

# In the Land of the Blind

By Bill Wolfe

In my dreams, I see colors for which I have no name. There are smells, too. Odors that seem so close, so real; and yet drift away from my reality like so much fog the moment I awake. These are the odors of food that are actually pleasing. Of merely damp soil, and of dry particles of dirt that float around in dry air. I try to describe these things to my adopted Family, but it's no use. They just can't understand. But when I'm grieving at their grave mud, I know I will try again to tell the next generation about the colors, the odors, the memory of a large, soft face looking at me with love. A face that is much like mine.

"Immortal" It's the velvety touch/thought of Meerkin, the current head of the Family. But it's not his normal, gentle waking touch. I sense fear, urgency. "Our birthing-crèche is being taken by the deepmud. We cannot pull it back. I understand that you want us to do without you but this is too much. Please help us."

This is serious, and though I have been less willing to help, of late, I jump from my oversized firmmud berth with barely a touch/thought of acknowledgment. The echoes of the dreams vanish as I leap away. In two bounds I am at the crèche.

Meerkin is right. A truly huge bubble of gas has surfaced just beneath one corner of the woven-vine building. What was stable hard mud is now a gaping hole coated with the slick, slimy, near-liquid deep mud. The structure would have already plummeted to the bottom but for the twenty-something villagers with foretendrils wrapped around the far corner. There are the crèche workers, of course, but also every adult that was close enough to lend a tendril is here.

Furiously backpedaling with every cilium that can dig mud, they are being inexorably drawn into the pit as the weight of the building—and its precious occupants—pulled harder down the shallow slope. The thick, stagnant air fills with the pain-laden grunts of those holding on. There is the smell of fear, agony and pure determination as tendrils strain to the breaking point. And yet none have released their grasp, even as the front cilia of those at the very edge find no purchase except for air.

"And they call me a superhero!" I touch/think to myself.

My crèche people must be from a world of superheroes because I am stronger than the whole village, combined. My lower appendages also allow me to walk upright, and to do something that I have tried to explain to them for as long as I can remember. Jump.

I jump. High.

To those struggling with the crèche, it must seem that I fly in from the sky. They can only see things a few body lengths away.

I needed to jump high because the mini-tendrils at the end of my lower appendages have to dig deeply into the side of the hole. As I had hoped, the slick, slimy deepmud merely coated the sides. Beneath is pliant hard mud. I have a solid anchor to push from. The crèche is many times larger than I am, and for the first time in generations, I'm not sure I am powerful enough by myself.

Pushing off from the lowest corner, I wriggle my mini-tendrils deeper into their new little dens. I am out of tendril shot of those pulling, so I can't warn them that I am about to push much harder. My own hummmph! of strain joins those up top as I reverse the direction of the crèche and slide it quickly back up the slope. But as I push with all I have, I feel the hard mud beginning to give way. The little dens are fast becoming long gouges and I can tell that I am about to slip.

Inspiration strikes. I place my head in an irregularity in the vines and let go with my upper appendages. These I dig into the hard mud like I did with the lower. By pushing my rigid mini-tendrils into the mud, I can walk up the hard mud slope using both my upper and lower appendages. The woven building cuts through the tiny dead tendrils that cover my head, and I taste my own blood as it runs around my face, but I keep pushing and wall-walking.

When the weight disappears, I flop forward and taste deep mud. I do not move, I just lay there, my air exchanger pumping. A dozen tendrils entwine me, all touch/thinking at once as they haul me the rest of the way to the top.

Through myriad voices, all of whom I have known since they emerged from their own birthing-crèche, the message is one.

"Gratitude, Immortal. Our children are safe. We humbly accept your sacrifice of injury and pain"

Their thanks are done. Sometimes, I want them to praise me for the things I do for them. I wonder if my crèche people appreciate their heroes differently. I don't remember. I was nearly as small as them when I wandered into the village. The Family has touch/memories of smoke and heat and a crash that shook the very hard mud just before I arrived. They know that I am not one of them, but one of the aliens that come to enslave whole villages to use as translators between creatures from different worlds. But they cared for me and I feel responsible for them.

I tell them they must do for themselves because I plan to leave this place. To go where the aliens can be found and maybe they will take me with them. I do not touch/tell my Family how much I hate the smell, the heat, the gelid sludge they call food. I can't touch/tell them that the sight of their tapered, grey, slimy bodies makes me want to squash them like the slugs they are. And most importantly, I absolutely have to get away from all this rotten stinking mud!

The End