CAROL EMSHWILLER

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

NOBLE POETS OF THE consortium:

You have conferred upon me your highest honor, you have called me, in your own words, Most Noble of the Noble (though "words" is hardly the proper way to refer to what you call your parts of speech, so, rather, your syllables, your prefixes, your signs and signals), and I have already made the accepting gestures as well as I can manage them.

Now, in order to know your strange yet "Humble Master" better, you have asked for my alien view of the story of how I came to be your leader. I will tell you.

I came here, as you all know, as a mere specimen -- a spot -- a "speck," as you have called me; kidnapped from my world. I jumped through the right door on the first try -- ran the maze, jumped to the proper ledge, escaped pain (at least for the moment). Though our noses are not as keen as yours, I could smell the rot behind that door -- the sea-like rot that seemed to me might mean freedom. It turned out to be a feeding trough. I did not eat. At least not then.

But I have come to be a new meaning in your land, which is sweet to me to be and even more so because I will eat, now, nothing but the roots of lilies and the blossoms of squash, or, rather, what, on my world, would seem to be the equivalent of these things.

Here, not everything is strange to me. There are small things that might as well be cats. There are fish. The only difference is that they can fly as well through air as through water so one sees fish sitting in the trees preening themselves, which is a strange sight to me. The trees not unlike those from my own home world, though I've seen none taller than a tall man. The land, at least in this area, is flat and every few yards there is another stream to cross. This I've seen though not experienced. Before, I wasn't important enough to walk the land, and now I'm too important for it and will be carried along in a sort of upright barrel with a little tent over it in case it rains, which it often does.

It was my curls that started you off about me. Curls are rare among you. You call them "curls of the dreamers that come from having dreamed. Curls," as you say, "of creativity." It is by my curls that I came to be in the magnificent fat state I'm in now. It is by them that I have been raised up to this point. Now it will be my poems that will fly from your mastheads, hang over your doorways, be carried through your streets on banners, and worn across the tops of your caps.

You hadn't noticed my curls at first, but they grew long in my captivity, so that after a few months you knew that I must be a creature to be reckoned with.
(I paid for a cool, perfumy drink -- my first taste of such things as you drink
every day -- with my first poem, not knowing, then, its true value. Not even knowing that it was a poem.)

Suddenly you started with different sorts of tests, though whether tests or initiation, I'm still not sure. You don't speak to me of that other time before
I wore the robes and ribbons of my station. Perhaps it's beneath my dignity to speak about it now, but now you'll not fault me for it because I have already had a poet's full share of punishment.

You began the new stage by throwing mud and rocks at me. I couldn't guess why. Sometimes it seemed inadvertent -- almost like a tic of some sort. You weren't even looking toward my cage when you did it. Or I wasn't looking. Once I was hit
on the head and didn't know it until I came to with a lump behind my ear. Why, I
wondered, this change from mazes to cruelty?

And you were saying "Confess," over and over. (I knew by then the syllables for
it.) Confess what? Then there came a series of small annoyances: tacks on the floor of my cage, crumbs on my pallet, rotten things in my soup, shells in my nuts, hulls in my grains. "Confess. Admit," is all you would say. I had no idea
what to confess to, and, as my curls grew yet longer, you became more and more frantic. I began to be able to tell your moods by the way your ears lay (flat against your hair if you were angry) and by the way your tails flipped from side
to side.
Being a poet is knowing when to stop.
Being a poet is knowing when to begin.
(You said these.)

I finally discovered, through dint of your training, that I did, after all, have
the knack of the contemplation of the absolute. Though, at first, the concept of
the absolute escaped me utterly, you lived by it every day. The syllables for it
were your favorite syllables. The absolute, you said, is where and what all science comes from. It took me many hard lessons to come to terms with that and
to answer, as was so often called for: "Absolutely."

But I began with: Ab, baa, baa, ab, ab, baa, and after those first bits I got myself the drink, but then my cage was tipped up over a puddle and I fell out and landed in the mud. Unwashed, just as I was, I was tied to a pole and carried
to the poets palace and taken in through a. small back door. Hooded poets came.
"Sing," they said. All I knew was my, "Ab, baa, baa," but now it wasn't enough.
I tried: "Cha, poo, tut," and was told to go back to ab and yet ab was wrong. I
was pinched and pulled and slapped at until, three days later, I could answer

properly with: "Ab-so-lu-la-la," and when I could answer with the "word" for poet in all its syllables as we, in my homeland might say: "Po-et-ti-ca-la-la" --when I could say these two, I was taken to the president,
Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, he who is called
The-Uncertained-Among-the-Certained,
and also sometimes The-Certained-Among-the-Uncertained. Not as I was, all muddy
and red, but washed and dressed in a backless robe of your form of silk, with the worms that made it still attached here and there so that all could see what
it was woven of and marvel. I didn't know then why it had no back to it.

I was not allowed...of course not allowed to actually see the president of poems
who talked to me from behind a screen. He, however, could see me, and from there
could reach out with his whip and snap it over my head with a great snap, or let
it fly onto my back, in which case it made, instead, a flat, slapping sound.

"Sing," he would say, and I would answer, "Ab-so-la-la," but by then, that was wrong.

In this manner I learned your syllables and syntax. I learned the prefix for the
poem and the suffix for happiness, and I learned to call the president of poems
sometimes: Humble-Master-of-the-Names-of-Things, or sometimes:
Humble-Master-of-the-Thingness-of-Things-that-Objects-Should-Speak-Through-Him.
And I learned, whatever I wore, to bare my back in his presence or in the presence of any of you poets of the palace as a temptation to the whip. Yet, I must confess it, I still, even at this moment...I still don't know what a poem is, or how to find one, or which syllables make one up, or whether a syllable is
part of one or belongs to a part of another entirely different poem.

The first poem of mine that hung from the flagpoles (and I still don't know why)
was:
Look for the tender. The tenders
of the stock. Flocks
of fish fly. By
now they nest in the poet's curls. Whirl
his thoughts like fish. Oh fly
them by. And by.

After that poem, the screen was removed and I was allowed to see, at last, the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, his head of black curls going gray, his yellow eyes, his ears set forward in greeting .... It was he, then, who taught me to snap the whip, "Because," he said, "your syllables will travel at the speed of sound, sounding out over the whole world." "Snap," he said, and I would
snap. "Sing," he said, and I would sing, and many's the time he stole my syllables and took them as his own and only let, as you would call them, the lesser of my syllables be taken as said by me, though, neither then nor now, do
I know which are the lesser of my syllables and many that you say are lesser, I
think otherwise, while those on the banners are those I would deny.

"Don't think," he would tell me. "That way lies the false madness and not the true madness of the poem." But sometimes he said, "Think! Think, think, think,"
and I still don't know, I confess it, when to think and when to not think.

First, then, the poet's whip lashing out at me, and afterward, a long time afterward, the bed where he mothered me as only (as you say) poets can mother, fed me blossoms and let me recover, for a while, from poetry. By that time I had
learned better than to repeat myself. By that time I was scarred and bruised, but knew not to stop talking when poems were being called for -- not to let any
line that might be turned and twisted and hooked onto another line or divided in
that strange way of yours into even more nonsense than I'd thought it had -- I learned not to let any such lines stay unsaid.

It was a long rest he (and you) gave me. And for all that time, not one single little poem or even syllable, not one suffix or prefix was allowed from me, though I had been beaten to the point that, whenever my vigilance relaxed, poetry would pop out of my mouth at random. The president, Humble-Master, shushed me and yet, even so, I saw him pressing down what I had said into his little clay tablet, quickly, with the long nails of his paws. (You had let my nails grow, too, by then, so that I could do that, though I was clumsy at it.)

Then it was that he (and you) were all kindnesses, but especially he the Humble-Master, waiting on me hand and foot (ear and tail as you would say) held
the wine glass to to my lips, brushed back my curls. His ears always pricked forward now and his tail moved in a slow, contented back and forth. He waited by
me even all night long. I could see his eyes glow when he was awake and watching
me. I felt he liked me, perhaps even loved me, and I began to like him, too, though I could make out nothing about him. I could speak your syllables, but I understood nothing of anything, neither of poetry, nor of love, nor of liking. It seemed that, as I learned more, I understood less and less

But I lay back and rested, grateful for the care and only woke out of my happy dream of no more whipping, no more groveling, not even, anymore, to answer: "Ab-so-lu-la-lat-ly" -- only woke up to my thoughts again the day he shaved my head...Cut off my curls and then shaved me. He did it. My (I thought of him as mine now) my president, my Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, did it all gently, as, now, he always was with me. Then he turned away and did the same to himself, cut
his curls and shaved his head. After that he gave me the lick that was his kiss
(on each of my eyelids) and motioned me to do the same to him. I felt the soft vulnerability of his closed eyes. Then he brought out a box for me and left me,
for the first time -- the first time on this world -- completely alone. I had been watched and studied from the moment I came here and then tortured and then
kept awake and kept talking and only now left alone, with a few blossoms strewn
about the table (whether for decoration or a snack, I couldn't guess).

I knelt by the box and opened it. At first I couldn't tell what it was except that it was something to wear and that what lay on top of it was a helmet. The

helmet was covered with a glassy, red enamel and the sign of the poet was on the
front -- not just the sign of any poet, but the sign of the president,
Humble-Master-of-the-Poem...his sign was on the front of it, but one of my own
short poems was written -- embroidered, actually, along the red and white flag
that feathered from the top and unfurled as I took the helmet from the box. My
poem, all there in a long line: IF THE SOUND OF THE SNAP, THEN NO PAIN
THEREFORE
JOY.

The helmet exactly fit my now bald head. The ear holes had been moved from the
top to the side in order fit my ears. Under the helmet was a breastplate
exactly
right for my strange, flat chest, jointed mitts that would fit my hands only,
under them, penis sheath, leg guards. At the bottom of the box curled a whip,
longer than any I had seen, and under it was a dagger, curved, with the
sharpness on the inside, like a sickle. On the hilt was the sign for joy and
the
sign for the power of sparkling mirrors, and I knew that, just as the
president,
Humble-Master, was the poet called Uncertainties, I was to be the poet called
Joy. I had never heard, among your poets, of a poet ever called Joy, and I
have
since learned that that is true, there are none, which is odd, for it seems to
me that the joy when the sound of the whip comes snapping over your head is as
much as any joy I've experienced here on your world, because when the blows
fall
upon your back it makes an entirely different sound. One would think it would
have been written about, and often, but I suppose that's not your way.

I was left alone with these new things long enough to think about them, which
I
did. Then other poets from the palace came and dressed me in them.

"There is no future for you, Joy, nor any future for any of us, in a land
where
the president who is known as Uncertainties exists at the same time as you do.
Now Joy must put an end to him."

I asked them the same question I'd asked him and that he would never answer:
Why
had I been raised up so high among them, from speck to where I was? They said
it
was not only because my curls were tight and tiny and stuck out around my face
like a great amphitheater, but also because I had brought unusual and
important
things to poetry. "It would be a pity for poetry if your syllables were
stopped," they said, "so be vigilant."

They belted my dagger about me, they coiled my whip over my shoulder, and led
me
to the arena, a place where I'd only heard poetry before, though I'd often
wondered at the brown stains on the far wall. When I'd asked about them, you'd
always answered that they were the stains of bad poems.

The fight, you told me, was to be fought to the sound of our poems, so that I
and the president must never stop talking and never stop fighting. Also we
must
never turn our backs or grovel as that would change death to non-death for no
one could kill a groveler. Then, if I had killed him, I was to put my ear on

the
ground and grovel one last time which would be the last forever. If the president, on the other hand, killed me, he'd not have to do that, having already, when he'd won and become the president, come to his last grovel.

You poets of the palace were to be our audience, and you sat on the tiers with your tablets on your laps, ready to write out the poems we would be saying to each other. Those in red robes were to be for me. Those in green were for he who
had taught me everything I knew, who had nursed me, waited on me, drunk wine with me, and once gave me a handful of jade marbles.

"It's possible to win with the poetry," you told me, "and yet still die."

I wasn't one of you and I didn't fight as you were used to. I threw off my whip
at once, for I wasn't good at it and didn't want the added weight. I took out my
dagger right away, and you all made great barking sounds I had not heard you ever make before, though you said to each other that what I did was not against
any of the rules. There was no rule about it because no one had thought to do that.

The president, Noble-Master, turned me and twirled me and forced me back with his whip. All skills I had never mastered. He did this over and over, but I kept
coming in, each time trying some new way, and trying to grab his whip which he skillfully kept away from me. He could wind me up and turn me and throw me against the back wall until it was my blood that mixed with the older stains. Then he could unwind the whip so fist I couldn't grasp it and only got rope burns trying. I gave up on the whip and went, instead, after the poem that hung
from his helmet on that long banner. (His poem read: THE ABSOLUTE IS FULL OF UNCERTAINTIES.) I jerked at it, and had his helmet off before he'd realized what
I was doing. Again, it was obviously not something that any of you would have done.

For a moment the slow intonations of his fighting poem stopped and his own side
called to him that time was running out for the sound of the next syllable.

His neck was bared to me now, and yet he stood still, shocked, and I stood still, too. Finally he spoke, and, according to the timers, just in time. "To the uncertainty of death," he said, "I'm sending Joy, poet from the lesser world." I, at the same time, was saying, "I have learned to like you," and, at that moment, as he stood, still dazed, I came out of my own shock. And cut off his tail.

There was a roar of rage from all of you. It was clear that nothing of the sort
had ever happened before. In my mind it had been that or his head, and I decided, at the last moment that I wouldn't -- couldn't try to kill him.

He turned, then, dagger out, and fought me with a rage I'd never seen in him in
all the time that I had spoiled syllables. He was so angry he lost all skill and
flailed out, scratching at me and even biting. His poem fell apart to mere

mouthings. "Not done...not to be considered"...and that there, "Couldn't be a president with only half a tail. Might as well," he said, "be without ears." At which point I clipped the left one off. At this, he fell and groveled. He wasn't dead, but he said he could never again rule poems. "I'm as good as dead," he said, but I said, "No. You're my poet. If no one else's, then mine."

"If it comes from your mouth," you all said -- "If it comes from the mouth of Joy, the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, then it must be."

And that is how I came to be here before you, making accepting gestures, being the six hundred and twelfth poet to become president, and here, my friend and servant, still alive -- though in his own mind only half so, having lost all but one way of greeting you, and all but one way of showing pleasure -- yet, to me, alive and singing, the even humbler master, the poet, Uncertainties, and, as I am also, sure of only a few small things.