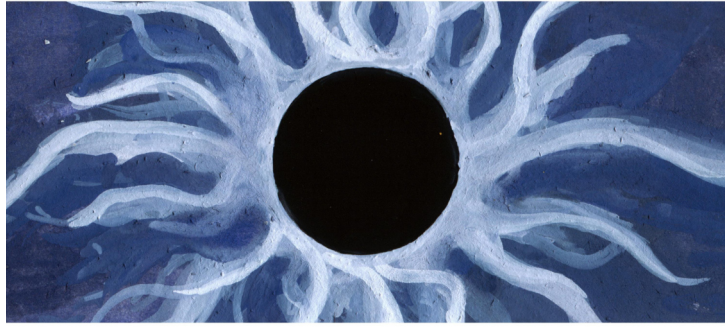




The Askais, whisper-skinned and light footed, mark their skins with two circles, the twin suns that circle their desert skies. The Latons crown their ships with an encircled ring, their own star, as seen through a portal from their caves to the

void.
But we persist, and with us, so do clues. Some of which only reveal themselves as such when we meet others in the great

We forgot our history, of course. The millennia are long, the distances longer, our stories fragmented by time dilation, cryosleep, catastrophe.

Homecoming Ezra Wu

Only five worlds, we say, of the hundreds of millions found so far.

Five is not bad, says the Askai.

The Laton considers, why not? We have the time.

So after many jumps and many sleeps, and much gratitude for our good fortune, we find ourselves on another world. We leave our ships, thinly clothed, while our companions clamber out in protective gear. They look to us, expectantly.

The worlds are beautiful, in the way that all worlds are. We document their flora and their fauna, we make art. We return to the sky and exchange knowledge and stories for goods, we move on to the next.

This time though, there's something in the air, the way it meets our lungs.

We ponder this mystery together, in the long waits between worlds.
The sun is too bright, remarks the Askai. You can dim it, but so would the rays of light.

But our children draw the suns of the worlds we find with wild waves of light, clumsy triangles curled this way and that. Their Askai friends stop at the circle, the Latons might add some straight rays of light. We and the other spacefaring parents watch, well-acquainted with the loops and turns of solar flares, but knowing also that these patterns are indiscernible to the naked eye, especially in the early ages where these cultural symbols are forged.

sky above. Others signify their suns as circles in the sky, cast bright colors by the rainbow of atmospheres of innumerable worlds.

When our moons pass the sun, you can see some of them, those sun threads, says the Laton. But not so many, not as drawn on your heraldries here.

We regard the symbols we draw sometimes on our clothes, idle adornments on our notes or our tools.

Maybe then a moon, we say, but exactly the right size to cover the sun. Then you could see the flares with the naked eye. And the sight of it would be brilliant, maybe so brilliant we would never forget.

We comb through our joint collections of the planets and stars, a pooled resource of a hundred peoples, the whole galaxy wide. The Askai and the Laton watch as we run the calculations, impressed as always for our people's predilection for numbers.

Something about the symphony of greens, the weight of our bodies against the earth. Something in the smell of the wind and our very cells.

We spend longer here, maybe too long. The Askai languish in their tents to escape the humidity. The Laton stomp around to retain their strength. But our friends are patient, and finally the day comes.

The planet's moon spins slowly towards the sun. As it reaches its zenith, we lose it to the brightness of the planet's blinding sun.

The land cools, the air darkens.

But the time comes, then passes. Our friends join us on the grassy hill.

Was it the math, they ask, as they come to a rest beside us.

This planet's moon, we say, has been drifting away, very slowly. The math was right. And so is the air, the sky, the seas.

Instead, we say, it seems that we've been away for a long, long time.

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