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Geoffrey A. Landis: Winter Fire

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I am nothing and nobody; atoms that have learned to look at themselves; dirt that has learned to see the awe and the majesty of the universe.

The day the hover-transport arrived in the refugee camps, huge windowless shells of titanium floating on electrostatic cushions, the day faceless men took the ragged little girl that was me away from the narrow, blasted valley that had once been Salzburg to begin a new life on another continent: that is the true beginning of my life. What came before then is almost irrelevant, a sequence of memories etched as with acid into my brain, but with no meaning to real life.

Sometimes I almost think that I can remember my parents. I remember them not by what was, but by the shape of the absence they left behind. I remember yearning for my mother's voice, singing to me softly in Japanese. I cannot remember her voice, or what songs she might have sung, but I remember so vividly the missing of it, the hole that she left behind.

My father I remember as the loss of something large and warm and infinitely strong, smelling of—of what? I don't remember. Again, it is the loss that remains in my memory, not the man. I remember remembering him as more solid than mountains, something eternal; but in the end he was not eternal, he was not even as strong as a very small war.

I lived in the city of music, in Salzburg, but I remember little from before the siege. I do remember cafés (seen from below, with huge tables and the legs of waiters and faces looming down to ask me if I would like a sweet). I'm sure my parents must have been there, but that I do not remember.

And I remember music. I had my little violin (although it seemed so large to me then), and music was not my second language but my first. I thought in music before ever I learned words. Even now, decades later, when I forget myself in mathematics I cease to think in words, but think directly in concepts clear and perfectly harmonic, so that a mathematical proof is no more than the inevitable majesty of a crescendo leading to a final, resolving chord.

I have long since forgotten anything I knew about the violin. I have not played since the day, when I was nine, I took from the rubble of our apartment the shattered cherry-wood scroll. I kept that meaningless piece of polished wood for years, slept with it clutched in my hand every night until, much later, it was taken away by a soldier intent on rape. Probably I would have let him, had he not been so ignorant as to think my one meager possession might be a weapon. Coitus is nothing more than the natural act of the animal. From songbirds to porpoises, any male animal will rape an available female when given a chance. The action is of no significance except, perhaps, as a chance to contemplate the impersonal majesty of the chain of life and the meaninglessness of any individual's will within it.

When I was finally taken away from the city of music, three years later and a century older, I owned nothing and wanted nothing. There was nothing of the city left. As the hoverjet took me away, just one more in a seemingly endless line of ragged survivors, only the mountains

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