The Threads of Time
C.J. Cherryh

It was possible that the Gates were killing the qhal. There were everywhere, on every word, had been a fact of live for five thousand years, and linked the whole net of qhalur civilization into one present-tense coherency.

They had not, to be sure, invented the Gates. Chance gave them that gift...on a dead world of their own sun. One Gate stood—made by unknown hands.

And the qhal made others, imitating what they found. The Gates were instantaneous transfer, not alone from place to place, but, because of the motion of worlds and suns and the traveling galaxies—involving time.

There was an end of time. Ah, qhal could venture anything. If one supposed, if one believed, if one were very sure, one could step through a Gate to a Gate that would/might exist on some other distant world.

And if one were wrong?

If it did not exist?

If it never had?

Time warped in the Gate-passage. One could step across light—years, unaged, so it was possible to outrace light and time. Did one not want to die, bound to a single lifespan? Go forward. See the future. Visit the world/worlds to come.


There was an End of Time.

It was the place where qhal gathered, who had been farthest and lost their courage for traveling on. It was the point beyond which no one had courage, where descendants shared the world with living ancestors in greater and greater numbers, the jaded, the restless, who reached this age and felt their will erode away.

It was the place where hope ended. Oh, a few went farther, and the age saw them—no more. They were gone. They did not return.

They went beyond, whispered those who had lost their courage. They went out a Gate and found nothing there.

They died.

Or was it death—to travel without end? And what was death? And was the universe finite at all?

Some went, and vanished, and the age knew nothing more of them.

Those who were left were in agony—of desire to go; of fear to go farther.
Of changes.

This age—did change. It rippled with possibilities. Memories deceived. One remembered, or remembered that one had remembered, and the fact grew strange and dim, contradicting what obviously was. People remembered things that never had been true.

And one must never go back to see. Backtiming—had direst possibilities. It made a paradox.

But some tried, seeking a time as close to their original exit point as possible. Some came too close, and involved themselves in time—loops, a particularly distressing kind of accident and unfortunate equally for those involved as bystanders.

Among qhal, between the finding of the first Gate and the End of Time, a new kind of specialist evolved: time menders, who in most extreme cases of disturbance policed the Gates and carefully researched afflicted areas. They alone were licensed to violate the back—time barrier, passing back and forth under strict non—involvement regulations, exchanging intelligence only with each other, to minutely adjust reality.

Evolved.

Agents recruited other agents at need— but at whose instance? There might be some who knew.

It might have come from the far end of time—in that last (or was it last?) age beyond which nothing seemed certain, when the years since the First Gate were more than five thousand, and the Now in which all Hates existed was—very distant. Or it might have come from those who had found the Gate, overseeing their invention. Someone knew, somewhen, somewhere along the course of the stars toward the end of time.

But no one said.

It was hazardous business, this time-mending, in all senses. Precisely what was done was something virtually unknowable after it was done, for alterations in the past produced (one believed) changes in future reality. Whole time-fields, whose events could be wiped and redone, with effects which widened the farther down the timeline they proceeded. Detection of time-tampering was almost impossible.

A stranger wanted something to eat, a long time ago. He shot himself his dinner.

A small creature was not where it had been, when it had been.

A predator missed a meal and took another…likewise small.

A child lost a pet.

And found another.

And a friend she would not have had. She was happier for it.

She met many people she had never/would never meet

A man in a different age had breakfast in a house on a hill.
Agent Harrh had acquired a sense about disruptions, a kind of extrasensory queasiness about a just—completed timewarp. He was not alone in this. But the time-menders) Harrh knew three others of his own age) never reported such experiences outside their own special group. Such reports would have been meaningless to his own time, involving a past which (as a result of the warp) was neither real nor valid nor perceptible to those in Time Present. Some time-menders would reach the verge of insanity because of this. This was a future fact. Harrh knew this.

He had been there.

And he refused to go again to Now, that Now to which time had advanced since the discovery of the Gate—let alone to the End of Time, which was the farthest that anyone imagined. He was one of a few, a very few, licensed to do so, but he refused.

He lived scattered lives in ages to come, and remembered the future with increasing melancholy.

He had visited the End of Time, and left it in the most profound despair. He had seen what was there, and when he had contemplated going beyond, that most natural step out the Gate which stood and beckoned—

He fled. He had never run from anything but that. It remained, a recollection of shame at his fear.

A sense of a limit which he had never had before.

And this in itself was terrible, to a man who had thought time infinite and himself immortal.

In his own present of 1003 since the First Gate, Harrh had breakfast, a quiet meal. The children were off to the beach. His wide shared tea with him and thought it would be a fine morning.

“Yes,” he said. “Shall we take the boat out? We can fish a little, take the sun.”

“Marvelous,” she said. Her gray eyes shone. He loved her—for herself, for her patience. He caught her hand on the crystal table, held slender fingers, not speaking his thoughts, which were far too somber for the morning.

They spent their mornings and their days together. He came back to her, time after shifting time. He might be gone a month; and home a week; and gone two months next time. He never dared cut it too close. They lost a great deal of each other’s lives, and so much—so much he could not share with her.

“The island,” he said. “Mhreihrrinn, I’d like to see it again.”

“I’ll pack,” she said.

And went away.

He came back to her never aged; and she bore their two sons; and reared them; and managed the accounts: and explained his absences to relatives and the world. He travels, she would say, with that right amount of secrecy that protected secrets.
And even to her he could never confide what he knew.

“I trust you,” she would say— knowing what he was, but never what he did.

He let her go. She went off to the hall and out the door— He imagined happy faces, holiday, the boys making haste to run the boat out and put on the bright colored sail. She would keep them busy carrying this and that, fetching food and clothes— things happened in the shortest order when Mhirehrin set her hand to them.

He wanted that, wanted the familiar, the orderly, the homely. He was, if he let his mind dwell on things— afraid. He had the notion never to leave again.

He had been to the Now most recently— 5045, and his flesh crawled at the memory. There was recklessness there. There was disquiet. The Now had traveled two decades and more since he had first begun, and he felt it more and more. The whole decade of the 5040’s had a queasiness about it, ripples of instability as if the whole fabric of the Now were shifting like a kaleidoscope. And it headed for the End of Time. It had become more and more like that age, confirming it by its very collapse.

People had illusions in the Now. They perceived what had not been true.

And yet it was when he came home.

It had grown to be so— while he was gone.

A university stood in Morurir in Morurir, which he did not remember.

A hedge of trees grew where a building had been in Morurir.

A man was in the Council who had died.

He would not go back to Now. He had resolved that this morning.

He had children, begotten before his first time-traveling. He had so very much to keep him— this place, this home, this stability— He was very well to do. He had invested well— his own small tampering. He had no lack, no need. He was mad to go on and on. He was done.

But a light distracted him, an opal shimmering beyond his breakfast nook, arrival in that receptor which his fine home afforded, linked to the master gate at Pyvrrhn.

A young man materialized there, opal and light and the solidity, a distraught young man.

“Harrh,” the youth said, disregarding the decencies of meeting, and strode forward unasked.

“Harrh, is everything all right here?”

Harrh arose from the crystal table even before the shimmer died, beset by the old queasiness of thing out of joint. This was Alhir from 390 Since the Gate, an experienced man in the force; he had used a Master Key to come here— had such access, being what he was.
“Alhir,” Harrh said, perplexed. “What’s wrong?”

“You don’t know.” Alhir came as far as the door.

“A cup of tea?” Harrh said. Alhir had been here before. They were friends. There were oases along the course of suns, friendly years, places where houses served as rest-stops. In this too Mhreihrinn was patient. “I’ve got to tell you— No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. I’m through. I’ve made up my mind. You can carry that where you’re going. — But if you want the breakfast—”

“There’s been an accident.”

“I don’t want to hear.”

“He go past us.”

“I don’t want to know.” He walked over to the cupboard, took another cup. “Mhreihrinn’s with the boys down at the beach. You just caught us.” He set the cup down and poured the tea, where Mhreihrinn had sat. “Won’t you? You’re always welcome here. Mhreihrinn has no idea what you are. My young friend, she calls you. She doesn’t know. Or she suspects. She’d never say. — Sit down.”

Alhir had strayed aside, where a display case sat along the wall, a lighted case of mementoes of treasures, of crystal. “Harrh, there was a potshed here.”

“No,” Harrh said, less and less comfortable. “Just the glasses. I’m quite sure.”

“Harrh, it was very old.”

“No,” he said. “—I promised Mhreihrinn and the boys— I mean it. I’m through. I don’t want to know.”

“It came from Silen. From the digs at the First Gate, Harrh. It was a very valuable piece. You valued it very highly. — You don’t remember.”

“No,” Harrh said, feeling fear thick about him, like a change in atmosphere. “I don’t know of such a piece. I never had such a thing. Check your memory, Alhir.”

“It was from the ruins by the First Gate, don’t you understand?”

And then Alhir did not exist.

Harrh blinked, remembered pouring a cup of tea. But he was sitting in the chair, his breakfast before him.

He poured the tea and drank.

He was sitting on rock, amid the grasses blowing gently in the wind, on a cliff top by the sea.
He was standing there. “Mhreihrrinn,” he said, in the first chill touch of fear.

But that memory faded. He had never had a wide, nor children. He forgot the house as well.

Trees grew and faded.

Rocks moved at random.

The time-menders were in most instances the only ones who survived even a little while.

Wrenched loose from time and with lives rooted in many parts of it, they felt it first and lived it longest, and not a few were trapped in back time and did not die, but survived the horror of it and begot children who further confounded the time-line.

Time, stretched thin in possibilities, adjusted itself.

He was Harrh.

But he was many possibilities and many names.

In time none of them mattered.

He was many names; he lived. He had many bodies; and the souls stained his own.

In the end he remembered nothing at all, except the drive to live.

And the dreams.

And none of the dreams were true.