient. *We* are more than any family could be. We fought and argued and loved and learned through the long, cold voyage. We chose teams, disbanded, reformed, chose again, and now the fit is perfection within diversity. Nothing can stand between us and the joy of planetfall.

A smooth jolt of perfectly designed machinery—

Severing connections with Ship. The lander is less than a hundred meters long, a tiny thing, really, yet sleek and fresh.

Time is moving so fast.

I unhitch and push off my harness to be closer to *her*. She scolds but she wraps her arms around me, and the web accommodates, the net stretches. We laugh to see so many others have done the same.

Viewing Ship from outside, along her great length, we marvel at her condition, weathered yet intact. Noble, protecting.

Ship, combined from an early formation of three hulls, now resembles two ancient stupas joined at their bases. Designed to protect against the hard wind between the stars, streamers of plasma convection once flowed and glowed ahead of and around the hulls like foggy gold rivers, ferrying interstellar dust—icy, glassy, metallic—aft, where it was processed into fuel or forged to replace Ship's ablated outer layers.

Now, the last of the plasma feebly glows around the pinched middle, a vestigial beacon. The view distracts us for only a moment. We are lost in simple wonder. One out of a hundred ships, we were told, would survive. And yet we have made the longest journey in the history of humanity, we are alive, and

WE!

ARE!

HERE!

LIFE START

A jerk and an awful sound, like water rushing or blood spurting. Everything's dark and muddled. A little redness creeps into my vision. I'm surrounded by thick liquid. My legs and arms thrash out against a smoothness.

Have we crashed? Did we break up in space before we landed? I'm already losing bits and pieces of what all that means. My memory is becoming like a puzzle picked up and shaken apart.

Puzzle. Jigsaw puzzle.

All wrong!

My entire body hurts. This is not the way it should be—not the way anything I know should be. But then I can feel what little I do know slipping away, including my name and why I'm here.

Alone in a shrinking tightness, like being squeezed out of a tube, legs still trapped, fingers ripping through the rubbery membrane, opening holes through which

I breathe.

I'm kicking my way out of a smothering sac. My chest aches and burns. The air hurts. Then the noise hits again and pounds my head, my ears, metal on metal. Doors closing. Walls moving, scraping, squealing.

My lungs seize. Hands and arms grow stiff. Naked flesh sticks to the deck. Skin comes away. I'm *freezing*.

A little one pulls on my exposed arm. She's thin and wiry and strong. She tears at the sac until all of my upper body is cold. She makes sounds. I think I understand but my head isn't locked in yet.

There was something wonderful before this.

What was it?