

Preface

Geoff Ryman, in his desperate and beautiful science fiction novel *The Unconquered Country*, describes Third, a peasant girl in a place like Cambodia.

Numbers were portents too. They were used as oracles. This was a practical thing. Rice shoots were counted; yields were predicted, seed was stored. Numbers spread out in fanlike shapes, into the future. Third could read them. She saw yarrow in her mind, ghost yarrow she sometimes called them, and they would scurry ahead of the real stalks. They moved too fast for her to follow, flashing, weaving. They leapt to correct answers. If anyone asked Third how much rice was in a bowl, she . . . could have answered, “Six hundred to seven hundred grains.” The yarrow stalks in her mind would click, telling her how much space ten grains took—as represented by so many lengths cut into a stalk—and how much space there was in a bowl. The ghost yarrow opened and closed, like a series of waving fans, beautiful, orderly, true. . . . She could not follow the waving fans, but she could feel her mind driving them. It was a pleasurable sensation, this slight sense of forcing something ahead. She could make them go faster if she wanted to. It was how she saw the world; it was as if the world were a forest of yarrow, moving all around her, as if numbers were leaves, rustling in the wind.

When a teacher from the rebel movement comes to the village to help the children prepare for the new world they are building, she forces Third to count each yarrow stalk as singular.

“Sit there,” the teacher said, and pushed Third back. “Now. One. Two. Three.” She laid the stalks down but far apart, in parallel lines that Third knew could never meet. Third. Three stalks together made three parts of a whole. These did not. Third understood, and she did not want to. As if tearing through flesh, the teacher was rending the numbers apart. She was making them alone. Third turned and tried to run. . . . Something terrible had happened to the numbers. They wouldn’t work. Third tried to drive the yarrow in her mind, but as soon as they touched on any one of the new numbers, they were snagged by something. They stopped, and had to start again, grew confused or were left naked, hanging, and Third realized she had never really understood how they danced their way to answers. They were going away, like friends. (1987, 5–12)

