

SF MASTERWORKS



THE DISPOSSESSED

# URSULA LE GUIN

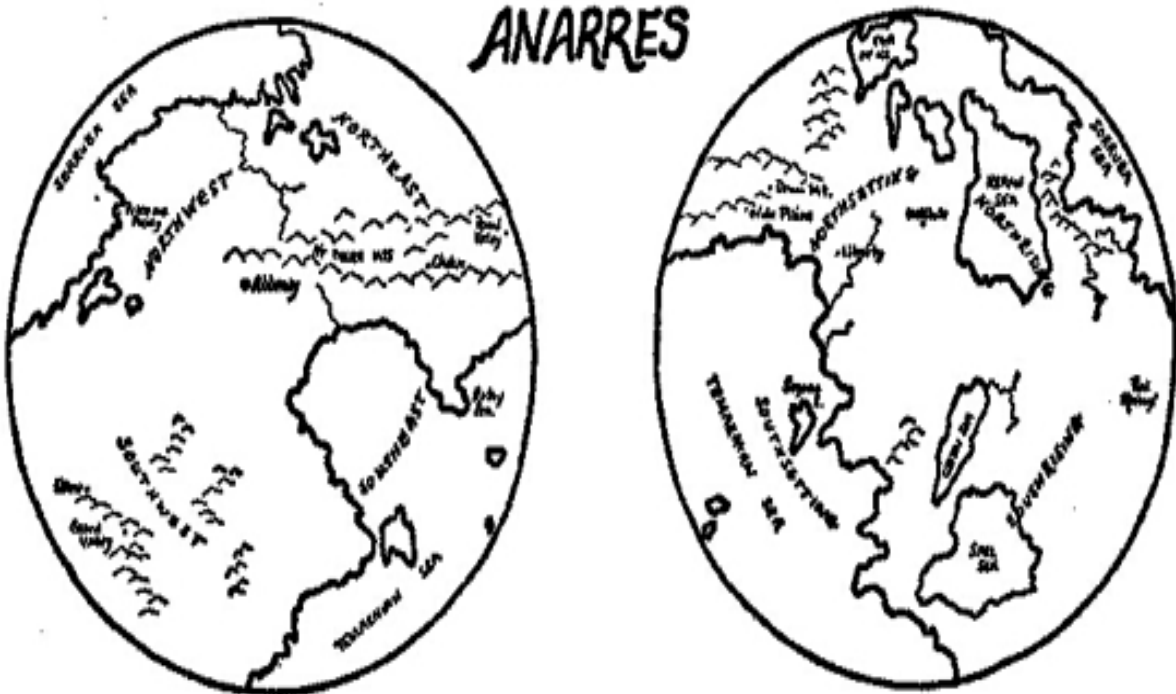
'To be read again and again' THE TIMES



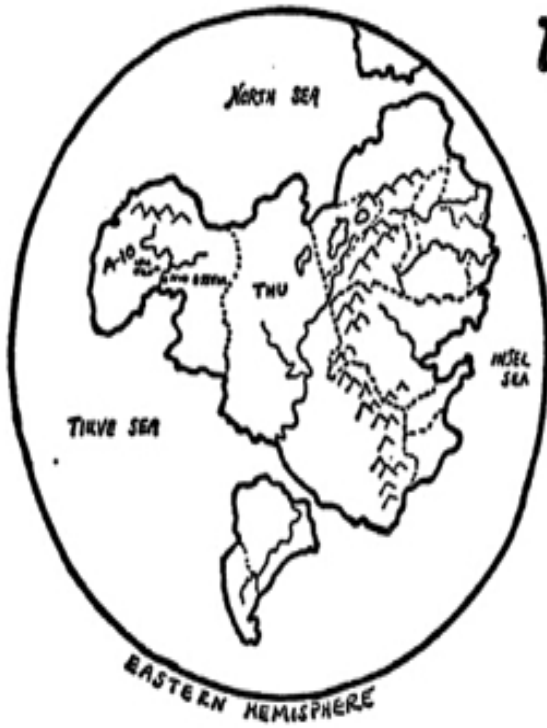
# **The DISPOSSESSED**

# Ursula K. Le Guin

For the partner



# URRAS



# Chapter 1



There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall.

Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.

Looked at from one side, the wall enclosed a barren sixty-acre field called the Port of Anarres. On the field there were a couple of large gantry cranes, a rocket pad, three warehouses, a truck garage, and a dormitory. The dormitory looked durable, grimy, and mournful; it had no gardens, no children; plainly nobody lived there or was even meant to stay there long. It was in fact a quarantine. The wall shut in not only the landing field but also the ships that came down out of space, and the men that came on the ships, and the worlds they came from, and the rest of the universe. It enclosed the universe, leaving Anarres outside, free.

Looked at from the other side, the wall enclosed Anarres: the whole planet was inside it, a great prison camp, cut off from other worlds and other men,

in quarantine.

A number of people were coming along the road towards the landing field, or standing around where the road cut through the wall.

People often came out from the nearby city of Abbenay in hopes of seeing a spaceship, or simply to see the wall. After all, it was the only boundary wall on their world. Nowhere else could they see a sign that said No Trespassing. Adolescents, particularly, were drawn to it. They came up to the wall; they sat on it. There might be a gang to watch, offloading crates from track trucks at the warehouses. There might even be a freighter on the pad. Freighters came down only eight times a year, unannounced except to syndics actually working at the Port, so when the spectators were lucky enough to see one they were excited, at first. But there they sat, and there it sat, a squat black tower in a mess of movable cranes, away off across the field. And then a woman came over from one of the warehouse crews and said, "We're shutting down for today, brothers." She was wearing the Defense armband, a sight almost as rare as a spaceship. That was a bit of a thrill. But though her tone was mild, it was final. She was the foreman of this gang, and if provoked would be backed up by her syndics. And anyhow there wasn't anything to see. The aliens, the off-worlders, stayed hiding in their ship. No show.

It was a dull show for the Defense crew, too. Sometimes the foreman wished that somebody would just try to cross the wall, an alien crewman jumping ship, or a kid from Abbenay trying to sneak in for a closer look at the freighter. But it never happened. Nothing ever happened. When something did happen she wasn't ready for it

The captain of the freighter *Mindful* said to her, "Is that mob after my ship?"

The foreman looked and saw that in fact there was a real crowd around the gate, a hundred or more people. They were standing around, just standing, the way people had stood at produce-train stations during the Famine. It gave the foreman a scare.

“No. They, ah, protest,” she said in her slow and limited Iotic. “Protest the, ah, you know. Passenger?”

“You mean they’re after this bastard we’re supposed to take? Are they going to try to stop him, or us?”

The word “bastard,” untranslatable in the foreman’s language, meant nothing to her except some kind of foreign term for her people, but she had never liked the sound of it, or the captain’s tone, or the captain. “Can you look after you?” she asked briefly.

“Hell, yes. You just get the rest of this cargo unloaded, quick. And get this passenger bastard on board. No mob of Oddies is about to give *us* any trouble.” He patted the thing he wore on his belt, a metal object like a deformed penis, and looked patronizingly at the unarmed woman.

She gave the phallic object, which she knew was a weapon, a cold glance. “Ship will be loaded by fourteen hours,” she said. “Keep crew on board safe. Liftoff at fourteen hours forty. If you need help, leave message on tape at Ground Control.” She strode off before the captain could one-up her. Anger made her more forceful with her crew and the crowd. “Clear the road there!” she ordered as she neared the wall. “Trucks are coming through, somebody’s going to get hurt. Clear aside!”

The men and women in the crowd argued with her and with one another. They kept crossing the road, and some came inside the wall. Yet they did more or less clear the way. If the foreman had no experience in bossing a mob, they had no experience in being one. Members of a community, not elements of a collectivity, they were not moved by mass feeling; there were as many emotions there as there were people. And they did not expect commands to be arbitrary, so they had no practice in disobeying them., Their inexperience saved the passenger’s life.

Some of them had come there to kill a traitor. Others had come to prevent him from leaving, or to yell insults at him, or just to look at him; and all these others obstructed the sheer brief path of the assassins. None of them had firearms, though a couple had knives. Assault to them meant bodily assault; they wanted to take the traitor into their own hands. They expected

him to come guarded, in a vehicle. While they were trying to inspect a goods truck and arguing with its outraged driver, the man they wanted came walking up the road, alone. When they recognized him he was already halfway across the field, with five Defense syndics following him. Those who had wanted to kill him resorted to pursuit, too late, and to rock throwing, not quite too late. They barely winged the man they wanted, just as he got to the ship, but a two-pound flint caught one of the Defense crew on the side of the head and killed him on the spot.

The hatches of the ship closed. The Defense crew turned back, carrying their dead companion; they made no effort to stop the leaders of the crowd who came racing towards the ship, though the foreman, white with shock and rage, cursed them to hell as they ran past, and they swerved to avoid her. Once at the ship, the vanguard of the crowd scattered and stood irresolute. The silence of the ship, the abrupt movements of the huge skeletal gantries, the strange burned look of the ground, the absence of anything in human scale, disoriented them. A blast of steam or gas from something connected with the ship made some of them start; they looked up uneasily at the rockets, vast black tunnels overhead. A siren whooped in warning, far across the field. First one person and then another started back towards the gate. Nobody stopped them. Within ten minutes the field was clear, the crowd scattered out along the road to Abbenay. Nothing appeared to have happened, after all.

Inside the *Mindful* a great deal was happening. Since Ground Control had pushed launch time up, all routines had to be rushed through in double time. The captain had ordered that the passenger be strapped down and locked in, in the crew lounge, along with the doctor, to get them out from underfoot. There was a screen in there, they could watch the liftoff if they liked.

The passenger watched. He saw the field, and the wall around the field, and far outside the wall the distant slopes of the Ne Theras, speckled with scrub holum and sparse, silvery moonthorn.

All this suddenly rushed dazzling down the screen. The passenger felt his head pressed back against the padded rest. It was like a dentist's examination, the head pressed back, the jaw forced open. He could not get his breath, he felt sick, he felt his bowels loosen with fear. His whole body

cried out to the enormous forces that had taken hold of him, *Not now, not yet, wait!*

His eyes saved him. What they insisted on seeing and reporting to him took him out of the autism of terror. For on the screen now was a strange sight, a great pallid plain of stone. It was the desert seen from the mountains above Grand Valley. How had he got back to Grand Valley? He tried to tell himself that he was in an airship. No, in a spaceship. The edge of the plain flashed with the brightness of light on water, light across a distant sea. There was no water in those deserts. What was he seeing, then? The stone plain was no longer plane but hollow, like a huge bowl full of sunlight. As he watched in wonder it grew shallower, spilling out its light. All at once a line broke across it, abstract, geometric, the perfect section of a circle. Beyond that arc was blackness. This blackness reversed the whole picture, made it negative. The real, the stone part of it was no longer concave and full of light but convex, reflecting, rejecting light. It was not a plain or a bowl but a sphere, a ball of white stone falling down in blackness, falling away. It was his world.

“I don’t understand,” he said aloud.

Someone answered him. For a while he failed to comprehend that the person standing by his chair was speaking to him, answering him, for he no longer understood what an answer is. He was clearly aware of only one thing, his own total isolation. The world had fallen out from under him, and he was left alone.

He had always feared that this would happen, more than he had ever feared death. To die is to lose the self and rejoin the rest. He had kept himself, and lost the rest.

He was able at last to look up at the man standing beside him. It was a stranger, of course. From now on there would be only strangers. He was speaking in a foreign language: Iotic. The words made sense. All the little things made sense; only the whole thing did not. The man was saying something about the straps that held him into the chair. He fumbled at them. The chair swung upright, and he nearly fell out of it, being giddy and off balance. The man kept asking if someone had been hurt. Who was he

talking about? “Is he sure he didn’t get hurt?” The polite form of direct address in Iotic was in the third person. The man meant him, himself. He did not know why he should have been hurt; the man kept saying something about throwing rocks. But the rock will never hit, he thought. He looked back at the screen for the rock, the white stone falling down in darkness, but the screen had gone blank.

“I am well,” he said at last, at random.

It did not appease the man. “Please come with me. I’m a doctor.”

“I am well.”

“Please come with me, Dr. Shevek!”

“You are a doctor,” Shevek said after a pause. “I am not. I am called Shevek.”

The doctor, a short, fair, bald man, grimaced with anxiety. “You should be in your cabin, sir—danger of infection—you weren’t to be in contact with anybody but me, I’ve been through two weeks of disinfection for nothing, God damn that captain! Please come with me, sir. I’ll be held responsible —”

Shevek perceived that the little man was upset. He felt no compunction, no sympathy; but even where he was, in absolute solitude, the one law held, the one law he had ever acknowledged. “All right,” he said, and stood up.

He still felt dizzy, and his right shoulder hurt. He knew the ship must be moving, but there was no sense of motion; there was only a silence, an awful, utter silence, just outside the walls. The doctor led him through silent metal corridors to a room.

It was a very small room, with seamed, blank walls. It repelled Shevek, reminding him of a place he did not want to remember. He stopped in the doorway. But the doctor urged and pleaded, and he went on in.