

ORYX + CRAKE

On the white beach, ground-up coral and broken bones, a group of the children are walking. They must have been swimming, they're still wet and glistening. They should be more careful: who knows what may infest the lagoon? But they're unwary; unlike Snowman, who won't dip a toe in there even at night, when the sun can't get at him. Revision: especially at night.

He watches them with envy, or is it nostalgia? It can't be that: he never swam in the sea as a child, never ran around on a beach without any clothes on. The children scan the terrain, stoop, pick up flotsam; then they deliberate among themselves, keeping some items, discarding others; their treasures go into a torn sack. Sooner or later - he can count on it - they'll seek him out where he sits wrapped in his decaying sheet, hugging his shins and sucking on his mango, in under the shade of the trees because of the punishing sun. For the children - thick-skinned, resistant to ultraviolet - he's a creature of dimness, of the dusk.

Here they come now. "Snowman, oh Snowman," they chant in their singsong way. They never stand too close to him. Is that from respect, as he'd like to think, or because he stinks?

(He does stink, he knows that well enough. He's rank, he's gamy, he reeks like a walrus - oily, salty, fishy - not that he's ever smelled such a beast. But he's seen pictures.)

Opening up their sack, the children chorus, "Oh Snowman, what have we found?" They lift out the objects, hold them up as if offering them for sale: a hubcap, a piano key, a chunk of pale-green pop bottle smoothed by the ocean. A plastic BlyssPluss container, empty; a ChickieNobs Bucket O'Nubbins, ditto. A computer mouse, or the busted remains of one, with a long wiry tail.

Snowman feels like weeping. What can he tell them? There's no way of explaining to them what these curious items are, or were. But surely they've guessed what he'll say, because it's always the same.

"These are things from before." He keeps his voice kindly but remote. A cross between pedagogue, soothsayer, and benevolent uncle - that should be his tone.

"Will they hurt us?" Sometimes they find tins of motor oil, caustic solvents, plastic bottles of bleach. Booby traps from the past. He's considered to be an expert on potential accidents: scalding liquids, sickening fumes, poison dust. Pain of odd kinds.

"These, no," he says. "These are safe." At this they lose interest, let the sack dangle. But they don't go away: they stand, they stare. Their beachcombing is an excuse. Mostly they want to look at him, because he's so unlike them. Every so often they ask him to take off his sunglasses and put them on again: they want to see whether he has two eyes really, or three.

"Snowman, oh Snowman," they're singing, less to him than to one another. To them his name is just two syllables. They don't know what a snowman is, they've never seen snow.