

The Cusp of Leaving

by Wendy Russ

She waited on the hot, broken pavement, arm outstretched, her thumb a ticket to a distant, refracted horizon. Waves of heat danced like undulating snakes under the spell of a charmer. She pictured herself passing through them, abandoning the green of home for the wide-open spaces where ground meets sky.

The pack on her back was heavy, but probably not heavy enough to last for long. Mini cans of pork and beans, fruit cocktail, bottles of water, toothbrush, hairbrush, her clothes.

She was untethered, except for the pack and the lingering sensation inside her — a tender, bruised feeling, a souvenir of rough love that she simultaneously craved and despised. He didn't know yet she was gone. He would hate her for leaving, deride her for her careless travel plans.

And yet...

And yet he would get that animal gleam in his eye and want to fuck her because she was willing to edge close to danger, to step out onto the ledge, to hold her breath, hoping it would all work out okay.

Down the road a farm truck rumbled. She stuck her thumb out, mustering a look of energetic hopefulness. The truck slowed and finally stopped. A dusty, sun-worn man leaned across the torn bench seat.

"Whar you headed?"

His lips and teeth were stained brown from years of chewing tobacco. The truck sputtered and belched blue exhaust.

The girl motioned west. "Thattaway. As far as I can git."

The man's eyes made a slow measure of her, taking in the long hair and pale skin, her slender body and small breasts, the jeans that hung low on her narrow hips.

She looked away, back the way she'd come, toward wild, green hills. A red-tailed hawk circled, looking for prey. The man spit out the window and nodded, as if finally making up his mind.

"C'mon then. Let's go." He leaned to push the truck door open, his other hand tapping a rhythm on the steering wheel, something familiar, something that stirred a memory in her.

This was the moment then. The circling hawk let out a scream as it swooped from the sky toward earth, talons spread wide.

