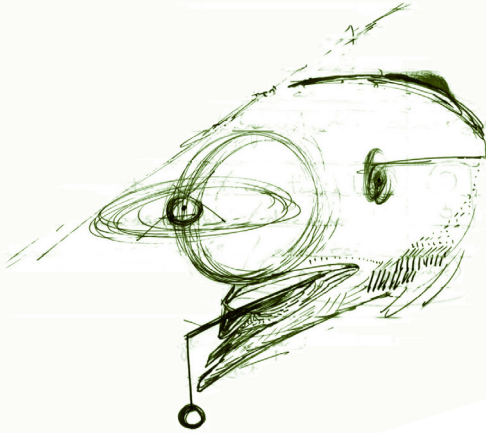


Flood

Part 3 from

**Song
of the
Brakeman**



[2006]

We set the Blackhawk on a trajectory for the toll booth and descended giant legs to the water level. The air was dense with gases and clinging vapors. Gravity was light. All around us fluids were streaming, but they did not make the descent more difficult, if anything they improved our grip. We reached precipitation level. The toll booth blew. The Coral Sea lay before us.

Where the surface had skinned over it resembled human flesh. Thin curving reeds left it at intervals like hairs shooting from pores. The mist cleared momentarily, and the scene illuminated. A sheet of fluorescence spread above us like a wrapping of blue-green plastic: a limit of pure pollution which was our only protection from the star.

Where the sun found points of penetration it burned the surface of the sea creating potholes in the crust and searing currents of air. We were facing the foil, tip to toe, naked under our coats and wanting, mouth to mouth, breath, skin and pockets. For a few moments the universe existed within

us. We were one, all. When we separated, we stepped upon it, the universe, for it had become a surface, receptive and smooth as a black belly. Flood had formed a rind firm and thick enough to support us.

We trekked for some hours. The color of that spongy ventral cortex changed as the light rose from coal-black to chocolate, from Indian ochre to Tongan tan, Mongolian bronze, and eventually to the pinky cream of that least protected flesh of all. The shooting hairs became forests of salt-loving mangroves embedded far beneath the tough sponge we were walking or lying on. It was impossible not to entwine wherever it suggested itself for the air, the atmosphere, the tension of the place incarnated mutual desire. We relaxed in conjunction, no longer driven by an escape motive. We were sex itself, twinning, nourishing. We were like animals in their prime, whose leap is the revelation and realization of their nature.

As the dawn light grew, though it never passed the strength of such a light as you might find inside a tent on a rainy day, the air thinned and we heard the sound of running water. A spring was shimmering, rippling with waves and with schools of sleek, randy fish jumping exuberantly. We skirted it and continued across the congealed sea, trying to make the other side before daybreak. We had expected Flood to show signs of deepening in its heart, but it was as shallow as it had appeared near the shore. Beneath the sur-

face we could make out parts of dwellings, transmission towers and sections of city buildings. We were only a few meters above the indigestible refuse of the centuries. Pneumatic drills and call-boxes, rotating blades and screen monitors, guns and swords and tank gun turrets poked out of the thinning murk. In slow swirling bays, office furniture and children's toys, bunks, magazines and baseball bats were floating freely. This was the back yard swamp of what was once regarded as progress.

Meniscus, where it bordered projecting objects or islands of olivine rock, was concave, licking up, as if resisting the downward curvature of the globe. This chemical repository seemed incapable of promoting life, but as our inner wish was fertile beneath the memory of violence, from cracks in the rocks hardy twigs extended with one or two tiny leaves on the ends of them.

The skies were devoid of bird-life, airplanes had been unheard of for nearly a generation, but something airborne was approaching from the direction of Pell. We hid behind the torn-off door of a wrecked scan-van whose nose was wedged into a truffle shelf and watched as a capsule, trailing turquoise and blonde traces, arced towards the crash site. It was one of the few older-model surveillance planes in existence. Propelled by turbo-charge action and reaction, they were notorious for burning fuel with great extravagance and for leaving noxious vapor trails of various colors behind

them. They were used only in cases of extreme urgency.

As it descended towards the smoking tollbooth we could make out a line of reporters' electric buggies beetling towards the same site along the elevated route. The back pages were already reporting that terrorists had drained Ex-P's blood to feed their vampire bats. The chauffeur was suspected of complicity, his Norteña music had surely been the code, sending messages to the prisoners inside Pell about the best moment to strike.

An hour or so passed as they picked through the remains. We dared not move until the capsule had departed. Eventually the fish-head rose from the accident site and made a few passes over the hills. It did not pass our way. Whoever was inside that plane never considered that Flood could be crossed.

In that they were not completely mistaken. The flesh-like surface gum around about us was thinning as the light strengthened. We had to avoid some growing puddles. Beneath the surface lights flickered and swept. A wall-eyed pike-perch approached us as if from memory, faded deity eyes in a shimmering coat. Its head poked up, edges dripping. Touch that and it's 'Good night, Nurse', as Chip used to say. It raised its glans-like head and gill-slits higher till you could make out razor-sharp fins. We moved our arms so it didn't mistake us for cadavers. The carrion kings weren't

interested in living beings. Other pike-perches grouped near us, curious about the new life forms moving above. One fired, but not at us. Its poison shot through a hole in the surface, searching the rocks and crevices ahead of us. It would return to him, his own missile end him if it found nothing. The growing lakes of heavy liquid began to move in lazy elliptical swirls, reaching up onto the edges of our crust which was still connected to land. We made for the rocks at the point of an inlet. Climbing around them towards the bay we looked back over a hypnotizing dance of rose-tipped waves towards the distant auto-route. For the moment we were safe. But what lay ahead? The inlet was fed from the mountains by a seeping gray and violet mud. As we descended from the rocks and tracked through the mudsand of the bay we clinked into a litter of corked bottles of all shapes and sizes, with colored lights illuminated within. The glass flashed and they set up their own tinkling. I tasted an unfamiliar salt and asked Enola, 'What do you see?'

She replied, 'Cradles burning', and popped the cork of one of them. The light went out but a voice came from the dark, stale interior, a voice without words, an exhalation of pent-up wanting, an audible sigh, a sexual groan.

When we heard it we were aware that the showers which had been peppering us since we set out had exhausted themselves. There was nothing between us but warm sensuality. Sleep was difficult in that still and quiet. Some images arose

and sank again into the night. Some shapes occurred, like objects out of the past : helmet-shapes, square-headed and metallic, and smooth-steel wingless airplane columns alternated with the vision of complex flower-heads. Some naked figures like waifs, mortal and vulnerable, rose out of the mud and dissolved into it again, every one a biological replica of Enola or of me at different ages. We were infantile, playing, pubescent, abused, adolescent, afraid, experimenting. Forms in time, too, were inconstant. We were visualizing a history, a congregation of our selves before we met each other. My head was burning, and I was wanting to scratch the place where Myra's chip resided, until our attitude mutated and we took these images, convex, chrome-orange and distorted, as reassurances of our freedom, and the necessary unfolding of our empathy. We had been breathing in short rapid shots, but now we could draw lungfuls of dehumidified air, charged with real oxygen. We interlaced with renewed force and, newly-charged, rounded a point to find a second bay. A triple-hulled craft was stationed there, the left and right hulls were shorter and finer than the middle one which seemed to contain a cabin. The trimaran — for it was one of sorts — was moored to the rooftop ventilation grill of a flooded motel and its harpoon cannon was aiming straight at us. I could not make out more than the cap of the harpoonist, who must have been less than half my size, but his harpoon looked powerful enough to transpierce all three of us in a

split second. We raised our hands, empty palms open and upwards, to show we were unarmed, but when neither the capped figure nor anything else on deck moved, we approached carefully.

The figure was unprotected by cloth or flesh. His bones were fused to each other, perhaps by the radiation wave associated with a meteor fall, or the black sun of a nuclear explosion. His flesh had long ago been picked off by birds or worms. Two more such figures lay below deck. They had been male and female, that much was obvious from the shapes of their pelvises. They were Enola's and my size, and they had been caught in the act when the unidentified phenomenon toasted them from the core. Their bones made up a continuous object. They had no joints, but swollen junctions. Their pelvises and arms, shoulders and teeth were cemented to each other's. Within minutes so were ours, or rather the points of contact of our skin which seemed to blend like molten wax. We experienced the pleasure of the other as a moment of recollection passing.

I was for forcing one of the locked drawers in the cabin below, but Enola found a key on a silver chain around the woman's neck that opened all the locks. Inside the bureau was ink, and a pair of notebooks. The man's contained details on the dangers of Flood, on the fish to avoid, and on optimum calibrations for the craft's instruments. These would prevent us becoming barracuda breakfast. The boat

was designed to carve easily through the thickest viscosity. The sides of the boat were of a particularly smooth fiberglass. While certain rules had to be followed regarding center-hull ballast, it was sufficient to breach the liquid by pushing off, and its razor-sharp prows, breeze-harnessing lateens and light but durable rudder did the rest. There were a few solar panels which gave a feeble light below. A map was still readable, though it used parameters we were not familiar with. The woman's notebook contained intimate details of the couple's life together. The smaller figure at the harpoon had been her son, though perhaps not his, for she said 'my son', and not 'our son'. The three had been caught by the rains, but there was no indication what blast or phenomenon had ended their lives so rudely.

We were soon adrift in that ghost rig on a sea of quicksilver. Barracudas nudged the sides of the rudder to see if it flexed. I drove a carving fork into one of them and flipped it onto the deck. The flailing razorback jack-knifed, but we had breakfast all fingers accounted for. We threw the rest of it back and pushed off, as a riot of barracudas and sharks thrashed in bloody rivalry. We demoted junior and greased the harpoon.

Following the man's notes, we took care to verify every hump above the water line before shooting. There were the ones who neither sank nor paddled, the failure of a mating pair, bloated human carrion. You puncture those and it's

Technicolor Friday followed by a weekend of fever. Turtles were the best prize. Their flesh was healthy and protein-rich, and by placing the empty shells upon the decking we could condense a few drops of drinking water.

We navigated through a melee of mashed cottages and condominiums, nearly reefing ourselves upon a sandbank. We moored against a rig of piling that had once housed an elevator. Only the shaft remained. As Enola was throwing cans from the larder into the boat I saw a thing move among the submerged bathtubs, vacuum cleaners and standard lamps: it was the barnacled back of a giant tortoise. One nudge from that and we'd have been in the marinade. The carcass of a four-tusked hairless musk-swine floated near us, freshly drowned. We sliced it into thin strips to bake.

In the distance Flood seem interminable and tranquil, the surface unbroken, but every day we passed through new environments: sandbanks piled high with military unwantables, a stinking cache of dead whales which, for some reason, the birds had not touched. There were more visions of those forms that materialized and dissolved into the medium, more love in which the skin seemed rough on first contact but softened as we clasped to make one hyphenated being; and dreams of our children, hundreds of thousands of our children. They were like fish in a net, flailing, crawling together, over each other.

After some giant pouch-rats tried to board, one of us had

always to be awake to beat them off. You had to love with one eye open. One evening we were lying naked on the deck and Enola took hold of me. She said she was being drawn into the past. She had not been able to expel Ex-P. He had had her by force and come in the way that perpetuates the race. She could not get him out of her, not her body nor her mind. She was afraid she was carrying his child. Fruity with yearning and drilled through with fear, yellow pearls no bigger than pin-heads had appeared on her skin.

The temperature dropped but she wouldn't clothe herself. The surface congealed by night, and by dawn a glistening emerald dew had grown over that. As if elated by the new colors, Enola was dancing on the starboard bow, slow-mo, hand-jive style. I had only known one dancer, and I was crazy about her too. The howling of a dog in the mountains accompanied our embraces. The trimaran carved ahead, born by a subcutaneous current.

As we penetrated Flood we found that there were areas which did not congeal in the night, and crusted floating masses which did not dissolve during the morning. These merged on contact to form floating islands. Their terrain appeared smooth but was jagged with dangerous crystal blooms. Not all floating objects were dangerous. Some were boons. One floating crate was full of sealed packets of seaweed powder, rich in vitamins.

Our nights were those of reaffirming embrace, our bodies

so warm as to break all natural laws of thermodynamics. As the days went by the sun grew stronger. We fashioned sombreros out of turtle paddles. The surface between the packs of crusted islands had become a mercury-like expanse that hurt your eyes. You could only see ahead by means of a superlative squint.

We approached a partly-submerged bungalow. The house had been displaced in its entirety. We forced entry through the hole left by a crumbled chimney. In the attic we found more preserved food in tins — and two more skeletons in each other's arms, picked clean by whiteworms. They had starved for want of a tin opener. There was something familiar about this attic. I opened a chest. There were photographs of a guy who looked like Chip in a yard that resembled the diagnosis business. How did he get into our honeymoon? Was all this no more than part of the treatment? In the dining room below we could hear barracuda swarming, rapping against the ceiling and the attic door.

That night I saw two lights undulating far away, moving as the headlights of a vehicle on a motorway would move. They vanished and reappeared as if the car was curving down into a valley. Tongues of flame spat out when he changed down. The tail-lights dipped out of sight and seconds later a hyper-octane nuclear Meso-plume shot into the pock-marked sky. The howling of a pair of dogs or seals lasted till morning, then a second howling started up, deeper in, Enola's labor

cry. She gave birth on the verge around mid-morning. We named the baby Richie Tibbetts and made frequent stops to ransack wrecks for blankets and baby provisions. Enola turned protective, suspicious of the slightest noise, afraid the least variation in temperature would impact on the baby's health. His face set after a few hours. I liked the look of him. He reminded me of how Enola used to look when we fell for each other. A few days passed and he could already speak, and sing, something like the melody of Texico Rose. Ex-P's or not, he called me daddy and slept a lot.

He developed at an amazing rate and we were soon worrying about his schooling. We wanted him to be a normal kid, to grow up to lust after dancers and make the grade, but there was no escaping it: Richie was developing nasty streaks. Winter was setting in and he was whining that it was too cold, that he was sick of eating tinned food, that he wanted to go to a forest and catch butterflies. We paid more attention to him. We gave him everything he asked for. I took my role responsibly, teaching him about necessity. Maybe my moralizing was faulty, kids can sense that kind of thing. He didn't conceal his boredom. It didn't take a shrink to see he had had enough of us. He picked holes in everything we did. We only had to breathe. He asked smarmy questions. I was sick of him, he was sick of us, but Enola was afraid what would become of him if he left home.

The temperatures dropped and the smooth surface hard-

ened up. We were stranded in mid-ocean with a whining adolescent. He was having nightmares by night and oversleeping by day. When he was out cold in the afternoons Enola stripped and passed the time dancing, as she liked to do, on the starboard bow. Her naked body made the perfect target. A shot echoed around the mountains. She fell, winged. Two dog-seals, their front legs, part-flipper, part-paw, were already upon her. They took her feet in their mouths and dragged her over the surface towards a trapper who strapped her on a sled behind his own buggy and sped towards the shore. A pillar of smoke was rising behind the hills, a reddish-orange smoldering that I knew well — the meltdown of a crashed Dodge could smoke like that for weeks. Richie and I wrapped our feet in marlin skin and set out. Everywhere pouch-rats were gasping for air, their jaws working above the ice layer, their bodies trapped in the freeze, squeezed by the expanding ice which in some cases was forcing the offal out of their mouths. Ice fungi were soon at work, and other new foliage on the surface, blooming bright crimson and yellow.

As we neared the cleft, we made out a string of dark shapes descending into one of the elevated valleys—members of the Tribe, heading for the hidden city. If they had seen the smoking Dodge or the trapper's campfire, they took no notice, and soon disappeared from view. The trapper had been drinking musk-wine and was gesticulating towards the

wounded Enola with sudden arm movements, the story of a hunt perhaps, or justifying himself. He was engrossed in his own narrative, but Enola saw us and, clutching her left shoulder with her right hand, began to sway to the left and right. He took it as a sign and, unsheathing his knife, he lowered his rigging. He would not enjoy her dead before he had enjoyed her alive. The trapper's mutant barkers were play-fighting on the other slope. When we began to run, they barked. The trapper lifted his head towards the dogs, then turned to see what they were barking at. Before he could reach for his gun it was in my hands. I gave him his own sex eye in the middle of his forehead and potted one of the dog-seals off. The other made it to safety, where it began to howl piteously. We strapped Enola onto the sled, tied the dead dog-seal behind us, and slid down the slope to the lake of crusted mucous using the trapper's rifle as a paddle-pole.

The ordeal made Richie easier to be with. He wore a strip of the trapper's fur coat as a trophy. Enola's arm regained mobility though the boat remained icebound for a short winter. The supplies of tinned meat were running low when, one morning, Enola was cleaning the observation window and there was a crack all around. She sent up a shout. Richie roused himself from his nightmares and together on deck we stared at the darkest of deep-red gashes. The ice had fractured from the shore to the horizon along a jagged line which included the

trimaran. The shell had split. We opened a bottle of the skinny couple's bourbon to celebrate. We had been freed, and read hope in that rising blood-like sludge.

Warming mud is a revolting reality. We drank to numb the senses. With the heat came thousands of small creatures we had never seen the likes of. Reptilian, strangely human, like encrusted human embryos possessing survival instinct and motor impulses. Larger ones followed, not much larger, but with an appetite for the former ones which they swallowed in twos and threes before sinking back into the turgid scum. They were more like bloated carcasses than living, hungering, creatures. A new generation of barracuda had found its way from suspended animation to join the fun of the fair. The sea was running hot. Its currents were quickening. Its shades, green and brown, grew complex and revealed wide sweeping currents.

Richie saw it first. He called for me but I wouldn't listen. I thought he was crying wolf. In spite of all we had seen, when I looked up I could hardly believe my eyes. It was rising miles away from over the horizon, lifting like a megalosaurus. Enola, full of bourbon on the starboard bow, was stretching out her good arm crying, 'Retro, Breakbark!' when lightning, or a glance of that reptilian eye struck her and she fell into the brother-witch lake. As I reached my hand towards her, it seemed that other hands were under the surface, other human hands! I could feel their wish to draw me

in, to share that fetor of bacteriological cousinage, their woe of want, their blindness and rejection, their submissive credulous madness. Flood, the mental malady. I was starting to think we would all be better off in there, naked, bleeding, mouths swollen, gulping that orphaning thickness, that precipitation unwanted by earth or by heaven, than up here, hand reaching for beloved hand, seconds away from annihilation. I slashed open the remaining tins and spooned the jellymeat overboard. There was a wild splashing of barracudas and the sea of hands disappeared into someone else's dreams. Enola climbed towards me, bald as Cadeba under his Stetson and glowing with electrolyte. We embraced with such finality that we felt the pulses in standing position.

The dark form of that astronomically huge hate-shaman continued to rise, darkening the sky above the horizon. Richie was on the forward bow, spellbound, staring at the surge. He would not budge from his crow's nest. It now had the form of a wall kilometers away to the south. He was staring into it as if it fulfilled some prophecy. There wasn't time to find out which one. The air was warming and thinning till it was like breathing through a straw, and the stench was outrageous. We were snared in a stagnant expectant silence on a three-legged raft in a low-lying waste facing a tsunami that knew no friction. I had to knock him out in order to seal us all inside.

We waited. Richie came to crying 'Mummy' — he

wanted to go out feeding. Enola cupped her hands under her breasts to satisfy him. Dark voluminous, the wave approached. The boat rocked and slid forward as the liquid beneath us was sucked in to provide matter for the wave. Richie recited good-and-evil proverbs as Enola and I braced for collision when—

insignificance. We had not broken any physical barrier or law, but in an instant we had become the darkness, the rip, the panic, the evidence that only a dream can provide of stupefying ignorance, that knowledge suppressed for a lifetime or during the transformation of our species — we had become the denied wish, primal anti-matter, tyrannical, neurasthenic. We were ready, equal to the surge, already within its physiology, voyaging in the fluid of its eye, in the Mesozoic, the pin point of measureless time, within nothingness, dark and futile, a passionless futility, neither atmospheric storm, nor rupture of the earth, nor tidal. An intrusive negation. Matter and light had been reduced, antifield. It was hurtful, mean, and vindictive. It penetrated you like a warm dye you could feel in your olives. This was it. Bad luck. We were the glue. It demanded all. It mocked us.

We could not speak and were not aware of breath entering or leaving our lungs. We felt nothing in the windpipe. We had what it took, the equipment to speak, but no muscle

responded in the larynx itself. We looked at each other, as figures in a photograph look at each other, momentarily, eternally, ineffectually, incapably. Our feet were like tree stumps, our legs cast in the space that held us. Was this stillness, or the speed of light? A moment, or eternity? Only our eyes moved, like those of iguanas. We had been installed in the unthinkable, less than primal, protoplasmic, our meager lives burned inwards to undergo this negation. We were flames between the act that would cause their extinction and extinction itself. The history of humanity seemed to compass less than an instant. We were specks, thirsting, yearning, but above all specks. Nasal fluid and sweat was running. Our urine was like the juice of an unknown fruit, for Enola sucked it out of her discarded pants, becoming one with the medium outside. That which had been most vile was most palatable. If we had been seeing lights in the brain during the darkness, now there was another light, external, a luminescence like a hand trying to touch us. Enola gasped. Something had touched her where it counts. She cried faintly, as if we were just within hearing. I saw her face in the gloom like an image in the clouds created more by the perceiving mind than what it has perceived. The face I saw was in agony. It was hard to bear. I must have fallen.

When I came to Richie was out of control, tearing off his jeans which were heavy with a form of excrement, luminous but odorless. We stood watch over him as his perspiration

darkened and coagulated. Speech seemed inevitable, necessary, but it did not arrive. We had no appetite for life. We had to think of things to say, but the effort of remembering caused us to drift in and out of consciousness. When we drifted back he was still there. Words were there, irrelevant words, but tenses had lost their adequacy. We had need of other tenses, of new words, new tunes, new time signatures.

At that, density lessened. The surge and its aftermath passed. It was one second later.

Clouds of birds of all species were congregating about our wreck. We double-checked the clasps, because they were poking their beaks, sometimes as long as 15 centimeters, into every crack. Our vessel was covered by birds of all feathers, pecking and attacking each other, driving the weakest off, engaged in pernicious duels, so that we descended with the added weight. Slime was soon lapping over the side decking, increasing our sex-wish. It was summer in the Venus suite again, but any movement might have proved fatal.

Suddenly the birds rose and flew as one body towards another floating mass, which proved to be millions of fish compressed to death by the surge. The birds scrambled for their carrion, coming to rest on the floating island of fish-flesh. We drifted with the tide around the warring gaggle and steered the trimaran towards a second dark mass, not a land-mass, but an island afloat, the size of a skyscraper, and reeking of synthetic fibers. Though the composition of that

berg was not common rubber, it was equally as soft, flexible and watertight. It was easy to climb up, permitting a grip without crumbling. From the first ledge we could make out other masses like it drifting freely, and, in the distance, true mountains.

A rock crossed the sky and plunged, burning into the lake beyond the horizon. A three-colored cloud rose like an ostrich plume green, orange and violet. No wave followed, not a ripple, only a coiling periwinkle of spectral light which hovered above us. It would cause greater disturbances. Spontaneous fires followed on land, and on the surface of the lake. Birds were being sucked towards them. Fire burst out among them in mid-flight. A second flock near us rose as a single body from its carrion island, and was sucked to extinction.

Enola started another of her slow-moving dances on the rubberberg, resting now upon the ball of the left foot, now on that of the other. She used the feet, the knees and the heels, singing to Richie as eddies turned the island around in mid-ocean:

*Nola had a baby boy
First words li'l Paul said
"Gonna be a-drivin' man
a steel-drivin' man"*

The tidal currents grew stronger and the breeze became a scorching blast. We sewed Marlin skins together to make a protective awning. The solar rays were causing fissures in the sides of the craft so we moored in the lee of one of the bergs to boil down some clods of fiber for glue. While I was climbing a scarp a darting eye came perilously close. It had passed by before we knew it—a tide of light and sound that took all in its path into the parallel investiture of its singularity. If it had been a bit more to the right Enola would have been annihilated. That speedier-than-light menace had whipped a channel from one horizon to the other which Flood was rushing to fill in.

We were still in the narrative.

Enola continued to sing. She taught me how to dance slow like that. We orbited each other as Richie picked up the chorus of the steel-driving man. Now he was dancing. It was not slow like ours but fast, electric boogie, hot-coals jiving. He was grooving to the rhythm of his generation. He dropped his chest back while snapping his pelvis forward, shifting his weight and reversing feet positions. We smiled, proud of junior. His head was spinning and while he was down on the ground he started to scratch the surface. He spat in the cracks and clawed and spat some more. He mixed it with some shit in the boiled down caulk and he had discovered ink. It looked like he was fixing to doodle. He drew three skeletons on the decking. That had me worried. They

looked like us. Were the skeletons of the original owners presages of our own?

I'll die with a hammer in my hand

The refrain wasn't enough for him. Soon he was wanting to pay life back in its own coin, to make up his own songs. Since he only had old songs to work with, he invented three word strings that sounded to me like refill therapy:

*Head hammer bang
Steel-dry man*

Before he had remembered any of the next verse we had beached ourselves. We took some supplies with us and squelched over a tidal mudflat towards some distant trees. Ahead of us we saw three figures carrying packs: two adults and a teenage boy. Richie turned back to take one last look at the trimaran, the skiff of his childhood. The boy ahead turned to look at us. We set off again, feeling things squirming in the mud about our feet and calves. The figures ahead moved as we moved, stopped when we stopped. One had a pentangular scar on his back. We were following our images, which grew fainter as the mud firmed up.

We smelt the odor of water, fresh water so pure, so drinkable, it seemed to be perfumed, water that had deposited its

burden of chemicals, water that had filtered down the inner chasms of cleansing mountains. Criss-crossing rivulets were flowing out of the forest as if to greet us. We fell on the running water as one, slurping like animals. As we reached firmer ground we were faced with the spectacle of hundreds of fallen palms, undermined and washed down by the rains. Beyond them was the forest of no return.