**Monologue**

The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever.

When we are young we do not look into mirrors. It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future. We become vain with the names we own, our claims to have been the first eyes, the strongest army, the cleverest merchant. It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself.

But we were interested in how our lives could mean something to the past. We sailed into the past. We were young. We knew power and great finance were temporary things. We all slept with Herodotus. *“For those cities that were great in earlier times must have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before.… Man’s good fortune never abides in the same place.”*

   Some of us had written books about dune formation, the disappearance and reappearance of oases, the lost culture of deserts. We seemed to be interested only in things that could not be bought or sold, of no interest to the outside world. We argued about latitudes, or about an event that had happened seven hundred years earlier. The theorems of exploration.

   Give me a map and I’ll build you a city. Give me a pencil and I will draw you a room in South Cairo, desert charts on the wall. Always the desert was among us. I could wake and raise my eyes to the map of old settlements along the Mediterranean coast … and south of that the hand-painted wadis, and surrounding those the shades of yellowness that we invaded, tried to lose ourselves in.

   In the street of imported parrots in Cairo one is hectored by almost articulate birds. The birds bark and whistle in rows, like a plumed avenue. I knew which tribe had travelled which silk or camel road carrying them in their petite palanquins across the deserts. Forty-day journeys, after the birds were caught by slaves or picked like flowers in equatorial gardens and then placed in bamboo cages to enter the river that is trade. They appeared like brides in a mediaeval courtship.

We stood among them. I was showing her a city that was new to her.

Her hand touched me at the wrist.

“If I gave you my life, you would drop it. Wouldn’t you?”

I didn’t say anything.