

The Cleft

Doris Lessing

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Extract

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I saw this today.

When the carts come in from the estate farm as the summer ends, bringing the wine, the olives, the fruits, there is a festive air in the house, and I share in it. I watch from my windows like the house slaves, for the arrival of the oxen as they turn from the road, listen for the creak of the cart. Today the oxen were wild-eyed and anxious, because of the noisy overfull road to the west. Their whiteness was reddened, just like the slave Marcus's tunic, and his hair was full of dust. The watching girls ran out to the cart, not only because of all the delicious produce they would now put away into the storerooms, but because of Marcus, who had in the last year become a handsome youth. His throat was too full of dust to let him return their greetings, and he ran to the pump, snatched up the pitcher there, drank – and drank – poured water over his head, which emerged from this libation a mass of black curls – and dropped the pitcher, through haste, on the tile surround, where it shattered. At this, Lolla,

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whose mother my father had bought during a trip to Sicily, an excitable explosive girl, rushed at Marcus screaming reproaches and accusations. He shouted back, defending himself. The other servants were already lifting down the jars of wine and oil, and the grape harvest, black and gold, and it was a busy, loud scene. The oxen began lowing and now, and with an ostentatiously impatient air, Lolla took up a second pitcher, dipped it in the water and ran with it to the oxen, where she filled their troughs, which were nearly empty. It was Marcus's responsibility to make sure the oxen got their water as soon as they arrived. They lowered their great heads and drank, while Lolla again turned on Marcus, scolding and apparently angry. Marcus was the son of a house slave in the estate house and these two had known each other all their lives. Sometimes he had worked here in our town house, sometimes she had gone for the summer to the estate. Lolla was known for her quick temper, and if Marcus had not been hot and dusty after the long slow journey he would probably have laughed at her, teased her out of her fit of impatience. But these two were no longer children: it was enough only to see them together to know her crossness, his sullenness, were not the result only of a very hot afternoon.

He went to the oxen, avoiding their great tossing horns, and began soothing them. He freed them from their traces, and led them to the shade of the big fig tree, where he slipped the traces over a branch. For some reason Marcus's tenderness with the oxen annoyed

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Lolla even more. She stood, watching, while the other girls were carrying past her the produce from the cart, and her cheeks were scarlet and her eyes reproached and accused the boy. He took no notice of her. He walked past her as if she were not there, to the veranda, where he pulled out another tunic from his bundle and, stripping off the dusty tunic, he again sluiced himself with water, and without drying himself – the heat would do that in a moment – he slipped on the fresh one.

Lolla seemed calmer. She stood with her hand on the veranda wall, and now she was penitent, or ready to be. Again he took no notice of her, but stood at the end of the veranda, staring at the oxen, his charges. She said, 'Marcus . . .' in her normal voice, and he shrugged, repudiating her. By now the last of the jars and the fruit had gone inside. The two were alone on the veranda. 'Marcus,' said Lolla again, and this time coaxingly. He turned his head to look at her, and I would not have liked to earn that look. Contemptuous, angry – and very far from the complaisance she was hoping for. He went to the gate to shut it, and turned from it, and from her. The slaves' quarters were at the end of the garden. He took up his bundle and began walking – fast, to where he would lodge that night. 'Marcus,' she pleaded. She seemed ready to cry. He was about to go into the men's quarters and she ran across and reached him as he disappeared into the door.

I did not need to watch any longer. I knew she would find an excuse to hang about the courtyard – perhaps petting and patting the oxen, giving them figs, or pretend

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the well needed attention. She would be waiting for him. I knew that he would want to go off into the streets with the other boys, for an evening's fun – he was not often here in this house in Rome itself. But I knew too that these two would spend tonight together, no matter what he would have preferred.

This little scene seems to me to sum up a truth in the relations between men and women.

Often seeing something as revealing, when observing the life of the house, I was impelled to go into the room where it was kept, the great pack of material which I was supposed to be working on. I had had it now for years. Others before me had said they would try to make something of it.

What was it? A mass of material accumulated over ages, originating as oral history, some of it the same but written down later, all purporting to deal with the earliest record of us, the peoples of our earth.

It was a cumbersome, unwieldy mass and more than one hopeful historian had been defeated by it, and not only because of its difficulty, but because of its nature. Anyone working on it must know that if it ever reached a stage of completion where it could have a name, and be known as a product of scholarship, it would be attacked, challenged, and perhaps be described as spurious.

I am not a person who enjoys the quarrels of scholars. What kind of a man I am is not really of importance in this debate – there has already been disputation about allowing this tale to exist away from the dusty shelves

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it has always been kept on. 'The Cleft' – I did not choose this title – had at various times been regarded as so inflammatory it had been put with other 'Strictly Secret' documents.

As I have said, the history I am relating is based on ancient documents, which are based on even earlier oral records. Some of the reported events are abrasive and may upset certain people. I tried out selected bits of the chronicle on my sister Marcella and she was shocked. She would not believe that decent females would be unkind to dear little baby boys. My sister is ever ready to ascribe to herself the more delicate of female attributes – a not uncommon trait, I think. But as I remind her, anyone who has watched her screaming her head off as the blood flows in the arena is not likely easily to be persuaded of female fastidiousness. People wishing to avoid offence to their sensibilities may start the story on p.29.

The following is not the earliest bit of history we have, but it is informative and so I am putting it first.



Yes, I know, you keep saying, but what you don't understand is that what I say now can't be true because I am telling you how I see it all now, but it was all different then. Even words I use are new, I don't know where they came from, sometimes it seems that most of the words in our mouths are this new talk. I say I, and again I, I do this and I think that, but *then* we wouldn't say I, it was we. We thought we.

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I say *think* but did we think? Perhaps a new kind of thinking began like everything else when the Monsters started being born. I am sorry, you keep saying the truth, you want the truth, and that is how we saw you, all of you, at first. Monsters. The deformed ones, the freaks, the cripples.

When was then? I don't know. *Then* was a very long time ago, that's all I know.

The caves are old. You have seen them. They are old caves. They are high in the rocks, well above any waves, even big ones, even the biggest. In stormy seas you can stand on the cliffs and look down and think that water is everything, is everywhere, but then the storm stops and the sea sinks back into its place. We are not afraid of the sea. We are sea people. The sea made us. Our caves are warm, with sandy floors, and dry, and the fires outside each cave burn sea-brush and dry seaweed and wood from the cliffs, and these fires have never gone out, not since we first had them. There was a time we didn't have fire. That is in our records. Our story is known. It is told to chosen youngsters and they have to remember it and tell it when they are old to new youngsters. They have to be sure they remember every word, as it was told to them.

What I am saying now is not part of this kind of recording. When the story is told to the young ones – they have a name, they are called the Memories –

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it is told first among ourselves, and one will say, 'No, it was not like that,' or another, 'Yes, it was like that,' and by the time everyone is agreed we can be sure there is nothing in the story that is untrue.

You want to know about me? Very well, then. My name is Maire. There is always someone called Maire. I was born into the family of Cleft Watchers, like my mother and like her mother – these words are new. If everyone gives birth, as soon as they are old enough, everyone is a mother, and you don't have to say Mother. The Cleft Watchers are the most important family. We have to watch The Cleft. When the moon is at its biggest and brightest we climb up to above The Cleft where the red flowers grow, and we cut them, so there is a lot of red, and we let the water flow from the spring up there, and the water flushes the flowers down through The Cleft, from top to bottom, and we all have our blood flow. That is, all who are not going to give birth. Very well, have it your way, the moon's rays make the blood flow, not the red running down through The Cleft. But we *know* that if we don't cut the red flowers – they are small and soft like the blisters on seaweed, and they bleed red if you crush them – if we don't do that, we will not have our flow.

The Cleft is that rock there, which isn't the entrance to a cave, it is blind, and it is the most important thing in our lives. It has always been so. We are The

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Cleft, The Cleft is us, and we have always made sure it is kept free of saplings that might grow into trees, free of bushes. It is a clean cut down through the rock and under it is a deep hole. Every year, when the sun touches the top of that mountain there, it is always the cold time, and we have killed one of us, and thrown the body down from the top of The Cleft into the hole. You say you have counted the bones, but I don't see how you can have, when some of the bones are dust by now. You say if a body and its bones has been thrown down every year, it is not so difficult to work out how long it has been going on. Well, if that is what you think is important . . .

No, I cannot say how it started. That isn't in our story.

The Old Shes must have known something.

We never called them that before the Monsters began being born. Why should we? We only had Shes, didn't we, only Clefts, and as for *old*, we didn't think like that. People were born, they lived for a time, unless they drowned swimming or had an accident or were chosen to be thrown into The Cleft. When they died they were put out on the Killing Rock.

No, I don't know how many of us there were *then*. Whenever then was. There are these caves, as many as I have fingers and toes, and they are big and they go back a long way into the cliffs. Each cave has the same kind of people in it, a family, the Cleft Watchers,

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the Fish Catchers, the Net Makers, the Fish Skin Curers, the Seaweed Collectors. And that is what we were called. My name was Cleft Watcher. No, why did it matter if several people had the same name? You can always tell by looking at someone, can't you?

My name Maire is one of the new words.

We didn't think like that, no, we didn't, that every person had to have a name separate from all the others. Sometimes I think we lived in a kind of dream, a sleep, everything slow and easy and nothing ever happening but the moon being bright and big, and the red flowers washing down The Cleft.

And, of course, the babies being born. They were just born, that's all, no one did anything to make them. I think we thought the moon made them, or a big fish, but it is hard to remember what we thought, it was such a dream. How we thought has never been part of our story, only what happened.

You get angry when I say Monsters, but just look at yourself. Look at yourself – and look at me. Go on, look. I am not wearing the red flower belt so you can see how I am. Now look at The Cleft, we are the same, The Cleft and the Clefts. No wonder you cover yourselves there, but we don't have to. We are nice to look at, like one of those shells we can pick off a rock after a storm. *Beautiful* – you taught us that word and I like to use it. I am beautiful, just

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like The Cleft with its pretty red flowers. But you are all bumps and lumps and the thing like a pipe which is sometimes like a sea squirt. Can you wonder that when the first babes like you were born we put them out for the eagles?

We always used to throw deformed babies there, on that rock, the sloping rock just past The Cleft itself. One side of The Cleft rises out of the Killing Rock, yes, that's what we call it. We didn't keep damaged babies, and we didn't keep twins. We were careful to limit our numbers because it was better that way. Why was it? Because that's how it has always been, and we never thought to change things. We did not have a lot of births, perhaps two or three to a cave in a long time, and sometimes a cave had no babies at all in it. Of course we are pleased when a baby is born, but if we kept all the babes born there would be no room for us all. Yes, I know you say we should find a bit of shore where there is more room, but we have always been here, and how could we move from The Cleft? This is our place, it has always been ours.

When we put out deformed babies the eagles came for them. We did not kill the babes, the eagles did it. An eagle keeps watch on that peak over there – can you see it? That little speck there, it is a great big eagle, the size of a person. We put out all the newborn Monsters and watched as the eagles carried

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them off to their nests. That time went on, we believe, and it went on, because the Old Shes (your name for them) were worried because there were so many fewer in the caves, so many Monsters had been born, more than babes like us, the females.

Males, females. New words, new people.

And it went on, instead of waiting for a birth with pleasure, we were afraid, and when one of us saw that the babe was a Monster, she was ashamed and the others hated her. Not for ever, of course, but it was a terrible thing, the moment when a Monster appeared at the moment of giving birth. There were fewer of us catching fish and gathering seafood. The Old Shes were complaining they were not getting enough to eat. Yes, we always fed them and gave them the nicest bits to eat. I don't know why, we just did. Suddenly there were only half the number in the Fish Catchers' cave, and some of the others who were not Fish Catchers had to become Catchers.

I agree, it was strange we never thought to wonder what was happening on the other side of the Eagles' Hills. You always talk as if we are stupid, but if we are so stupid how is it we have lived for so long, safely and well, so much longer than you, the Monsters, have. Our story goes back and back, you tell us so, but your story is much shorter. But why should we have moved about and looked for new things, or wondered about the eagles? What for? We

have everything we want on this part of the island – your word for it, you tell us it is a large island. Well, good for you, but what difference does that make to us? We live in the part of the island where we watch the sun drop into the sea every night, and watch the moon grow pale as day comes.

A long time after the first Monster was born, we saw down on that part of the seashore nearest to the Eagles' Hills one of the Monsters, one of you. It had tied around its waist one of the fish-skin cloths we wear at the time of the red flower. We could see that under the skin was the lumpy swelling thing we thought was so ugly. This was a Monster we had given birth to, grown up. How had that happened? The Old Shes said we should lie in wait and kill that Monster next time it appeared on the shore. Then there was disagreement among the Old Shes, and some said we should climb up to the hills where the eagles lived next time we put out a Monster to die, and watch where the eagles took it. And some of us did that. They were very afraid, that is in the story we make the youngsters learn. We were not in the habit of roaming about and certainly never as far as the Eagles' Hills. No one had gone so far before. Yes, I know it is not more than a comfortable walk.

They saw the eagle carry the Monster in its claws up to the hills where the nests are but instead of dropping the baby in a nest the eagle went on and carried

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the baby down into a valley where there are huts. We had never seen a hut or any shelter because we had always had our caves. The huts seemed like some kind of strange animal, and very nearly frightened us into running back home. The eagle took the baby down, and then some Monsters took it and gave the bird a big lump of food. We know now it was a fish. The babe was taken into a hut. Everything they saw frightened the Watchers, and they did run home and told the Old Shes what they had seen. It was a terrible, frightening story they told. Over the Eagles' Hills were living Monsters, grown people, not Clefts like us. They were able to live though they were so deformed and ugly. That is how we thought then. Everyone was afraid, and shocked, and didn't know what to think or what to do.

Then another Monster was born and the Old Shes told us to throw it over that cliff there into the sea. A group of us took the babe to the cliff top. They did not want to kill it, because they knew now it could grow up and live and if they threw it into the waves that would kill it. All of us swim and float and are happy in the sea, but our babes have to be taught. They were crying and wailing and the babe was yelling, because they were out of earshot of the Old Shes there and they were so divided about what they were doing. They hated the Monsters, and now they were afraid, too, since

they knew about the Monsters living over the hills . . . look, you asked me to tell you what happened, so why get angry when I do? How do you know, if some of us Clefts had been born into your community, you might have thought we were Monsters because we are different. Yes, I know you can't give birth, only we Clefts can give birth, and you despise us, yes, you do, but without us there would be no Monsters, there would be *no one at all*. Have you ever thought of that? We Clefts make all the people, Clefts and Monsters. If there were no Clefts, what would happen – have you really thought about that?

They were standing on the cliff with the yelling baby Monster when one of the big eagles appeared floating just above them, and it screamed and screamed at them, and now they were really afraid. The eagles are so big they can carry a grown person – not very far, but it could have lifted one of those of us on the cliff, perhaps the one holding the babe, up and over and into the sea. Or those great wings could knock them one by one into the waves that were crashing and jumping in the sharp rocks. But what happened was not that. The eagle let itself down from the sky and took the baby in its claws and went off with it back in the direction of the Eagles' Hills.

The Clefts didn't know what to do. They were

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afraid to tell the Old Shes what had happened. I don't remember anyone saying anything about being afraid before.

Then a new thing began. When a Monster was born, the young ones pretended to throw it away into the waves, but they went far away so they could not be seen, and knew that the babe's crying would fetch an eagle. Then they laid the babe down on the cliff and watched while the eagle swept down and took it. By then as many Monsters were being born as Clefts, the ones like us, the ones like you.

Have you ever thought how strange it is that you have nipples on those flat places in front there? You can't call them breasts, can you? Why have nipples at all when they aren't good for anything? You can't feed a babe with them, they are useless.

Yes, I am sure you have thought, because you are always noticing things and asking questions. Well, what is your reply, then?

Next, an Old She said we should keep one of the Monsters, one of you, and let it grow and see if it was fit for anything.

It was hard to do because the eagles watched us all the time, and we had to keep the baby Monster out of their sight.

I don't really like to think of what happened to that babe. Of course I only heard about it all, it was part of the story, it was told again and again by the

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Memories, and what I am telling you now is only some of what we called the story.

There is a bad feeling about that part of our story. There were disagreements, worse, bad quarrels. It is in the story that there had never been that kind of quarrel before. Some Old Shes wanted not to tell about the first monstrous babe and how it was treated. Others said what was the point of the story if it left bits out? I believe a lot was left out. What we all know is that, first of all, no one wanted to feed the Monster. It was never fed enough and it was always hungry and crying. That meant that the eagles were always hovering about trying to see where we kept the babe. It did get fed, but the one feeding it would tease and torment it as it fed. That first Monster babe had a bad time.

Then one of the Shes said it must stop, either we decided to let it live and look after it, or not, but what was happening now would kill the babe. What did we do to it? The thing you all have in front, the lumps and the tube was what everyone wanted to play with. The little Monster screamed and screamed and its lumps were swollen and became sick and full of matter and bad-smelling water. Then one of the Old Shes said that the Monsters were really like us, except for your thing in front, and your flat breasts. It was like one of our babies. Cut off the thing in front and see what happens – well, they did cut it

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off and it died. All the time it screamed and howled and when another Monster was born and it was kept, it was a little better treated but I don't want to tell you everything about how these little Monsters were treated. And I think that some of us became ashamed. We are not cruel people. There is no record of any of us doing cruel things – not until the Monsters were born. The Monster we were trying to bring up strayed outside the cave we kept it in and a watching eagle swept down at once and took it over the hill to the others. How they survived, those babes, we have no idea.

Then there were quite a few Monsters born all at once. Some of the Old Shes wanted us to keep another for a plaything, others not. But the story goes that quite a few of the babes were put out on the Killing Rock at the same time and instead of one eagle, or two, as many came as there were little Monsters, and we watched as the babes were carried off and over the hills. How did those babes live? Babies need milk. There is a tale that one of our young Clefts became sorry for the hungry babes, and went by herself over the hills and found the new babes crawling about and crying, and she fed as many as she could. There is always milk in our breasts. Our breasts are useful. Not like yours.

And she stayed there with the Monsters, but no one knows now what really happened. We want to

believe it, I think, because we are ashamed of the rest of the story, but there is also the question, how did those babies live when they were not fed?

There is a tale that two of us were sitting by the sea, watching the waves and sometimes sliding in for a little swim, then they saw two of the fish we call breast fish, because that is what they look like, big puffy jellies, and they have tubes sticking out, like the Monsters, and one of them stuck his tube into the other, and there were little eggs scattering through the water.


That was when the idea first happened to us that the Monsters' tubes were for making eggs, and if so why and what for?

This tale, I think, is fanciful, but something like that, I suppose, happened.

The Old Shes began to talk about it, because we told them – by 'we' there I mean the young ones, who found something intriguing about those tubes and the eggs. Some of the young ones went over the hill and when the Monsters saw them, they grabbed them and put their tubes into them, and that is how we became Hes and Shes, and learned to say I as well as we – but after that there are several stories, not one. Yes, I know what I am telling you doesn't add up to sense but I told you, there are many stories and who knows which one is true? And some time after that, we, the Clefts,

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lost the power to give birth without them, the Monsters – without you.

 This account, by this Maire, was later than the first document we have. Much later – ages. Ages is a word to be distrusted: it means there is no real knowledge. It is a smooth tale, told many times and even the remorse for cruelty has something well-used about it. No, it's not untrue, it is useful, as far as it goes, but a lot has been left out. What that is, is in the first document, or fragment, which is probably the very first attempt at 'the story'. It is crude, unaccomplished, and told by someone in shock. Before the birth of the first 'Monsters' nothing had ever happened – not in ages – to this community of first humans. The first Monster was seen as an unfortunate birth fault. But then there was another, and another . . . and the realisation that it was all going to continue. And the Old Females were in a panic, raging, screaming, punishing the young females who were producing the Monsters, and their treatment of the Monsters themselves – well, it does not make for pleasant reading, Maire's account, but I cannot bring myself to reproduce that other fragment here. It is too unpleasant. I am a Monster and cannot help identifying with those long-ago tortured infants, the first baby boys. The ingenuity of the cruelties thought up by the Old Females is sickening. Even now, the period of putting the newborn out to die, then keeping a few, and mutilating them – well, it went on