

NUMBERS

Excerpted from the story collection

THE WORLD DOESN'T REQUIRE YOU

1.

Out in the middle of the Cross River there is an island. It appears during storms or when the river's flooding or even on clear summer days. And sometimes it rises out the water and floats in the air. The ground turns to diamond and you can hear the women playing with the sparkling rocks. The skittery clatter of diamond on diamond and the high laughter of the women—I call them women, but they are not women. So many names for them: Kazzies. Shuantices. Water-Women. The Woes. I like that last name myself. The poet Roland Hudson came up with that one in the throes of madness. Dedicated his final volume, *The Firewater of Love*, to:

Gertrude, Water-Woman, my Woe who caused all the woe...even
though my dear, you are not real, I cannot accept that and will
never stop believing in your existence and beautiful rise from the
river into my arms.

Drowned himself in the Cross River swimming after Gertrude and there's something beautiful in that. Dredge the depths of the Cross River and how many bones of the heartsick will you find along the riverbed? So many poisoned by illusion. Don't tell me there's no island and no women rising naked from the depths, shifting forms to tantalize and then to crush. I've seen their island and I've seen them and gangsters love too; gangsters are allowed love, aren't we? Sometimes there's a fog and I know the island's coming and I snap out of sleep all slicked with sweat and filled with the urge to swim out there to catch a water-woman and bring her back to my bed. If

you pour sugar on their tails they can't shift shapes on you and they have to show their true selves and obey you completely. If I had to do it all over again I'd dust her in a whole five pound bag and spend eternity licking the crystals from her nipples. And Amber, a man lost in delirium. Poor, poor Amber.

2.

Last year, 1918, ended bad for me and for Amber, and to think, it began with so much promise. My mother got me a job driving Amber around town in February and by now, I expected to be collecting numbers slips for him, and then Amber Hawkins fell in love with Joyce Little and became something like a lovesick pit bull puppy. Joyce's brother Josephus got the money-making position I had my eye on and I was stuck being yelled at from the backseat as I swerved about the road. Amber was a killer, as was everybody I worked with. I tried to forget that, but sometimes it made me nervous, especially when I drove.

I figured Joyce would turn Amber into something akin to a decent human being once they were married. Most married people I knew became boring soon as they put on the ring; they lost some of their humor and spontaneity, but I had to admit they grew a little more humanity.

September 15, 1918: That was supposed to be the day. He booked the Civic Center for the wedding, displacing a couple who had reserved the place months before, but it was Amber Hawkins, nothing anyone could do. He ordered up nearly a hundred pastries. So many tulips arrived on the eve of the wedding that I joked a hillside in Holland had suffered a sudden baldness. Hundreds of people swarmed the Civic Center that Sunday. Everything was to begin at noon. Those of us who worked for Mr. Washington, and even people who worked for Mr.

Johnson and Mr. Jackson, put aside our differences to show up for Amber. Joyce's family sat in the front. Mostly, I remember her cute little sister and the short socks resting against her tan skin. Her tall skinny father sat stoically holding the little girl's hand. Joyce's jellyrolled mother wiped at her wet eyes every few minutes.

And then nothing.

No word from Joyce up on through the wedding day. Amber made us get all dolled up and festive-like for his big humiliation.

Josephus, was the best man. He stood near the altar wearing a twisted guilty smile as he swayed back and forth fingering a big, ugly purple flower pinned to his lapel. He was an arrogant fucking shitstain, but I hated seeing him squirm.

At about five in the evening it was clear all was lost, Amber's father ambled to the front where Amber and Joyce should have been standing. His movements were sheepish and slow. For the first time, the ruthless killer looked as frail and as wispy as the old man he was. There were rumors that his lifestyle—the women and the whores he kept around town—had left him so syphilitic that his once sharp mind had rotted and his body was beginning to twist and fail too. I didn't believe or engage in the talk. He'd been nothing but good to me.

Thank you for coming people of Cross River, Elder Mr. Hawkins said to the wedding crowd. You have been more than generous to my family and all connected with us. I'm sorry, but there will be no celebration today. Again, I thank you for spending your time with us.

We all slowly dispersed that night and the next day Amber was back to work, mumbling the day's numbers from the backseat. Never mentioned Joyce or showed any signs of sorrow or pain. I knew the sadness was there though. Had to be.

Amber waited a month. He waited two. Then he had Joyce's whole family killed.

A single bullet to each of their foreheads and their bodies dumped in the Cross River. It was deep in December, near Christmas, and thin white sheets of ice skimmed along the river's face.

Three days after their disappearance, the family came bubbling to the surface, just as Amber wanted. The cold-hearted bastard didn't spare even the ten-year-old girl. Amber's own best man paid the ultimate price for his sister's desertion.

With Josephus dead, I expected a promotion, but he gave that to Doc Travis Griffin's son. I let it pass without complaint, at least Amber hadn't tasked me with taking the lives of four innocent people. Frank and Tommy did the hit, I'd heard, and when I saw them I watched their muddy boots and thanked the Lord I didn't have to walk in them. But who am I kidding though? I stood amongst the killers and the dirt was all over me just as it was all over them. I would have done the job with sadness and emptiness; with revulsion and cold rage toward Amber, but still I'd have done it.

Loretta and I used to stand at river's edge sometimes and watch the sky reflecting on the water. Did it through all types of weather, but a pleasant March day was definitely a reason to be out. Felt I was safe from the river when I was with her, like it wouldn't dare open up and devour me whole.

What if you die? she asked, this was some time after the news of the killings reached Mr. Washington, causing things to crack up for us. Amber had missed another payment to Mr. Washington, putting all of us who worked for him in danger. What if they kill me? she asked and I was unsure how to answer.

I didn't look up from the river. Amber's falling apart, I said.

And he should fall apart, she replied. Baby, this is not your problem. He made this happen. Brought it all down on himself. So you gotta fall on his sword? My cousin, he in St. Louis, we could go up there. I could work for him and you could find a job—

Shining white people's shoes again? The type of job I got is the only way a negro can live decently. At least negroes who came up poor like us anyway.

On her face I could see the passing hellfire that she—an angry God—was condemning me to for all my mistakes. I suppose I have to take some credit or some blame, as it were, for how things happened. I've been known to blame Loretta for eventually leaving me or Miss Susan—it was her *Little Book of Love Numbers* that got all those thoughts cranking through our heads. I've blamed Mr. Washington for his harshness and even the whole society of water women and their wicked nature. But really, if I had left the whole business behind like Loretta wanted, how could things have been any worse? Truth was, I couldn't leave Amber, the one who was destined to sit on the throne if only he could do something as simple as overcome heartbreak. His face sweating constantly now. His limbs shaking. This damn compassion. This damn empathy.

A March breeze passed over Loretta and me. It was filled with heat and something that made me feel like a lover, like I could take Loretta into the water and after we finished she'd trust my word forever. Loretta kicked at the river with her bare feet.

Still cold, she said.

St. Louis, huh? I said, pitching a rock into the water. Can't put your feet into the Cross River in St. Louis.

It's fine, she replied. I'll put my feet in the Mississippi.

The Mississippi ain't Cross River, though. Look at that. No ugly parts. Ripple upon ripple of boundless beauty.

When'd you become a poet?

Girl, you know Elder Mr. Hawkins called me a poet when me and Amber met with him. He say that 'cause I like to daydream. I'm not Roland Hudson. I never rubbed two words together and made them rhyme, but he right, you know. I wonder how he know I'm a poet at making love, though.

We're talking about our future and you want to make jokes? Even if Amber gets himself together and you do move up in the organization, you want to end up a dirty old mobster like Elder Mr. Hawkins?

I knew Loretta was right—at least somewhat right; Amber did bring this problem on himself—but I could never give Loretta her due.

I took a deep breath while Loretta lectured me; the sound of my own deep breathing helped to cancel out her voice. The day was one of the spring's best, but I didn't expect the air to be so floral and I mentioned this to Loretta. Then I said what had been on my mind in the last several months:

I ain't never been nothing and nobody never expected nothing from me at all. Not you. Not even my mother. You all think I'm not that smart and that's okay. I'm the underdog. I stick with Amber I could be up there in the organization in the number two spot like Elder Mr. Hawkins. Shit, I could be the next Mr. Washington if Amber don't make it. Don't doubt me. You could be the Washington Family First Lady. How about that Loretta?

If that's what matters to you then—

In my memories, Loretta turns to white dust mid-sentence and blows away, leaving behind the sweet scent of flowers in bloom. And that's how she left me. Or maybe she just walked out after an argument. I can't figure it. My mind is so damaged I can't tell memories from hallucinations; daydreams from nightmares.

3.

Mr. Washington was so furious over the Little family killing that he carved up our territory and threatened to give over our remaining operations to Philemon if we couldn't pay a \$5,000 fine and restitution to the Littles.

Elder Mr. Hawkins delivered the news coldly and sternly in January—the very top of 1919—at the funeral for Frank and Tommy, Amber's best shooters.

Who the fuck am I supposed to pay restitution to? Amber asked, in a loud whisper. Funeral-goers glanced toward the back where we stood and then averted their eyes. The Little Family is dead! And Mr. Washington didn't have to kill Frank and Tommy—

I cancelled Frank and Tommy, Elder Mr. Hawkins said so calmly and coldly that I felt the grains of his frost. I laid their bodies out by the river myself. They were stupid enough to follow your order to cancel Joyce's peoples, they had to— Trust me Amber, it was best for you that they go.

On top of the fines, Mr. Washington stripped us of half our territory and reassigned much of Amber's personnel. And still we were responsible for kicking the same amount to Mr. Washington every week.

The debt became a millstone dragging Amber's operations to the bottom of the Cross River. It's as if Mr. Washington didn't want to see us live. Like the folks high up could no longer abide by Amber's success after the death of the Little family. I wondered why Mr. Washington didn't just put a bullet in him. Would have been more merciful than this slow usurious homicide.

Amber sent a fleet of prostitutes into the juke joints and commissioned truck hijackings, but it was never enough. Never did he look less like the heir to the throne. When all seemed lost, Carmen shot into our lives, a little brown-skinned bolt from a cannon. Woke us up when we didn't even know we were sleeping. I was never clear on where he found her. It seemed as if she had always been there on his arm.

Carmen was a pretty number. From a certain angle her head appeared perfectly round. Her hair—shiny, black and smooth—stopped where her head met her long neck. Carmen stayed draped in a green dress. Said it was the color of spring. And the spring of Carmen indeed felt like a re-birth.

It was an April afternoon and Carmen's green dress had been on my mind for several hours. Three sets of ledger books sat before me—Amber asked me to make the numbers work, but there was no making sense of these numbers so I daydreamed and when I got tired of that I leafed through *Miss Susan's Little Book of Love Numbers*. When I got to the chapter titled, Can A Woman Make a Man Lose His Mind? I was damn sure for a few minutes that Loretta and Joyce were water women. They made you fall so deep you never wanted to ever gasp for air again and then they disappeared, leaving you disoriented and your mind buzzing with madness until the end of your days and that's if you're lucky. Everyone else they lure to the Cross River and persuade to bury themselves beneath the waves. Loretta and Joyce hid their gills well. I thought of the creased skin beneath Loretta's breasts. Where was Carmen hiding her gills? They

could shift shapes, you know. Maybe Carmen was Joyce returned. No. Amber walked into the office holding tight to Carmen's hand and her sweet smell deranged every thought I had of the water women until the images slid from my brain into my throat and felt like the smoothest ice cream.

You got time to be reading that witchcraft? he asked, nodding toward my *Miss Susan* book. Amber moved as if he had no control over his body and fell into the chair across from me, breathing heavy and sighing before speaking again. What my numbers looking like?

I couldn't immediately answer him. I noticed Carmen's slant smile. Amber too had grinned when he walked through the door, but talk of business had twisted his lips into a grimace.

I'm not sure how we're gonna make Mr. Washington's payments again this month, I said.

It was a fair enough guess. With the reduced territory there were fewer businesses to intimidate, fewer lottery customers and Amber had fewer people working for him bringing in any revenue.

Carmen rested her soft hands on the back of Amber's neck.

You need to get yourself a woman, Amber said.

I'm sorry I can't get these numbers to make sense, I replied. I'll keep try—

I'm talking about what's really important in this life and you stuck on business. I don't remember you being this stiff. Didn't my father call you a poet or something?

Amber was telling me about Loretta, Carmen said. You been out with anyone since then?

I shook my head.

Amber's a good guy, Carmen continued. He asked about my friends for you. I got a whole army of nice girls. You don't like one, the next one will be better. They all could use a guy like you.

See, what I'm talking about, Amber said. This is a firecracker of a woman. What you think of my woman?

I looked up at the sweep of her hair resting on her cheeks. The black, breathing lines beneath her eyes.

She hides her gills well, I said.

Amber and Carmen laughed. I'm glad they took it in the spirit of a joke. Sometimes it was hard to tell what was going to make Amber lose it.

You know there's no such thing as water women, right? Carmen asked with her slant-smile lingering and hanging over me. I didn't reply.

Loretta wasn't no water woman, Amber said. She just ain't like your ass no more. Same thing with Joyce. We got to live with that. It takes a special woman to be with guys in this life. Loretta and Joyce wasn't special enough, but my baby Carmen—he grasped her by the waist and pulled her tight—my baby Carmen ain't going nowhere.

Mean-fucking-while, I said. Philemon is the toast of the family.

Outrageous! Amber slapped the desk. What would happen if I walked right up to him and shot him in his face right in front of Mr. Washington?

You know something, Carmen said, looking up to the ceiling, her voice all distant and spinning with childlike innocence. There hasn't been a good firebombing since your dad ran the streets, has there?

In a different world, Carmen could have run this organization, I'm sure. I feared her and I wanted to devour her.

Our action against Philemon, was to be nothing serious; just a prank like streaming lines of toilet paper through his trees. We didn't mean for it to happen, but Philemon's house burned. Perhaps I daydreamed too intensely about Carmen's green dress and put too much gasoline into the Molotov Cocktails. No one was hurt, but Amber yelled at the old-faced teenagers we hired to do the job: What was in that shit, sunfire?

He never gave them the second \$10 he promised and still they kept their mouths shut and everyone assumed the Johnson Family did it as retaliation for Philemon moving into their Northside strongholds.

Mr. Washington took Philemon's advice and ordered all guns turned on the Johnson Family in a sort of unbalanced warfare. When they largely retreated, most of our crew leaders were left with bigger territories, except for us. Somehow our territory shrank and we found ourselves scrounging for every dollar we could come across.

Amber shrugged it all off and I still have this vision of him with his feet up on a table in the office holding a copy of the *Days* or the *Times*, staring at the air above the ledger books as if the numbers were twirling before him. He nodded. He grimace-smiled, saying, Carmen got this all figured out. Every damn piece to the puzzle. Every piece.

4.

Shortly after I began working for Amber, before he became translucent to me—the way Josephus appears in my dreams—my mother sent me to see Miss Susan. She had seen Miss Susan before

she married my father (and probably before she started seeing Elder Mr. Hawkins) and said everyone should see her when they think they're in deep with a lover. I hadn't even been paid yet and was still living off shoe-shining bread so my mother gave me money for that old witch. Miss Susan told me to go into the Wildlands and bring her three roots. My mother, said, That witch crazy if she think I'm sending my only boy into that old spooknigger forest. She went down to the market and bought three roots and ground them into the dirt so they looked fresh.

Ms. Susan stared at me. She fingered my naps. Squeezed my face and then she turned my roots in her hand. I had heard rumors that she made you drop your pants and stared right into the eye of your penis. I silently prayed she let me keep my pants on and thankfully, she did, but, God, the power of this woman! She looked nothing like the grinning old crone they had pictured on her books. Miss Susan looked smooth-skinned and serious. I would have done anything she asked just because of the forcefulness of her voice. So, I said, Is Loretta the one? She looked up from my roots with her glowing gold eyes and said, You're in danger.

You know who I work for, I said. You not telling me nothing I don't know.

That's not why you're in danger. It's your heart. If you know what's good for you, you're gonna stay the hell away from the river.

I left with a bunch of her books and walked straight to the river to sit and read. And that's when I heard them calling me. A wispy sound rustled in my ears and I felt drunk, pleasant drunk without the anger or the bitter taste on my tongue or the physical burn of liquor corroding my insides as it passed through.

The world looked wavy, but I saw it—that diamond island rising from the Cross River like a ghost ship out the fog.

And those water-women dove from land and swam to me. They rose out the water, brown and nude, their skin shining with the life-giving waters of the river.

Numbers-boy, the water-woman in the front said. Hey, Numbers-boy. You got a number for me?

All those women turned into one. She reached for me and caressed my face. You're beautiful, she said. Anyone ever tell you you're beautiful?

She grabbed my hand and placed it on her naked hip.

Don't be afraid, she said. When I looked into her eyes, we lived a whole life, from awkward first steps together to deep commitment. I could never look at another.

Loretta, a voice called from the island.

Your name is Loretta? I asked. Like my Loretta?

No, she said. I'm better than your Loretta.

Without another word, she turned and dived back into the river. Perhaps she didn't have all of me. Some of me was back with my Loretta because I realized this was a trap. This was exactly how Miss Susan described water woman seduction in her books. So many lovers, like the poet Roland Hudson, dived to their ends after these deadly tricksters. I took a step toward the water. Then I stopped. Self-preservation kicked in and I remembered they weren't even women. or even human, but instead they were evil-intentioned beings with secret gills tucked away somewhere.

The island descended from mid-air into a thick fog, sinking slowly into the black water. And even though it nearly caused my death, the feeling I had there by the Cross River was the greatest feeling any man could ever experience. I cried hot tears that night waiting for the water woman's return.

I knew nothing in life would ever feel like staring into her brown eyes, touching the warmth of the flesh at her hip. Nothing. I would chase women, try to experience bliss in all things, but no experience I ever had could fill my soul this way, but if I ever returned to the river and that island decided to rise up, I knew I would die.

Not a bad way to go, huh? Drowning in a water woman's light.

5.

Carmen disappeared, not by train, but by wind. To hear Amber tell it, they had spent the afternoon downtown on the way to purchase a ring when she walked out ahead of him. She smiled, not the slant-smile, but a broad true one and then she stretched out her arms like a bird preparing for flight. Oh, Amber were her last words before the soft brown of her flesh turned into a fragrant white powder. When the breeze came, scattering pieces of Carmen throughout the town, Amber grabbed clumps of her powder and tried to put her back together, but the grains of Carmen slipped between his fingers, leaving traces of her in the creases of his hands, embedded between the threads of his clothes and curled always in the coils of his hair.

It's like my dream, I said the night of her disappearance. The numbers, which usually twirled in the air, stopped to watch Amber with pity.

Water women, I said. A plague of them.

I need to smoke, he said, walking to the door. Come and get me in ten minutes so we can finish the ledger. Business first, right. I'll be okay by then.

It only took two minutes to figure out that he was going out into the pitch of the night to find Carmen by the river. He had left the car, so I figured he was walking briskly south toward

the bridge. Their voices would soon be screaming through his head, crowding his lonely thoughts.

Turns out there couldn't have been a worse time for Carmen to blow in the wind. I took two steps into the street and felt a hand grab my arm: It was Fathead Leroy, a guy who took numbers for Amber over on the Southside.

Man, he said. I got rolled for my numbers slips. I don't know that shit by heart like Amber.

Who got you? Somebody with the Jacksons?

Naw, look, you know Todd who work for Elder Mr. Hawkins? Him and a guy I never seen before. A white guy. I think he from Port Yooga. They looking for you and they looking for Amber. Told me to tell you not to burn nothing you can't pay for. Cracker punched me and threw my betting slips into the river. I don't got the standing to do nothing against someone as high up as Todd. You and Amber gotta get this shit right for us out on the streets.

I looked over Leroy's shoulder. It started to play as a setup. Not too far in the distance I saw Todd with a big white man who stomped toward us like a gorilla. How could I leave the office without my piece? Loveblind Amber probably hadn't spent two thoughts on packing. I dipped my head and turned from Leroy before breaking into a jog. Perhaps they ran behind me, but I wasn't willing to spare a glance. The shadows of the Wildlands called. When I entered them, the dark grew heavy and I swore as I dashed through the stream that pieces of the black flaked off and covered me. I came out into a clearing and could see the gleam of the moon casting down on the earth. This was a circuitous route to get to the bridge, but it would keep me alive long enough to find Amber. I imagined him wading in water, waiting for Carmen to beckon him beneath the choppy surface.

The closer I got to the river, the louder the buzzing vibrated in my head. I felt as if something kept lifting me into the air with every step. It was a beautiful tone shooting from the depths. My skin grew warm, suddenly flush with blood. Part of my mind called me to turn around to save myself. Who would I be if I bowed to the Gods of self-preservation when Amber was in danger? But Amber could already be a bloated corpse, the beasts of the river tearing at his dead limbs. What a liar I am. This death march felt good, that was the truth. That now was the only reason I plowed deeper into the forest. It felt just like floating on my back beneath the sun when the river rocked with a loping rhythm. All that remained was for me to dip my head under.

While I indulged this daydream as one of the last I'd ever have, I came out of a long blink and before me stood Amber with his ankles steeped in the river.

That's when the whispers began. Images of Loretta. My Loretta. Then the water woman Loretta.

I wanted to call out to Amber, but what if I missed my Loretta speaking to me?

A burst. A loud popping, like fireworks. I looked to the cloudy black of the sky, now hiding the stars and obscuring the moon. Another pop, or rather this time it was a bang, closer to me now. I wasn't shot, but for a second I thought I was, as the rhythm of it vibrated first at my feet and then in my chest.

Amber didn't move. Didn't react at all as if he hadn't heard the sound. He just stared down at the river, trying to see the whole world in the water.

Another shot burst toward us, this time from a different angle and there was Todd on a hill looking down upon us.

Amber, I called. Amber! Run! Save yourself!

The whispering in my head grew louder. I saw the white man approach, an albino gorilla burning with murderous intent. There was nowhere we could run, Todd and the White Gorilla were tactical geniuses, cutting off our paths of flight.

I wondered if Mr. Washington would give us a twin homegoing full of lavish food and celebration.

My skin warmed and I figured since my death was upon me, I'd shut off my mind and give in to the creeping pleasures of the beckoning woes.

Just as I decided my time lay at an end, the water parted and up in the sky rose that diamond island, the land of the water women. Scores of them—brown and nude and river-slicked—floated down to us. Two of them caressed Amber. I locked eyes with a woe and she whispered my name. Tall and skinny with a sharp, gaunt face. She bounce-walked and after a few steps her movements nearly resembled floating. The woe put her arm around me, softly touching my chest. With my eyes, I searched her naked body for gills, but soon I gave in and began softly kissing her neck and kneading her soft wet flesh, growing more aggressive with the increasing intensity of her breaths and her moans. Together they sounded like a new language.

There was that pop again. And another pop, itself a language I no longer cared to understand. I placed my tongue gently in my water woman's mouth. We were melting into one being. Pop. She jerked and shuddered and I felt a hot wetness at the side of my lover's body. I gasped. My heart felt as if it had shifted and now beat in the center of my body. My water woman went limp in my arms, her head flopping to the side, her skin turning cold and scaly and silvery and blue beneath the crack of moonlight that spilled from behind the cloud cover.

I looked at the blood and chunks of flesh that covered my skin and my clothes. Some of the water women ran and dove back into the river. I scanned the water's edge for Amber. He

held a water woman in his arms and another stood behind him rubbing his back. The one in front took hold of his hand and led him deeper into the water.

I ducked from the flurry of bullets I expected to buzz by our ears like mosquitoes. Todd and the White Gorilla stalked toward me. I crouched to the ground with my hands covering my head. When they were upon me, they stopped and hovered. I watched their work boots, afraid to look into their faces.

What happened next, in my state I could have never guessed, cowering and wishing for quick end as I was.

Todd and the White Gorilla stepped over me, mumbling apologies. They stumbled toward the river and its bounty of naked women.

As grateful as I was for their mesmerism, it also saddened me. That was to be my fate, my thoughtless death march to a land under the water.

I rose to my feet and ran to river's edge where Amber stood. I snatched at him and held him down. He screamed and cried, cursing and threatening me with great violence. I knew it was just a matter of endurance. When the island sank back into the depths of the river, he'd regain a certain sanity. His water women didn't fight—that's not how they did things. They blew kisses and walked out into the river until their heads were fully submerged.

As for Todd and the White Gorilla, water women gazed into their eyes, laughing playful laughs and twisting their naked hips. It was a beautiful invitation to a drowning and they accepted, holding tight to the women as they led them to the bottom of the river.

For Amber, the sinking of the island was the worst part; he twisted, thrashed and screamed. But when it was over, when that island was again tucked beneath gentle currents, Amber grew calm and docile. He lay on his back atop the wet soil with his hands on his face.

Take me home, he said. I need to go home.

I looked off into the distance at the glowing town and I realized that Amber and I would never again be allowed there. He moved his hands from his face and it was as blank and innocent as a newborn baby's. His voice sounded simple and soft. He was my responsibility now and I had no idea where we would go. All I could be certain of is that part of him was now submerged somewhere within his depths and would never surface again.