ORBIT 15

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They Say

One day when Backster happened to cut his finger and dabbed it with iodine, the plant that was being monitored on the polygraph immediately reacted, apparently to the death of some cells in Backster's finger. Though it might have been reacting to his emotional state at the sight of his own blood, or to the stinging of the iodine, Backster soon found a recognizable pattern in the graph whenever a plant was witnessing the death of some living tissue.

Could the plant, Backster wondered, be sensitive on a cellular level all the way down to the death of individual cells in its environment?

On another occasion the typical graph appeared as Backster was preparing to eat a cup of yogurt. This puzzled him until he realized there was a chemical preservative in the jam he was mixing into the yogurt that was terminating some of the live yogurt bacilli. Another inexplicable pattern on the chart was finally explained when it was realized the plants were reacting to hot water being poured down the drain, which was killing bacteria in the sink.

—*The Secret Life of Plants,*
by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird (Harper & Row, 1973)

"Aha!" says our novice. "You have to use verbs with thee and thou." So he does. But he doesn't know how. There are very few Americans now alive who know how to use a verb in the second

person singular. The general assumption is that you add *-est* and you're there. I remember Debbie Reynolds telling Eddie Fisher —do you remember Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher?— "Whithersoever thou goest there also I goest." Fake feeling: fake grammar.

Then our novice tries to use the subjunctive. All the was's turn into were's, and leap out at the reader snarling. And the Quakers have got him all fouled up about which really is the nominative form of Thou. Is it Thee, or isn't it? And then there's the She-to-Whom Trap. "I shall give it to she to whom my love is given!" — "Him whom this sword smites shall surely die!" — Give it to she? Him shall die? It sounds like Tonto talking to the Lone Ranger. This is distancing with a vengeance. But we aren't through yet, no, we haven't had the fancy words. Eldritch. Tenebrous. Smaragds and chalcedony. Mayhap. It can't be maybe, it can't be perhaps; it has to be mayhap, unless it's perchance. And then comes the final test, the infallible touchstone of the seventh-rate: Ichor. You know ichor. It oozes out of severed tentacles, and beslimes tesselated pavements, and bespatters bejewelled courtiers, and bores the bejesus out of everybody.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, discussing
the perils of fantasy, in the essay
"From Elfland to Poughkeepsie"
(Pendragon Press,
Portland, Oregon, 1973)

Elsewhere I have suggested the *cul-de-sac* resulting from the rise of literary realism and naturalism. In literary study the theories behind them reached a kind of climax in Vernon L. Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927). . . .

Almost at once reaction set in. Drawing upon earlier aesthetic critics, such as James in fiction and the French Symbolists in poetry, many critics insisted that one should give all his attention to the work itself, not to "outside" or "non-literary" matters.

(Do you recall that in *More Issues at Hand,* even as he wondered

why sf was no longer a part of the mainstream, as it had been at the time of Wells, James Blish found "very little practical use for the historical critic—the man who detects trends and influences, and places individual works in the settings of their times—except to the reader" and called for "the technical critic [whose] work usually takes the form of *explication du texte*, or what used to be called The New Criticism, twenty years ago." At least in this passage, Blish has taken sides in this basic controversy.) The extreme advocates of a purely aesthetic criticism insisted that their students (many of them now teachers) examine a book *in vacuo*.

Apply this to science fiction. It makes no difference whether Stanton Coblentz, Otis Adelbert Kline, Gene Wolfe, or Harry Harrison wrote the story. It makes no difference whether Hugo Gernsback published it in *Wonder Stories* or Damon Knight accepted it for the *Orbit* series. It makes no difference whether it was written in the 1890's when the vision of a technological utopia was bright or in the 1960's when many authors, like John Brunner and Brian Aldiss, had perhaps become somewhat disillusioned by the failure of these earlier dreams.

None of these matters, say the most ardent aesthetic critics, really contribute to our understanding of the story. And one never, never inquires into the intention of the author, for even he himself does not know what he intended.

—Thomas D. Clareson
(SFWA Forum, No. 31)

FLAMING DUCKS AND GIANT BREAD

Yes, in fact, it *has* been a long time since
the year began in April.

R. A. Lafferty

1

This is the year of clod and clown.
This is the year when the sky falls down.

A huge bloody glob fell in front of Valery Mok with a smash and a splash. It was no small thing. It was at least a thousand pounds of flesh: raw, red, bloody flesh.

"And human," Valery said. "One can always tell human flesh." She tasted a bit of the blood on her finger. "Type AB," she said. (Yet there were those who never believed that Valery could identify blood groups by taste.) "All right," Valery said then, "who's the joker?"

There was no sound or vapor trail overhead. There was no high building near enough to be the source of the big bloody glob, not if it had fallen normally. And there was no near person who was powerful enough to have hurled such a thing. There

were people of a sort there, that's true. These people were calling "Happy New Year!" to each other, but they weren't people capable of heaving thousand-pound hunks of flesh about.

It was early morning of the first day of April. And the year was one that was coincident in several numerations.

"It's been many a time since the year began in April," Valery told the town. "April, the opening, the beginning. But the beginning was tampered with long ago. How could these people know that this was really New Year's? Most of them weren't even born in those old centuries.

"Do any of you know of any giant who has disappeared or been slaughtered?" she asked in a louder voice.

"Not us," the people said. "We'd slaughter no giants ever. We like them."

The people formed a mad-eyed crowd of mixed types. They seemed under the influence of something, probably the chorea, for they danced along instead of walking. They were good people. One of them was dressed as St. Vitus, and several of them were holy.

"If no giants, then what *is* new, kids?" Valery asked them.

"There's a lady at the lying-in shop who has just given birth to thirteen children," one of the mad-eyed young women said, "and she's not near finished with it. They say that it looks as though she could go on all day without stopping. They're not very big children yet."

"That's nice," Valery said.

"The oldest ones of the children are already walking and talking," another of the young women said.

"That seems very early," Valery mumbled. "Even after a full day it would seem a little early." Valery didn't know much about children.

She left the dancing people. She left the bloody hunk of flesh, though she was still puzzled by it. She continued on her way toward the Institute for Impure Science. She was a member of the Institute, and there was an early morning meeting called by the director, Gregory Smirnov.

Valery's unoutstanding husband Charles Cogsworth was likewise approaching the Institute, but on a street parallel to that taken by Valery. Charles would not walk with his wife Valery in the mornings. There were always early morning kids abroad, and kids are often kidders.

"Hey, mister, walk your dog for you!" they'd offer. Well, Valery *was* just unkempt enough in the mornings to be referred to as a dog. Such offers amused Valery, but they embarrassed Charles, so they always walked separately. This morning there was a variant, however.

"Hey, mister, walk your cow?" one of the morning kids offered.

"Holy cow!" another kid whistled with amazement.

"Clank, clank," went a sound somewhere behind Charles.

"Now that is unfair," Charles protested. "My wife has not put on that much weight. Besides, she isn't even walking on this street."

"I wasn't talking about your wife," the kid said. "I was talking about the cow."

"Clank, clank," went the cowbell. "Can you tell me the way to the Cow Palace?" the cow asked, or else she didn't: this point remains in dispute. She was a big black-and-white cow, a Holstein or Dutch Belted or some such, and she had been following Charles.

"Veer off to the left," Charles said in common politeness, "till you come to a street called Drovers' Road. Follow Drovers' Road to the right till you come to the Cow Palace. It's about a mile and a half."

"Clank, clank," went the cowbell as the cow took the side street to the left. Cogsworth was not absolutely certain that the cow had spoken to him in words, but he had understood her meaning, and she had understood his. She must have been a simple-minded creature, in any case. The Cow Palace was a slaughterhouse, and no good could come to her there.

Glasser also was going to the Institute. He had to go several blocks out of his way. There was a steamship in the middle of

Fourteenth Street; it had the whole thoroughfare blocked. And there was not near enough water to float it, though it had rained a bit during the night.

And Aloysius Shiplap was going to the Institute for Impure Science. He was probably the most impure of all the scientists who belonged to the Institute. Aloysius looked back over his shoulder as he walked. "I wonder what's keeping that fellow?" he asked. He went another two blocks. "He's late," Aloysius declared, "but there's nothing I can do about it."

Aloysius was almost to the front door of the ramshackle Institute when a flaming duck plunged out of the smoking sky and smashed itself dead on the stones at his feet.

"He was more than a minute late," Aloysius said.

And then they were met in formal meeting and were in the middle of words. Gregory Smirnov, the director of the Institute, was outlining a study, or a notion, or a subject to be investigated. It really didn't seem important enough for the calling of an early morning meeting, but most of their studies at the Institute had had such very small and notional beginnings.

"Clock-keeping is a murderous business," Director Smirnov was saying. "However it is arranged and corrected, the annalist will find that he has burned some of his years behind him."

"And the annalist's analyst may find that his ears are burning, as well as his years," Valery gibed as she shuffled her cards. "Really, do you believe there is as much insanity among any tradesmen as historians?" Valery and Aloysius Shiplap and two of Epikt's extensions were playing Pape Jaune, the old French card game (the game was named Scrat in fourteenth-century Scotland).

Those extensions of Epikt: one of them looked like Johnny Greeneyes the cosmic gambler to a pip; the other was got up as the Ancient Scribe with black skullcap, flowing white beard, and goose-quill pen behind one ear.

"Have you been losing some years, Gregory?" Aloysius asked

the director. "I believe that I have lost one or two myself along the way."

"Someone has been careless with the years," Gregory said. "We know that either four or six years have been lost out of the count since the beginning of what common people call the Common Era. Thus, the birth of Our Lord was probably in 4 B.C., possibly in 6 B.C. Yet it was not just a mistake in the calculations. These missing years were not missing at all. Astronomical backtracking tells us that they really happened, even if they were somehow left out of the numbering, even if the annalists have left them blank of any happenings, even if we are not sure just which years they were, not sure just where their location was in time or space."

"Can't Epikt discover these things?" Charles Cogsworth asked. "Why do we keep the scatterbrained machine if he can't find out things like that?"

"Or play cards either," Valery said. The Johnny Greeneyes extension of Epikt looked pained at this gibe. After all, he had created himself to look like a gambler and a card shark, and he was plugged into the most brainy and most rational calculator in the universe. But he wasn't doing very good at the Pape Jaune game: there are unbrainy and unrational elements to Pape Jaune; it is one of the few games at which humans can beat intelligent machines.

"Yes, I trust that Epikt will be able to find the answers," Gregory said, "with the help of all of us. Our project, though, will be research on one year that *is* included in the numbering, and yet we must record it rationally as the Year That Did Not Happen. We will call it the Year of the Double Bogie or the Year of the Double Fool; or the Year of the Double Joker. I also find the name the Year of the Yellow Joker pushing itself into my mind; likewise, the Year of the Yellow Dwarf. There is superstition involved in contemporary attempts to leave it out of the counting, and I believe that it was left out for several decades. For a parallel, you will recall that this great Institute Building does not have a thirteenth floor."

"No. It has a cellar, then two stories, then an attic," Valery said. "It doesn't have any thirteenth floor, and I am sure that superstition is the cause of its not having one."

"Let's consider a taller building then," Director Gregory said, "one that possibly has twenty floors, but with the thirteenth floor left out of the numbering. Now then, a curious thing happens, hypothetically of course, since this is a hypothetical building. It is discovered one day that it *does* have a thirteenth story after all, one not built by the builders, one that is only entered by accident, one that is a crazy jumble of insane things and happenings, one that isn't measurable in normal space. And yet this thirteenth level is discovered again and again. It is occupied by odd tenants who pay rent irregularly and in most odd specie. It is used. And finally this story is restored to the numbering by the building owners, even though it cannot always be found. Such is the year which we will now make the subject of our study."

Valery drew the Queen of Wands card. It winked at her. The face of that queen looked somehow familiar.

"Who does she look like?" Valery asked, showing the card to Aloysius Shiplap.

"She looks like you," Aloysius said. "I hadn't noticed that before." Knowing that Valery held the Queen of Wands, Aloysius played the Judgment card. This, of course, is not the same as the Final Judgment card (many persons do not play much Pape Jaune and so may not be clear on this subject). "Scrat," Aloysius called. He had won that merlon and so was ahead in the game.

"What is the number of the doubtful year, Gregory?" Glasser asked, "and what are some of the insane things and happenings that clutter the rooms of it?"

"It's hard to give a direct answer to anything about it," Gregory said. "It has to be slipped up on. Epikt has been receiving a few hints accidentally. There is great subliminal folk interest in this doubtful year and considerable folk memory of it. There are many references to it now that are appearing in selected copies of old books, references that were not to be found in them when the old books were first printed. Thus, there is preternatural

tampering. Well, we can do preternatural tampering ourselves. Here is a communication from a certain Polydore Smith:

" 'Epikt, are you aware that in the year 1313 something happened to the Devil? He was compelled, by St. Michael and St. George and for a joke, to wear motley or clown suit for one entire year. This was frustration and humiliation to him. He found the propagation of all conventional evil impossible to him when he was dressed in that thing. He did, however, effect one year full of the most outrageous pseudo-evil ever. That whole year is absolutely incredible and is best forgotten: that is why I thought you might want to remember it and reconstruct it. The year was a lustrum year, not a calendar year. Well, down the hatch, kid! Oh, I forgot; you haven't any hatch.' "

"Odd letter," said Charles Cogsworth. "And just what is a lustrum year?"

"The year from one Tom Fool's Day to the next," Gregory said.

Aloysius had just drawn the Tom Fool card. This is not the same as the Fool card (many persons do not play enough Pape Jaune to know this). The Tom Fool was in motley, but he sure wasn't in it willingly. There was something world-deforming, world-splitting in the sulfurous fury of the Tom Fool in the year of his shame. He was a card almost too hot to handle. Yes, he was the Devil in bonds worse than chains, and he would force the incongruity of his position onto the world and rub the world's face in it. Aloysius had never noticed the intensity of the Tom Fool card before, had never noticed that Tom Fool was the Devil in an awkward predicament. (There is a regular Devil card in the Pape Jaune pack, but that shows a Devil who is rather pleased with himself.)

"Here's another one that Epikt received from an uncertified person," Gregory said. "It's signed Damn or Dumb, an odd name in either case. It was mailed from the West or Improbable Coast of Florida. (The best of belief today is that Florida never had a West Coast.)

" 'Epikt, this is from Guttmacher's *Pregnancy and Birth.* "In

1313 Lady Margaret, Countess of Hagenau, was laid in with three hundred and sixty-five children, one hundred and eighty-two females, all baptized Elizabeth by the bishop of Utrecht, one hundred eighty-two males, all baptized John, and one 'scrat' (hermaphrodite), who remained unnamed and unbaptized." I thought you might be able to do something with the above.' "

"What in blue hell would I do with three hundred and sixty-five children and me a bachelor?" the Johnny Greeneyes Epikt extension growled. This extension had just put down the Scrat card itself and he recognized it. "Unbaptized maybe," the extension said, "but it took a name to itself. It walked and talked the day it was born, and it reigned in Rome for one year."

"The use of the word 'scrat' points out loud to eighteenth-century Oxford," Glasser informed them. "It was something of a century of jokers in that place then, and many of their spoofs were intruded into serious books."

"Here's another one," Gregory said. "It also is from an uncertified person, a Gargo Repsky (why do all these names sound so Biercean?), and it reads:

" 'Epikt, if you have ever heard of me, you have heard of me as the Mad Professor. But to the point of information. In certain fourteenth-century paintings there is an intermediate layer that is unaccountable; it is a sort of reverse burlesque of the painting itself. But the fundamental layer of the painting and the surface layer are valid and rational, and they are identical. This tricky intermediate layer can only be picked up by middle infrared light of about one hundred and thirty thousand angstroms, the so-called fools' frequency. It really seems as if the old paint of the picture had been split and another picture accomplished between. These ghost or joker pictures are very salty burlesques, but they can be seen but once. After being brought out by the fools'-frequency light, they fade away forever, and the painting becomes a single-layer thing. Fortunately I have been able to get good photographs of a number of these out-of-place paintings.

" 'And in certain statuary of the same fourteenth century, there may be seen smaller contrary forms within the solid true forms.

The marble sometimes becomes transparent to reveal these inner carvings or moldings. The objects move, they writhe, they seem alive, and they are horribly funny (I choose my words carefully here). Then the marble will opaque itself again and the writhing inner images will vanish.

" 'I have dated these inner images. They were not carved or cut. They were molded by hand in a somehow softened marble. They were molded by the hands of lepers, and the flaked-off flesh of the molders allows me to get a carbon date on them. All were done in the year 1313, the lustrum year, not the calendar year.' "

"Epikt has guys write to him who are nearly as far off as some of the guys who write to me," Valery said.

There had been for some time now a heavy thumping on the roof of the Institute Building and in the roads outside. It was a rainfall of flaming ducks. They were dangerous: the roof of the Institute building wasn't in very good shape anyhow.

"Here's another one," Director Gregory Smirnov was saying. "It's to Epikt and it's from a certain Father Gassalasca Jape. It goes:

" 'Epikt, do you know that in the year 1313 there was a complete turnaround in the empire city of the world, Roma in Italia? This turnaround was for one year. Even the name of the city was turned around and was spelled Amor, or love, for that year. It was a fishy kind of love, though, and with a Babylonian sort of fishiness. The falsified view of the city was true for that one year, and it was the Whore of Babylon who sat on the seven hills. This was the mystery woman whose roots go down to Hell, and part of the mystery about her was that she was not really a woman. But she did rule in Roma; she did set up a court of love, of false love, in that city that was the city of the world. Epikt, I wonder if you could bring your great mechanical and animal and ghostly talents to bear on this, to draw back the veil from the mystery? The effect of it still lingers in the world as a miasma. It must be dispelled.' "

"We do get some odd correspondence," said the Epikt extension that was got up as the Ancient Scribe. "Are you running them through our main brain, Gregory?" This Epikt extension

had just drawn the Whore of Babylon card and was studying it with some wonder. No, she was not quite a woman, not as she on the Queen of Cups card was, not as she on La Grande Mère card was.

"Oh yes, we're running them through your main brain, Epikt," Director Gregory said.

(For those who came in late, Epikt, or Epiktistes, was a Ktistec machine, the most marvelous one in the world, the only one in the world so far. The Institute for Impure Science was mainly built around the stupendous mechanical brain of Epikt, the many thousands of cubic meters of it. For convenience' sake, Epikt usually maintained a few mobile extensions of himself, being sessile in the main part of his apparatus. These mobiles might be in any form from the clownish human to the hangdog canine. They could talk and get about; they could carry on their functions; they were droll, and sometimes they seemed a little stupid. Well, which of us does not?)

"There is a warning that should be given here," Director Gregory Smirnov was saying. "We must recognize that this year which we are going to study is a recompensing year, a lefthanded year (a sinister year in the real sense of the word), a contorted year. It is my own belief that one cannot enter a contorted year, even vicariously and experimentally, without himself becoming contorted."

"With us, who can tell?" Valery asked. That was true. They all had that look about them as if their faces and bodies had, just for a moment, melted like wax and then set again. They of the Institute had always had a little or a lot of that look; this day they had it a lot.

"I win!" Valery cried triumphantly, and she played the Wheel of Fortune card resoundingly. The wheel on the picture card was actually turning, and this was more than optical illusion. When it came to rest, the pointer of the fortune wheel pointed to the name Valery (nobody had noticed before that the names of all of them were printed fine on that card), so Valery had won.

"I will have to discover the old rules and find out how this game

was really played," Aloysius Shiplap said with a touch of sourness. "The game seems to make up its own rules as it goes along."

"The old rules say that I am always supposed to win," Valery declared, "and that is the way it is really played." She overturned the card table, and it was like clattering thunder. It was a very heavy table, not really a card table at all. None of the rest of them except the gigantic Director Gregory would have been able to overturn that weighty thing. The Johnny Greeneyes extension of Epikt gathered up the valuable pack of Pape Jaune cards. Pape Jaune, the Yellow Joker or the Yellow Dwarf, but who was Pape Jaune really?

"It's too nice a day to be inside this stinking Institute," Valery announced. "Oh, I'm sorry, Epikt! That's almost the same as saying that it's too nice a day to be inside that big stinking brain of yours, and really I like your big stinking brain. But let's be outside for a while." And they burst out like a cloud of April flies. (Some of the rare April flies are people-sized; do not forget that.)

"I wonder if the record-setting lady in the lying-in shop has had her scrat yet?" Valery asked the world.

"I'll go see," said the Ancient Scribe extension of Epikt.

"Oh, springtime, springtime!" Valery cried, catching hold of both Aloysius Shiplap and her own unoutstanding husband Charles Cogsworth. "Oh, to be young and foolish in the springtime! I wish that it might last all the year."

"Of course it will," Aloysius said. "I thought you knew that."

And Gregory and Glasser walked on that unkempt ridge that rises above the Institute, and talked about various business while the flaming ducks still pelted down.

"What they are," said Gregory, "is pieces of the sky. They break off and fall and catch fire. Ultimately the sky is made up entirely of ducks, though scripture mistranslates them as quails. It is because of this composition that we often hear the term 'duck sky.' "

"I sure never heard such a term," Glasser said.

"But scripture does not mistranslate," the Johnny Greeneyes extension of Epikt said. "Quails they are, the quails of the flesh-

pots. Huge, it's true, but quails. We have the holy words for evidence: 'We loathe our manna, and we long for quails.' "

"That's Dryden. He's not scripture," Gregory admonished.

"He is to me," the Epikt extension said, "and I speak *ex cerebro*, from the brain itself." (But Epikt had, from the human viewpoint, odd literary tastes.)

"Everybody accepts the blasted burning birds," Glasser said querulously. "Nobody questions them at all today. But I never saw such a thing as this shower of flaming ducks in all my life. What can possibly cause such a phenomenon?"

"Ah, the fellows flew too close to the sun," Director Gregory explained it.

2

This is the year on the end of the rope.
This is the year when Joan was Pope.

" 'Clement V was pope from 1305 to 1314,' " Gregory read from a tape spewing out from a section of Epikt's brain, from the correlating section. " 'And he was pope in Avignon, not in Rome. There was no pope in Rome in those years.' "

"And John XXII did not become pope till the year 1316," came another tape from another section of Epikt's brain, from the explicatory section.

"He'd have been three years old then," Valery mumbled. "So he matured quite early, but not as early as some members of his family did."

"Project the whole disputed year of 1313, Epikt," Director Gregory ordered.

"Impossible," the machine groaned from its depths. "You don't know what you're asking."

"Project it in the context of only one city then, the town of Amor which had been and would be Roma," Director Gregory said.

"Oh, all right," the machine Epikt agreed glumly. "It will be

sketchy, though, and not from any fault of mine. There is something inherently sketchy about the persons and events themselves. Whether they were real or not, the things that happened didn't have much depth to them."

This is Epikt's account of the disputed year in the context of the city of Amor.

The year itself was subjectively much longer than one year. The subjective sun rose and set several thousands of times during that compensating year. Indeed, though it was all one unmomentous moment, it was half a dozen decades on its own, less real level. Yet it can be measured, from one All Fool's Day to the next, and it takes the place of only one objective year.

Of the ruler in Amor during the disputed year, there was less than met the eye. She was small; she was insignificant. She warred against significance and meaning.

Joan Hedge-Green was born on All Fool's Day (sometimes called New Year Day) of the year 1313. She was but one of an exceptionally large birthing. She was not baptized, although an attempt was made. The water boiled or vaporized away on her approach, and the salt turned to putrid flame: thereafter she was not touched by either salt or water in all her short life. Her brothers at the same birthing had all been baptized John, and she took for herself the equivalent name Joan. She had nothing whatever to do with her sisters of the birthing.

Though she was grammatically feminine, she was a perfect hermaphrodite, a jape, a scrat. She was sometimes called the Pape Jape or the dwarfish jape on account of her small stature. She had deformities, but their nature is not known. She walked and talked on the day of her birth, but in no other way was she remarkable.

She left her hometown on the afternoon of her birth. She left by diabolical conveyance or vehicle, the black-wing express over the randy roads of the low sky. By one account she went to Roma in Italy. By another, she went to the town of Amor, "between the Germanies and Spain." By a third account, the two towns were

the same. She went there, and she set up an antirule or an antireign.

But she did set up court there. She issued coin of the metal known as fool's gold. The sovereign coin was the *sannio*, and the system was tredecimal (to the base thirteen).

Joan's forecourt was known as the Fleshpots of Egypt. (The Egyptian was but one of the motifs of the court; there was also the Babylonian and the Phoenician and others.) She fed her folk on fowl flesh; this was the roasted flesh of giant quail (all of them capons) that fell flaming from the low sky. She fed them on false-fish from that part of her court called the Rivers of Babylon. She fed them on a cheese so rank that it stood by itself, and came on command. She fed them on holy cow; and on unborn calves and colts, on unborn lambs and kids, on unborn cubs and children, all of which were roasted in that part of her court called the Ovens of Moloch.

She gave her folk break-bone bread, and maid bread, and giant bread, and love loaf. She gave them wasp honey and hornet honey. She gave them blood pudding and offal ("Love each other and eat offal" was one of her high mottos) and bad wine. A visitor in Amor Town that year (there was no such town in any other year) reported that most of the courtiers did know the difference between good wine and bad wine, and that they preferred the bad. Joan gave her people sulfur for condiment, salt being forbidden to them. She gave them heifer milk.

And Joan provided her people with hemp and with hoppy-poppy, with gobbling mushrooms and with ragged dream-weeds, with all the unreality seeds and substances and oils, with the aromatic and reason-wrenching plant known as smoke-poke the anti-incense; and the anti-incense raised its smoke not to heaven but to the low sky. These things were dispensed in that part of Joan's court known as the Ships of Tarshish.

The visitor to Amor, the one just mentioned, had asked several of the courtiers, "Do any of you know of any giant nearby who has disappeared or been slaughtered?" "Yes, there was one," the courtiers told him. "Our Papess Joan had him blown up with the

new blowup powder from China. There may have been others, but now there will be no more giants. Pieces of them will smash down from the low sky whenever the weather is right. These are what we call giant bread."

So the courtiers had plenty to eat and drink and smoke and inject. They had more than enough, for they finished nothing at all. They were grinning, nervous, ecstatic, jerky courtiers, robust of ear, but somewhat deficient in all other parts.

The city of Amor was built lightly, loosely, insubstantially, unpatterned and unstructured. It had solved the cursed necessity of having buildings and such materialities, for its buildings were very short on material. They were false-front and false-middle erections. The buildings were built of cardboard.

("But they didn't have cardboard then," the avid annalist said. Had they not? Disputed years are not in sequence. They have what they have. But no, the annalist was correct. They didn't have cardboard in Amor.)

The buildings, the whole town, was built of bark and willow withies. They were tricky, and they were almost grand. It was an architecture almost without weight. White and gray clay was smeared on the bark, and behold! there was the appearance of regal marble. All were gilt with fool's gold in whorled design, and at the same time all were in motley. Yes, the buildings, the buildings were in clown-suit getup of all light colors, with their own rakish royalty about them, and their precociousness. There was no maturity about them: they did not desire maturity. And at the same time there was nothing of the childlike: they sure did not desire children. There was the taut interruption, the jerk back from the momentous. ("That no thing come to term!" was another of the high Amor mottos.)

And many of the buildings were no more than burlap cloth new out of China (so many things were new out of China, the feeble tea, the sleepy poppy, the tuneless music, the lack of giants) and tent poles. But these buildings showed their own solidity without weight (the sleepy poppy was partly responsible for their showing of solidity), and their own dazzle. In the presence of this dazzle,

burlap is almost sunshine-color, it is almost gold, almost yellow, almost rich brown; and it is made out of the holy hemp and the unholy jape-jute.

These near-weightless buildings were peculiar in their horned domes, in their toadstool towers, in their lacelike pillars. Burlap shapes much more easily than stone, though its strength is less. The buildings would have blown down in a good wind, but for the long, disputed year there was no wind at all, no hint of a storm, not even a breeze.

It's true that in one region there was a semblance of a breeze now and then, and little bells (like sheep bells or goat bells) seemed to tinkle in this breeze. But it was all masquerade. Close examination would have shown that each bell was shaken by a small worm to cause the tinkling. They were woolly worms, caterpillars really. And a very close examination would have revealed that each of these caterpillars had its head notched in an inhibiting incision: the thing would never come to term; it would never be more than a caterpillar.

And also there was something wrong with the tinkling of the small bells. Fine examination would have shown that each of them was cracked, as was their sound. In this region also there were trees with leaves too green, and meadow flowers with blooms too yellow and too red. There was sodded grass that was not true grass. There was a rank goatishness over everything, but it was not the whiff of honest goat. This false breeze and false greenery were in the region of the court that was called the Groves of Arcady.

St. Peter's looked distorted and deformed. But St. Peter's was not built yet? It may not have been, as you know it; but it was built of bark and burlap and lashed poles. It was a burlesque of what it later became. There is no law that a burlesque of a thing may not appear before the thing itself.

The afore-cited traveler to Amor in the disputed year has written that the tongue of the people was langue d'oc and that the ears of the people were asses' ears. Others have said that the ears more resembled goats' ears. The people could waggle their

strange ears, and many had painted them motley colors, one yellow and one red. But there was nothing artificial about the strangely mutated ears. They were well rooted, and they were robust, the only robust things about those folk. And they had to be. The noise there was loud. Even the great mutated ears often bled bright red blood from the overpowering sound. And the sense of balance which lives in the inner ear was often destroyed. This accounts for much of the eccentricity of the chorea or St. Vitus dancers. They were the wobblies. The shattered and shattering noises also deformed other wavicles: those of light (for they made all colors into a crooked dazzle, and they manufactured colors where there could not be colors); the olfactory wavicles, so that the cloying bloodiness of giant bread, the sky-scorching feather smell of flaming ducks or quail, the burning pine knots of the steamboats, the rotten-roses floweriness of the court were all blended into a tall symphony of smell; the radio wavicles that mutated till they brought programs from the distant past ("This is station ALEX, Alexandria, Egypt, bringing you the Year One Wonders") and from the distant future ("Station KVOO, Bristow, Oklahoma, bringing a program sponsored by Johnny Horany the Hamburger King"). But it was the sound wavicles that predominated, that had made the ears become the highlights of the heads.

There was amplification for the electrical guitars and other instruments. This amplification had been made possible by the insoluble genius of Sparky McCarky. That wandering man, the Unholy Fool of the Hebrides, had brought, in jugs, from his native Benbecula Island, a quantity of the spectacular lightning that nests in the crags there. He had brought this jugged lightning to Amor Town; he had installed plug-ins where it might be tapped, and so his lightning had been turned into amplified sound.

The music and the lyrics weren't much. One couldn't hear them for the sound. There was a sort of projection in midair of the musical scores and the words of the lyrics. Some say that they were projected as on a visual screen; others say that it was a

multi-media screen. Some of those poets weren't bad. Dante was there for part of the year. Others of the great ones were there for a while, but finally the bad poets drove out the good ones.

In one central part of Amor Town, the sound reached such a strength that it sustained itself thereafter. When hands were removed from the instruments, the instruments still dinned on. When singers left, their voices remained. There was no stopping them. And when, beyond this noisy centrality, in the other fun spots—(The Gory Ox, The Calamity Howl, The Whoop Coop, The Gayety Gate (where Gayety Unrestrained sang with her sinewy voice)—the sound died away during the rare sleeping hours, that sound could be "lighted" again at the great, self-sustaining noise center, and it could be carried on a vibrating string to any of those bistros, there to rekindle the dead sound.

The technology of Amor Town in the disputed year was anachronistic and atrocious. There were the steamboats which could not have been if that were a proper sequence year. But the steamboats were there and, especially in the mornings, were always blocking dry and rubbled streets. It is believed that they steamed out on the morning dew and were stranded when the dew dispersed. The steamboats, old sternwheelers or sidewheelers, had names like Hierophant's Show Boat, April Queen, Joanie's Show Boat (the show girls on that one were named Joanie, Janie, Jeanie, Junie, Johnny, and Ginny), The Big Casino, Fruity-Tootie's Show Boat, and Five Card Charley's River Rag-Tag. It seemed that these steamboats properly belonged to some other place and time (improperly, all places and times belonged to Amor Town in the disputed year).

And then there were the automobiles (if you will permit our coining an illegitimate word from one Greek and one Latin root). These were machines: they ran on wheels and were powered by smoke. They were also called the Clown Cars, and they ran around on the green grass of Love Plaza. They ran erratically, in circles and in loops. They exploded so as to shake the whole

town. They buckled in the middle and left droppings, sometimes a pile of clowns who untangled themselves and ran in pursuit of their vehicles, sometimes a pile of camel excrement steaming and fragrant, sometimes a roaring lion who soon burst into flames, showing himself to be only a paper lion. Sometimes the clown cars reared up on their hind wheels and honked terrifying horns.

But, besides the steamboats and the clown cars, there wasn't much real technology in Amor Town.

(Here a tambour makes drumming sounds.)

I love with every orifice,
I love each dampish channel red,
I love all flesh alive and dead,
I love the bottomless abyss.

—Joan Hedge-Green (Papess at Amor)

(Here the drumhead of the tambour splits.)

(Here a ram's horn sounds.)

Nor guessed the situation bit,
Nor found the Lord so dull a lover,
Nor used the love-as-catchword kit
A multitude of sins to cover.

—Archipelago

(Here the ram's horn cracks.)

(Here a percussion triangle rings "ting, ting.")

The eternal triangle.

—Anon., 1907

(Here the broken triangle sounds "tunk, tunk.")

(Here a postboy's horn blows three notes.)

Do not go about as a demagogue, encouraging triangles to break out of the prison of their three sides. If a triangle breaks out of its three sides, its life comes to a lamentable end.

—Chesterton

(Here the postboy's horn blows three more notes, but far away.)

Love was the theme of Amor Town, and the triangle was the symbol and shape of that contingent society; the triangle, and its solid form, the tetrahedron. The sound of it was triangular, the groupings were triangular, and its prismatic light was triangular. Joan Hedge-Green herself formed an immediate love triangle with her two lovers, the Clown-Devil and the Maid of Wands. ("Glory, love, and love some more for Babylonian Jane" as Rudyard said, but not quite.)

Every person in Amor Town was a ravening lover. ("So I move mountains and I love them not, then I am nothing," as Paul said, but not exactly.) Each lover had its own Ares and its own Aphrodite, and each was by turns Ares and Aphrodite to others. This was the triangle repeated over and over again in the love plane, the interlocking loving that is not accountable ever. ("Blessed be that love that shatters all its offspring on the stones," as the Psalmist said, but not precisely.) But the plane does not go up far enough, and it sure does not go down far enough.

But, in addition, each lover had its masked lover or Hermes. This additional masked lover placed each lover in three love planes instead of one. This worked to construct the love pyramid, or love in depth. It was a nesting, close-fitting form, and it multiplied endlessly. It was the most simple crystal possible, and it propagated itself forever. It filled, or would fill, or might fill all the worlds and all the universes. ("And, for your love of love, lead apes in hell," so Will the Bard said, or almost said.) ("I love the jupe, I love the jape, I love the Tartarusian ape," so Joan of Amor said.)

This was the inward-turning construct that had no limits, and it had very few needs beyond itself. There was food in the Fleshpots of Egypt district of the town; there was other food in the Rivers of Babylon district; and there was very strong food in the Ovens of Moloch purlieu.

There were all the turn-on and plug-in devices in the Ships of Tarshish neighborhood. There were all attractive falsities in that barrio named the Groves of Arcady. There was music, and when the music failed, there was noise that failed not forever. Municipal arrangements were excellent. Law had been dissolved in love. ("Love, and let the law go hang," as Austen said, or very nearly said.) The garbage collectors had been dismissed as being unneeded (if you love it, it isn't garbage). The police had been disbanded. The firemen had been dismissed (if it burns, it is love, and should not be quenched). There were no magistrates; there were no officials at all; there was no thought for the morrow. There was the year that could not end, for it was self-contained and inward-turned. There was love and love alone, and it went on and on and on.

("It's the longest year I ever did see!" Valery Mok, observing from another place and time, swore. "There has to be an end to it." Valery drew the Shining Man card. She was not doing badly, but she was disgusted.)

The thing wrong with perfection is not that it repeats itself, but that it stands still in its first instance and freezes time. The thing wrong with love is that the false will so often supersede the true. The thing wrong with that town was that it was introverted and backwards: there are those who will live in it forever, but there are also those who will break out of it. The thing wrong with that year was that it began to come apart before the first week of June.

("What, what, why are they climbing over the walls to get out of that town?" Charles Cogsworth asked in amazement. "Malcontents," Director Gregory Smirnov said. "There are always

some. Continue with it, Epikt." "Might I not go on automatic?" Epikt asked from the great department of him that was under their feet. "And I could leave a couple of my extensions to monitor the thing." Not those two extensions, though: the Johnny Greeneyes extension was quickly over the hill and far away. The Ancient Scribe extension became so inconspicuous that he was invisible.)

3

That was the year that lost its luck.
That was the year of the flaming duck.

And then there was a sort of explanation that Epikt dredged up from the depths of his data banks: "Satan, in his person of Lucifer, was the first of the Flaming Ducks, and he is the father of them to this day."

The author of that is unknown except to Epikt. But the flaming ducks continued to rain down on the Institute Building and on the ridge above and beyond. You got tired of those ducks, but these were poverty days with the Institute and its members. The members were eating a hard-times lunch of bloody giant bread and flamed duck.

"I hear there will be a new giant moving into the neighborhood," Gregory said.

"Oh, that's good," Valery beamed. "It made me feel pretty uneasy to be all out of giants."

"I just don't know what causes a lustrum year," Glasser said crankily.

"I believe they happen because people are ordinarily so good that provision must be made in some place apart for even the shadow of evil that is in them," Valery said happily. "So that toy evil must be vented in a toy year. That's all there is to it."

"I wonder when there will be another lustrum year?" Aloysius Shiplap asked, somewhat worried.

"Not right away, I don't believe," Director Gregory Smirnov assured them all. "None of the signs of it are present. And the people, while very good in these last few decades, are not quite good enough that it spills over, not so overpoweringly good as to require being counteracted by a toy evil in another time and place.

"Aw, feather dusters!" Gregory swore suddenly. "I'm getting mighty tired of eating flaming duck. And it doesn't help as much as it did to call it quail or swan."

"We must all be careful not to be too good, lest we precipitate the thing," Valery warned. "If only we could have salt with the damned duck! But the doctors all say that we should forego salt in favor of sulfur. Here, Greg, I'll make you a good hard-times sandwich, break-bone bread, holy cow, flamed—ah—grackle, blood pudding, offal—no, really, they say it's good for you—yellow sulfur, and that good new Moloch mustard. Here, eat it hot, Greg, eat it hot."

"Oh, all right," Director Gregory Smirnov said glumly.

The stranded riverboat was hooting mournfully over on Fourteenth Street. It would have to wait many hours yet before being able to float on the morning dew. And the dew was never near as drenching as it should have been. In one week, the steamboat had been able to move only two and one-half blocks on the morning dews: no more than eighty yards a day.

There were many people dancing the chorea in the streets. One of them was dressed as St. Vitus, and several of them were holy. And always there was the towering noise behind it all, a noise that had once been music.

There were a few discouraged-looking holy cows, inquiring of people (somehow or other) the way to the Cow Palace. There was a person who said that he was the son of the Pied Piper. He was piping the children into following him, and they were being drowned in the reservoir.

There was a newly appeared, sad-looking person in motley or clown suit. He had mean-looking mustaches; he had a little spike

beard; he had red-rimmed eyes. He was unkempt. He looked like the Devil.

The children of the large birthing of the week before (they who had walked and talked on the day of their birth) had now taken over most of the city offices. And there was one of them in particular—ah, well, never mind, there is one like that in every large birthing.

There had been further huge, bloody globs falling from the low sky. It was believed, however, that they were the last remnants of some old giant, that they were not from the new giant who had not indeed arrived yet.

"Scrat!" cried Valery as she played the Strange Lover card.

And still there were the flaming ducks, all of them capons, stenchy and outrageous, thudding, thudding, thudding to earth day and night. One does get tired of burnt duck.

PALE HANDS

Whom do you lead on Rapture's roadway, far,
Before you agonize them in farewell?

Doris Piserchia

2021, and what had we to show for it? Overpopulation, for one thing. What did people see in each other? I read pornography by the pile, thinking I might find the answer there, but I didn't. It cost me a great deal, that erotica, because it was forbidden. The only way to get it was from pushers who charged according to how expensively a buyer was dressed. I always wore my oldest dress whenever I went on the hunt for porno.

Everyone spent their first six years of life in the Conditioning Center in Illinois. I didn't remember what I learned there, and no matter how much I questioned my friends, they told me nothing about their memories or their personal lives. It made me feel ignorant.

I cleaned masturbation stalls for a living. There must have been millions of them. One side of Fifth Avenue was my territory, the other side belonged to Lydon. I didn't know his last name. He came after Pisby died. Pisby was a dirty old man who spent

too much time in the stalls. With that bad heart of his, he shouldn't have pumped his beef so much.

My best friend was Permilia. She worked in a jewelry store on the corner of Fifth, and she always used one of my stalls whenever she got the urge to do it. The thing that fascinated me about Permilia was her hands. I mean, why make a fetish of hands? I thought about it and finally decided she removed all her rings and bracelets before getting down to business. Crude way of putting it? No cruder than saying people used to bang their heads off until they got the world so crowded it was like a can of beans. Banging. Why did they call it that? Why did some people always smear mud on the beautiful things? Wasn't it beautiful to make love? But how did they determine if they were in love or merely in a state of randiness?

Oh, well, it didn't affect me personally. I wasn't interested in sex, and as for masturbation, the stalls were just places I cleaned. Once a week I painted the walls. Every day I scoured them with ammonia, dragged the stools out onto the sidewalk and hosed them down. That was my life.

I had a one-room pad just off Fifth, a comfortable place I called home. Stall maids earned fairly good pay, so I had some modern conveniences, though not as many as Permilia. Jewelry was a very popular commodity.

Poor Pisby. He had something wrong in his head. That was where his trouble lay. His body was a pawn of his mind, and he couldn't control that, so he died. Maybe he was sick both in body and mind. Why didn't he simply quit doing it, or why didn't he find a girl? It made no sense. After all, he was nearly fifty, and nobody that age had an intense sexual urge. Had they? I couldn't say, being young and inexperienced and dead as a doornail in the beef department.

Fifth Avenue wasn't exactly crawling with queers, but now and then one ambled by. They were particularly vulnerable to the stalls, so they ought to have stayed on the few streets where there were none. For instance, a queer walks by, takes a gander at a stall and breaks his neck getting inside. According to the erotica I

read, such people used to frequent park toilets, which may have been a good deal like the stalls in appearance. Anyway, I sympathized with the queers, as they were made randy as hell by their botched hormones.

Lydon. What did I think of him? He took over for Pisby, showed up one rainy day when the stink of the stalls was ruining the air. I described him to Permilia, and she laughed and said he was a virgin, like me. How could she tell? Because he didn't make a fetish of his hands. Later I recalled how she frowned and stiffened after she said that, exactly as if she had suddenly experienced a sharp pain. I asked her what she meant by the hand-fetish business, but she didn't answer, broke her neck getting away from me, and it was a week before I saw her again.

No one could live together; no roommates; no girls together, no men together, and, of course, a male and female were not permitted to share a pad. The population had to be kept down.

Permilia said Lydon must be dead in the beef department because males almost always took to the stalls in their early teens. Their bodies were too exposed to stimulation, and this made them vulnerable. Women were a step behind them. Permilia laughed as she added, "But it's a short step."

Lydon. The first time I laid eyes on him, I thought, "What a grubby little thing; but interesting."

He had a red face, and it wasn't until I got close to him that I realized the redness was acne. It wasn't bad, except at his jawline. It was unfortunate, because his face was sweetly formed. He had dark eyes and a small nose and mouth. His body was square, but too small. Well, not too small, at that. Looked at as a package of man, he wasn't unattractive.

We got off on the wrong foot right from the start. "This isn't fit work for a fellow," I said, and he took offense.

"It's what I like to do, and who says one job is for a man while another isn't?"

Plunging through the crowds, I went back to my own side of the street and figured to stay there. Tension I could do without. This man had a burr up his tail because he had a few pimples. How dumb could you get?

"You going to vote today?" he yelled at me the next morning. It was early and the sidewalks were empty.

"Nope."

Approaching the curb, he stood with his hands on his hips and scowled. "Why?"

"For what purpose should I do a dumb thing like that? You think votes make any difference? It's a con game, and I don't intend to add to the farce."

"What kind of government would we have if everyone felt that way?"

"Same kind we already got," I said.

That was all we had to say to each other that day. Toward evening, he washed up in the outdoor sink and walked away toward the voting booths. I had to laugh behind my hand. With his ass tucked in and his shoulders shoved up in the air, he looked like a stubborn little chicken. For sure, he knew I was watching him, and, for sure, his face was the color of raw mutton. One funny fellow. Except there was something sad about seeing him outlined against the dirty buildings. One leg forward, then the other leg, and his arms didn't swing too much, and he kept moving farther away from me, and for some reason I continued watching until long after he was out of sight. Lydon. I should find out his last name.

Permilia came by the next day. "What kind of men are you attracted to?" I said to her, and she gave me an odd look. "Of course, it's none of my business," I said. "I know people don't like personal questions. Only I never see you with your boyfriend. In fact, I never see any couples anywhere. Can't figure it out. Everybody is banging their head off, but I wonder where they're doing it."

"You're feeling smutty today," she said. "Could the gonads be stirring at last?"

"There are too many things I don't understand, is all. Used to be it didn't bother me, but now, well, what kind of world do we live in? I never been anywhere since Conditioning Center, other than in the orphanage. Been to fifth grade, like most people, and once in a while I take a bus to the Rally Field and listen to the

election baloney, but that's hardly any experience."

"You're asking the wrong person, love. I never been anywhere, either."

"Don't you ever get curious about what's out of sight?"

"Only when I get desperate," said Permilia, and laughed.

Since I couldn't think of a response to that, I changed the subject. "Did you vote?"

"Sure."

"Who for?"

This time she merely smiled. "Sydney Lummet."

"You're kidding."

"Dammit, Vega, when are you going to grow up?"

"Why didn't you vote for Sebastian?"

"That virgin."

This was a subject I was interested in. "Lummet has something wrong with him. I mean, he's weird. I saw him once on TV, and that was too often. Let me tell you about it. First thing that happened after the screen lighted up was a close shot of his hands; nothing but his hands. He had colored noodles strung on them like Christmas ornaments. Next thing that showed was his teeth, growing big as saws, and then the next thing you knew, he started eating those damned noodles off his fingers, one at a time. Never witnessed anything like it in my life. If that business draws votes for him, I'll eat my hat."

Keeping a straight face, Permilia said, "Vega, you're the dearest friend I have. You're so innocent and stupid and sweet. Why don't you lay off subjects you don't understand? If you don't like Sydney Lummet, vote for Sebastian or don't vote at all."

She started to walk away, and I called after her. "Were you ever innocent and stupid and sweet?"

She whirled and gave me an angry stare. Suddenly her face softened, crumpled. My surprise increased as I watched her eyes glisten with quick tears. Then she hurried away from me so fast she almost ran. I lost sight of her as she shouldered her way into the crowds.

That scene made me brood for a solid week. Somehow I had

hurt Permilia, and I wanted to punish myself for having done it. More, I wanted to know how and why it had happened.

I had some words with Lydon. "My name is Vega, not that you're all that interested, but since we work close together, I'm not about to go on yelling, 'Hey, you.' "

One leg to hold him up, red face, stammering; the man was bright but he was also dumb. "I wondered what it was."

"Why didn't you just ask me?"

"Wasn't wondering that much." His fingers rambled up to his face and worried a pimple.

"Don't do that," I said. "Your hands are filthy from cleaning stalls and you shouldn't be pawing your face with them. If you stopped doing—"

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"It's obvious you can't stand me, but I may as well tell you I couldn't care less. It's only that we work almost side by side—"

"I didn't mean to say it."

"In that case, I want to ask you a question; about older women. You think maybe their nerves go with age? I have this friend—"

"I don't know anything about women."

"Aren't men pretty much the same?"

He got redder by the second. "I can't answer that."

"Why not?"

"I just told you. I don't know anything about women."

"Then I'll change the subject. Take these stalls. Why do you figure so many people use them? My clientele are regular as clockwork; two, three times a day most of them come by, and some more often than that. I can't figure out the attraction, can you?"

Lydon stiffened up like a board. When he left me and stalked into his resting booth, he was more statue than human. I tried to get another glimpse of him, but some people walked by and blocked him from my view.

I knew. He was embarrassed about sex. Shy. Set me to wondering how old he was. He hadn't any beard to speak of, but then his hair wasn't too dark, which may have accounted for that.

Probably he was my age. Two dunderheads.

Slept terribly that night, dreamed of a skeleton that had no flesh on it except in a crazy place. It kept following me around and I kept telling it to go away and leave me alone because I was dead as a doornail in the beef department. The skeleton laughed, and when I looked at its teeth I recognized it as Sydney Lummet. Instead of ordinary equipment between his legs, he had colored noodles.

The next day, Lydon brought me an eggbeater. "It's a present."

"What for?"

"Know you don't have one. They're dear on the market."

"And eggs aren't even on the market," I said.

He spoke very seriously. "You never know when one will turn up."

He went back to his side of the street, and I spent the morning alternately smiling and frowning. Permilia came by to use a stall, but she didn't speak to me.

Finished with my cleaning, I sat and snatched glimpses of Lydon between passersby. It was uncanny, but each day he seemed to be growing better-looking. How could that be? I heard first impressions were the only true ones, and when I first laid eyes on Lydon he was a grubby little mutt. Today he was no worse-looking than any of the fancy fellows who used my stalls.

Couldn't watch him in the afternoon because he sat on the curb and watched me. That pleased me. I passed time by examining the hands of my customers. The women preferred heavy jewelry; the men liked crepe streamers or thin chains that dangled free or were wrapped around the fingers. One fellow, a kook, had a thing about handcuffs. Once a day, every day, he came bursting through the mobs, stopped at the first stall, burst into tears, unlocked the cuffs on his wrists and darted inside.

"I'm sick and tired of your feeling sorry for me," I said to Permilia. It had been a week since I'd spoken to her. "You act like I'm a lamb about to be led to the slaughter. Kindly tell me what in hell is wrong with you."

"Memory. There's a piece of brain in my head that won't be laid to rest."

"You're different. Don't you like me anymore? If you don't you can be frank about it. You don't have to use my stalls out of politeness."

"You fool."

"That's easy to say. Everyone is a fool."

Quick as a wink, she changed the subject, or I thought she did. "There's a clinic on Eighth does a lot of operations free of charge."

"What kind of operations?"

"They'll lop off your beef if you ask them."

"Holy crow."

"Takes three minutes; no pain, no fuss."

"Permilia, what in the world—"

"Go over there and get it done. Right away. Today."

"There's another clinic on Ninth," I said. "It's for nuts, and you'd better get over there fast."

"Do it, sweetie," she said, and her eyes were full of tears.

"Go away. You're scaring me."

Lydon. He makes me miserable. Do I make him miserable? I hope so. There is a kind of sweetness like no other, and it only comes riding on the person of another. This sweetness worries me. It makes me despair. A pair of pants is nothing but a pair of pants. Shoulders, smelly old feet, hands, sweaty neck, hair in need of a shampoo, common face. Ordinary things. He comes out of his resting booth and everything which I am grows alert, like hair that suddenly stands on end. He looks across the street to see if I'm there, and naturally I am, and where else does he think I'd be? I'm never sick, so why look to see if I went somewhere?

The stink of the stalls saturates the air. The crowds have gone home. It is raining. I like the stink and the moans and the rain. He's over there where I can see him. The sweetness is as the steam rising from the sidewalks. Unhappy am I because it's almost quitting time, and he'll lock up his booth and walk away

without saying good-bye. This business is making me sick. He sits over there, watching me all day, but seldom does he smile or say good-bye. I mean, if I'm fit to look at all day, aren't I fit for more?

"Permilia, I have a problem."

"You're alive."

"That isn't the problem."

"I'm in a hurry."

"You're getting to hate me, and I don't know what I did."

She replied, but not to me; to herself maybe. "I should have grown a shell around me, like a clam. What do I care about a dumb kid? So she'll grow up, the same as everybody else, and I should laugh. I told her to go to that clinic, but she wants to keep her button. Why? Because without the goddam thing she might as well be dead. But she'll be dead if she keeps it. What kind of a world is this?"

Sydney Lummet won the election. We had a new President and everybody was happy. I was happy too. That old Lydon, that dumbbell, he brought me a present; a camera. I took his picture, he took mine.

"Did you vote for Lummet?" I said.

"Sebastian. I'm sorry the way the election turned out. I don't think Lummet can handle the economic crisis. Already we got too many people starving. He's an egotist. Besides, he leans too heavy toward psychology. You can't run a country on speculation, which is all psychology is."

I wasn't paying any attention to what he said. From the corner of my eye, I stared at his throat. The sun made it pink; it glistened like baby skin. Probably he looked that way all over. Next I examined his face. Common, ordinary man, except that he gave me a bellyache.

He was smiling at me. "Do you like to read?"

It was my turn to get red. "You won't laugh?"

"Of course not."

"I don't know enough to get along. You know. I'm not backward as far as brains go, but nobody ever tells me anything. How can I learn about life unless I read? So I read porno."

The smile left his face as if someone had smacked it off. His eyes grew small and narrow, and his mouth went thin. "Both of us are in the same boat. I read it too."

At noon he came over to my side of the street. We sat on the curb and had lunch together.

"What do you want to do with your life?" he said. "What is it that you have to have? I mean, what's your main interest?"

"I don't know yet."

"Me, either. I guess I'm just waiting for life to come and get me. Doesn't it work that way? We wait for death. I guess we wait for life too."

"I guess."

Permilia and I were both out of sorts. My trouble was a mystery to me. As for my friend, I planned to tell her to see a doctor, that is if I could get close enough to her. Suddenly I had the plague or something. Regular, she came to use the stalls, and regular, she kept out of my reach. From what I could see from a distance, she was steadily losing weight. Her skin looked bad. In fact, her whole appearance was haggard. Maybe she had gotten hooked on dope. I'd ask her, first chance I got.

My trouble. Awake at three every morning with my brain clicking away at the same old subject. Lydon. Why didn't he go away? So he didn't show up at work for three days. I didn't know if he had been sick. For some reason I was afraid to cross the street and ask him. Why didn't he come over and tell me where he had been? He sat in his resting booth, after he returned, and he looked as white as a sheet. Damn you, Lydon, what's wrong? Why don't you like me anymore?

Tuesday. As soon as I got to my resting booth, I knew I was in for a bellyache. I hadn't slept hardly any. The sidewalks were wet and hot, people were all over the place, the sun was a furnace, I was already sweaty, the stalls stunk to high heaven, my belly was killing me. Back in my mind, some idiot said over and over again, "Lydon, Lydon, Lydon."

"Why don't you go to hell?" I yelled.

He came out of his booth, walked to the curb, stopped. I

walked to my curb, stopped. We stared across the wet street at each other. All I could see were his eyes. They went all the way down into my soul and back out again, taking my guts with them. He smiled. My belly turned over. I smiled. How serious were we that morning, two dunderheads glaring at each other as if the life we were waiting for had suddenly materialized between us. A yearning in my throat, I said, "Lydon."

"Vega." He was hurting. So was I. Neither of us knew the truth. There wasn't anyone else in the world. The planet was ours, and our togetherness tore both of us to tatters, and it was the most glorious pain there could be. I wanted to be a worm clinging to his skin. That way he couldn't leave me. I'd be hanging onto him, secretly, and he'd take me with him wherever he went.

The sun was hot between us. I had a headache.

"Vega."

The way he said it made me smile again, but my face felt as if it were going to crack. I was so happy I wanted to cry, and then I did cry a few minutes later, because Lydon didn't come across the street to me. He started to; I know that was what he intended, but he never made it. His smile was like mine, simply there to dress up a naked face, and he put one foot down onto the street, with the other foot ready to follow. His hands were stretched out toward me.

All of a sudden his face turned purple. His feet stopped moving. His body froze. His expression deadened. He turned and walked over to one of the stalls. He slammed through the door.

I bawled my eyes out. I sat on the curb and waited for him to come out so that he would see my rage. I wanted to kill him with my anger. He didn't see it. After the longest time, he popped out of the stall and ran down the street at high speed.

At three in the morning I woke up in my one-room home. Dry-eyed, I didn't fight the chunk of my brain that had developed during the past weeks. Some gift. It was a chunk of a man named

Lydon. Consider him. Monster. Nothing but a beef pumper, same as everybody. Rather do that than . . . what?

What if Lydon had no mind? Say he was just a man with no will, and he was with me alone somewhere, and I could do anything to him that I wanted? Consider it. Lydon, you were so sweet. What would I do to you? You wear too many clothes. How can I see you that way? You're skin all over, and I want to look at all of it. I take off your shirt. Just as I thought; you give me a belly-ache. Common, ordinary back and chest. Let me put my lips between your shoulderblades. They aren't common if they make me want to do that. Now, Lydon, puppet man, take off your pants. Not too fast, as I'm getting ill. Wait a minute, let me kiss your mouth, because I may never get around to it later. There he is, Lydon is naked as a jaybird, and since I read all that porno I know all about men.

I have made a mistake. All I intended to do was look at him.

It was four in the morning, and I came stumbling from one of my stalls. I didn't remember getting out of bed and going there, didn't remember walking through the rain. But I knew what I had done inside the stall. The first time, and now I was really sick. It had taken about fifty seconds to do the job, and I hated it. I was a monster like everyone else.

Someone came out of a stall across the street. It was Lydon. He saw me and ran away. I sat down on the curb and cried. The past came back to me, haunted me. Now I remembered what they had done to me in the Conditioning Center.

"When you hear the sound of the bell, your physical desire will be focused. You will step inside a stall and bring yourself to orgasm. You are promised a rich, full sexual life. No urge must be ignored. Sexual activity in private quarters is evil. Desire is unfocused. Sexual activity between two people is evil. Desire is unfocused. The masturbation stalls are public facilities built for your use. You have nothing to hide. Your neighbors can see that you have nothing to hide. Sex and the stalls are united in your mind. There cannot be the first with-

out the second. First comes desire. Without the sound of the bell, desire remains unfocused. You will not be deprived of pleasure, as the sound of the bell can be heard when you pass the stalls. First comes desire. Remember that it is unfocused without the sound of the bell. Remember that the sound comes from the stalls. You must go to the stalls. When you hear the sound of the bell . . . desire is focused . . . evil is sex with another . . . no such thing as private love or sex, as you can't be trusted to obey if you are hidden away from the eyes of the world . . . someone might be with you and you might be tempted . . . rich, full life . . . many orgasms mean lack of tension and happiness . . . sex like stepping into public toilet . . . so sorry, but you've such a ravenous appetite . . . you won't be able to talk about it because your head will hurt . . . sound of bell in your head . . . not real . . . your id clamoring . . . oh, how I need a good one, or, it's a nice day and I feel energetic and mellow, oops, there goes the bell, better hop inside and enjoy my rich, full . . . that man I saw, he makes my id clamor, oops, where's the bell, where's the bell, where's the . . . he does me like no other, and all my life there will be men who send me speeding to the stalls, why don't they just cut out our eyes . . . one day I saw a human being who had the average complement of qualities, except that God meant for him to be meaningful to me, and my hands and my mind reached out for him and when I grasped him because I had to I found not him but a bell and it rang not in my hands but in my head and I wanted to scream because . . ."

It was true that the bell sounded only in my head, because never in my life did I ever hear it ring.

Sunup and I came out of a stall, and there was Permilia walking toward me. She had an axe in her hand. She went inside a stall. I heard a strange sound, and she walked outside and let the blood from the stump of her wrist leak into the gutter. Across the street, Lydon stood on the curb, crying.

"I love you, Vega," he said and went into a stall.

"I love you, Lydon," I said and went into a stall.

IF EVE HAD FAILED TO CONCEIVE

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The End

WHY BOOTH DIDN'T KILL LINCOLN

The End

—Edward Wellen

WHERE LATE THE SWEET BIRDS SANG

Arise, cry out in the night: in the beginning of the watches pour out thine heart like water before the face of the Lord: lift up thy hands toward him for the life of thy young children, that faint for hunger in the top of every street.

Kate Wilhelm

What David always hated most about the Sumner family dinners was the way everyone talked about him as if he were not there.

"Has he been eating enough meat lately? He looks peaked."

"You spoil him, Carrie. If he won't eat his dinner, don't let him go out and play. You were like that, you know."

"When I was his age, I was husky enough to cut down a tree with a hatchet. He couldn't cut his way out of a fog."

David would imagine himself invisible, floating unseen over their heads as they discussed him. Someone would ask if he had a girl friend yet, and they would *tsk-tsk* whether the answer was yes or no. From his vantage point he would aim a ray gun at Uncle Clarence, whom he especially disliked because he was fat, bald, and very rich. Uncle Clarence dipped his biscuits in his gravy, or in syrup, or more often in a mixture of sorghum and butter that he stirred together on his plate until it looked like baby shit.

"Is he still planning to be a biologist? He should go to med school and join Walt in his practice."

He would point his ray gun at Uncle Clarence and cut a neat plug out of his stomach and carefully ease it out, and Uncle Clarence would ooze from the opening and flow all over them.

"David." He started with alarm, then relaxed again. "David, why don't you go out and see what the other kids are up to?" His father's quiet voice, saying actually, that's enough of that. And they would turn their collective mind to one of the other offspring.

As David grew older, he learned the complex relationships that he had merely accepted as a child. Uncles, aunts, cousins, second cousins, third cousins. The honorary members: brothers and sisters and parents of those who had married into the family. There were the Sumners and Wistons and O'Gradys and Heinemans and the Meyers and Capeks and Rizzos, all part of the same river that flowed through the fertile Virginia valley.

He remembered the holidays especially. The old Sumner house was rambling, with many bedrooms upstairs and an attic that was wall-to-wall mattresses, pallets for the children, with an enormous fan in the west window. Someone was forever checking to make certain that they hadn't all suffocated in the attic. The older children were supposed to keep an eye on the younger ones, but what they did in fact was to frighten them night after night with ghost stories and inhuman sighs and groans. Eventually the noise level would rise until adult intervention was demanded. Uncle Ron would clump up the stairs heavily and there would be a scurrying, with suppressed giggles and muffled screams, until everyone found a bed again, so that by the time he turned on the hall light that illuminated the attic dimly, all the children seemed to be sleeping. He would pause briefly in the doorway, then close the door, turn off the light, and tramp back down the stairs, apparently deaf to the renewed merriment behind him.

Whenever Aunt Claudia came up, it was like an apparition. One minute pillows would be flying, someone would be crying, someone else trying to read with a flashlight, several of the boys playing cards with another flashlight, some of the girls huddled together whispering what had to be delicious secrets, judging by

the way they blushed and looked desperate if an adult came upon them suddenly, and then the door would snap open, the light would fall on the disorder, and she would be standing there. Aunt Claudia was very tall and thin, her nose was too big and she was tanned to a permanent old-leather color. She would stand there, immobile and terrible, and the children would creep back into bed without a sound. She would not move until everyone was back where he or she belonged, then she would close the door soundlessly. The silence would drag on and on. The ones nearest the door would hold their breath, trying to hear breathing on the other side. Eventually someone would become brave enough to open the door a crack, and if she was truly gone, the party would resume.

The smells of holidays were fixed in David's memory. All the usual smells: fruitcakes and turkeys, the vinegar that went in the egg dyes, the greenery, and the thick, creamy smoke of bayberry candles. But what he remembered most vividly was the Fourth of July smell of gunpowder that permeated their hair, their clothes, that lasted on their hands for days and days. Their hands would be stained purple-black from berry picking, and the color and smell were one of the indelible images of his childhood. Mixed in with it was the smell of sulfur that was dusted on them liberally to confound the chiggers.

If it hadn't been for Celia, his childhood would have been perfect. Celia was his cousin, his mother's sister's daughter. She was one year younger than David and by far the prettiest of all his cousins. When they were very young they had promised to marry one day, and when they grew older and it was made abundantly clear that no cousins might ever marry in that family, they had become implacable enemies. He didn't know how they had been told. He was certain that no one ever put it in words, but they knew. When they could not avoid each other after that, they fought. She pushed him out of the hayloft and broke his arm when he was fifteen, and when he was sixteen they wrestled from the back door of the Wiston farmhouse to the fence fifty or sixty yards away. They tore the clothes off each other and he was bleeding from her fingernails down his back, she from scraping

her shoulder on a rock. Then somehow in their rolling and squirming frenzy, his cheek came down on her uncovered chest, and he stopped fighting. He suddenly became a melting, sobbing, incoherent idiot and she hit him on the head with a rock and ended the fight.

Up to that point the battle had been in almost total silence, broken only by gasps for breath and whispered language that would have shocked their parents. But when she hit him and he went limp, not unconscious, but dazed, uncaring, inert, she screamed, abandoning herself to anguish and terror. The family tumbled from the house as if they had been shaken out, and their first thought must have been that he had raped her. His father hustled him to the barn, presumably for a thrashing. But in the barn, his father, belt in hand, looked at him with an expression that was furious and strangely sympathetic. He didn't touch David, and only after he had turned and left did David realize that tears were still running down his face.

In the family there were farmers, a few lawyers, two doctors, insurance brokers and bankers and millers, hardware merchandisers, other shopkeepers. David's father owned a large department store that catered to the upper-middle-class clientele of the valley. The valley was rich. David always supposed that the family, except for a few ne'er-do-wells, was rather wealthy. Of all his relatives his favorite was his father's brother Walt. Dr. Walt, they all called him. He played with the children and taught them grown-up things, like where to hit if you really meant it, where not to hit in a friendly scrap. He seemed to know when to stop treating them as children long before anyone else in the family did. Dr. Walt was the reason David had decided very early to become a scientist.

David was seventeen when he went to Harvard. His birthday was in September and he didn't go home for it. When he did return at Thanksgiving and the clan had gathered, Grandfather Sumner poured the ritual before-dinner martinis and handed one to him. And Uncle Warner said to him, "What do you think we should do about Bobbie?"

He had arrived at that mysterious crossing that is never delin-

eated clearly enough to be seen in advance. He sipped his martini, not liking it particularly, and knew that childhood had ended, and he felt a profound sadness and loneliness.

The Christmas that David was twenty-three seemed out of focus. The scenario was the same, the attic full of children, the food smells, the powdering of snow, none of that had changed, but he was seeing it from a new position and it was not the wonderland it had been, and he knew with regret that the enchantment had vanished and could never be recaptured. When his parents went home he stayed on at the Wiston farm for a day or two, waiting for Celia. She had missed the Christmas Day celebration, getting ready for her coming trip to Brazil, but she would be there, her mother had assured Grandmother Wiston, and David was waiting for her, not happily, not with any expectation of reward, but with a fury that grew and caused him to stalk the old house like a boy being punished for another's sin.

When she came home and he saw her standing with her mother and her grandmother, his anger melted. It was like seeing Celia in a time distortion, as she was and would be or had been. Her pale hair would not change much, but her bones would become more prominent, and the almost-emptiness of her face would have written on it a message of concern, of love, of giving, of being decisively herself, of a strength unsuspected in her frail body. Grandmother Wiston was a beautiful old lady, he thought in wonder, amazed that he never had seen her beauty before. Celia's mother was more beautiful than the girl. And he saw the resemblance to his own mother in the trio. Wordlessly, defeated, he turned and went to the rear of the house and put on one of his grandfather's heavy jackets because he didn't want to see her at all now, and his own outdoor clothing was in the front hall closet too near where she was still standing.

He walked a long time in the frosty afternoon, seeing very little, and shaking himself from time to time when he realized that the cold was entering his shoes or making his ears numb. And he found that he was climbing the slope to the antique forest where

his grandfather had taken him once, a long time ago. He climbed and became warmer, and at dusk he was under the branches of the tiers of trees that had been there since the beginning of time. They or others that were just like them. Forever waiting for the day when they would reclaim the land and cover the continent once more. Here were the relicts his grandfather had brought him to see. Here was a silverbell grown to the stature of a large tree, while down the slopes, in the lower reaches, it remained always a shrub. Here the white basswood grew alongside the hemlock and the bitternut hickory, and the beeches and sweet buckeyes locked arms.

"David!" He stopped and listened, certain he had imagined it, but the call came again. "David, are you up here?"

He turned then and saw Celia among the massive tree trunks. Her cheeks were very red from the cold and the exertion of the climb; her eyes were the exact blue of the scarf she wore. She stopped six feet from him and started to speak again, but didn't. Instead she drew off a glove and touched the smooth trunk of a beech. "Grandfather Wiston brought me up here, too, when I was twelve. It was very important to him that we understand this place."

David nodded.

"Why did you leave like that? They all think we're going to fight again."

"We might," he said.

She smiled. "I don't think so."

"We should start down. It'll be dark in a few minutes." But he didn't move.

"David, try to make Mother see, will you? You understand that I have to go, that I have to do something, don't you? She thinks you're so clever. She'd listen to you."

He laughed. "They think I'm clever like a puppy dog."

Celia shook her head. "You're the one they'd listen to. They treat me like a child and always will."

David shook his head, smiling. "Why are you going, Celia? What are you trying to prove?"

"Damn it, David! If you don't understand, who will?" She took a deep breath. "People are starving in South America. Not just a few Indians, but millions of people. And practically no one has done any real research in tropical farming methods. It's all lateritic soil, and no one down there understands it. Well, we trained in tropical farming and we're going to start classes down there, in the field. It's what I trained for. This project will get me a doctorate."

The Wistons were farmers, had always been farmers. "Custodians of the soil," Grandfather Wiston had said once, "not its owners, just custodians." Celia reached down and moved aside some matted leaves and muck on the ground, and straightened with her hand full of black dirt. "The famines are spreading. They need so much. And I have so much to give! Can't you understand that?" she cried. She closed her hand hard, compacting the soil into a ball that crumbled again when she opened her fist. She let the soil fall from her hand and carefully pushed the protective covering of leaves back over the bared spot.

"You followed me to tell me good-bye, didn't you?" David said suddenly, and his voice was harsh. "It's really good-bye this time, isn't it?" He watched her and slowly she nodded. "There's someone in your group?"

"I'm not sure, David. Maybe." She bowed her head and started to pull her glove on again. "I thought I was sure. But when I saw you in the hall, saw the look on your face when I came in . . . I realized that I just don't know."

"Celia, you listen to me! There aren't any hereditary defects that would surface! Damn it, you know that! If there were, we simply wouldn't have children, but there's no reason. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded. "I know."

"Come with me, Celia. We don't have to get married right away, let them get used to the idea first. They will. They always do. We have a resilient family, you and me. Celia, I love you."

She turned her head and he saw that she was weeping; she wiped her cheeks with her glove, then with her bare hand, leaving

dirt streaks. David pulled her to him, held her and kissed her tears, her cheeks, her lips.

She finally drew away and started back down the slope, with David following. "I can't decide anything right now. It isn't fair. I should have stayed at the house. I shouldn't have followed you up here. David, I'm committed to going in two days. I can't just say I've changed my mind. It's important to me. To the people down there. I can't just decide not to go."

He caught her arm and held her, kept her from moving ahead again. "Just tell me you love me. Say it, just once."

"I love you," she said very slowly.

"How long will you be gone?"

"Three years. I signed a contract."

He stared at her. "Change it! Make it one year. I'll be out of grad school then. You can teach here. Let their bright young students come to you."

"We have to get back, or they'll send a search party for us," she said. "I'll try to change it," she whispered then. "If I can." Two days later she left.

David spent New Year's Eve at the Sumner farm with his parents and a horde of aunts and uncles and cousins. On New Year's Day, Grandfather Sumner made an announcement. "We're building a hospital up at Bear Creek, this side of the mill."

David blinked. That was a mile from the farm, miles from anything else. "A hospital?" He looked at his uncle Walt, who nodded.

Clarence was studying his eggnog with a sour expression, and David's father, the third brother, was watching the smoke curl from his pipe.

"Why up here?" David asked finally.

"It's going to be a research hospital," Walt said. "Genetic diseases, hereditary defects, that sort of thing. Two hundred beds."

David shook his head in disbelief. "You have any idea how much something like that would cost? Who's financing it?"

His grandfather laughed nastily. "Senator Burke has graciously

arranged to get federal funds," he said. His voice became more caustic. "And I cajoled a few members of the family to put a little in the kitty." David glanced at Clarence, who looked pained. "I'm giving the land," Grandfather Sumner went on. "So here and there we got support."

"But why would Burke go for it? You've never voted for him in a single campaign in his life."

"Told him we'd dig out a lot of stuff we've been sitting on, support his opposition. If he was a baboon, we'd support him, and there's a lot of family these days, David. A heap of family."

"Well, hats off," David said, still not fully believing it. "You giving up your practice to go into research?" he asked Walt. His uncle nodded. David drained his cup of eggnog.

"David," Walt said, "we want to hire you."

He looked up quickly. "Why? I'm not into medical research."

"I know what your specialty is," Walt said quietly. "We want you for a consultant, and later on to head a department of research."

"But I haven't even finished my thesis yet," David said, and he felt as if he had stumbled into a pot party.

"You'll do another year of donkey work for Selnick and eventually you'll write the thesis, a bit here, a dab there. You could write it in a month, couldn't you, if you had time?" David nodded reluctantly. "I know," Walt said, smiling faintly. "You think you're being asked to give up a lifetime career for a pipe dream."

Grandfather Sumner let out his breath explosively. He was a large man with a massive chest and great bulging biceps. His hands were big enough to grip a basketball in each. But it was his head that you remembered. It was the head of a giant, and although he had farmed for many years, and later overseen the others who did it for him, he had found time to read more extensively than anyone else David knew. And he remembered what he read. His library was better than most public libraries. Now he leaned forward and said, "You listen to me, David. You listen hard. I'm telling you what the goddam government doesn't dare admit yet. We're on the first downslope of a slide that is

going to plummet the world to a depth that they never dreamed of. I know the signs, David. Pollution's catching up to us faster than anyone knows. There's more radiation in the atmosphere than there's been since Hiroshima—French tests, Chinese tests. Leaks. God knows where all it's coming from. We reached zero population growth a couple of years ago, but, David, we were trying, and other nations are getting there too, and they aren't trying. There's famine in a quarter of the world right now. The famines are here, and they're getting worse. There are more diseases than there's ever been since the good Lord sent the plagues to Egypt. And they're plagues that we don't know anything about. There's more drought and more flooding than there's ever been. England's changing into a desert, the bogs and moors are drying up. Entire species of fish are gone, just damn gone, and in only a year or two. The anchovies are gone. The codfish industry is gone. The cods they are catching are diseased, unfit to use. There's no fishing off the west coast of the Americas, North or South. Every damn protein crop on earth has some sort of blight that gets worse and worse. We're restricting our exports of food now, and next year we'll stop them for good. We're having shortages no one ever dreamed of. Tin, copper, aluminum, paper. Chlorine, by God! And what do you think will happen in the world when we suddenly can't even purify our drinking water?"

His face was darkening as he spoke, and he was getting angrier and angrier, directing his unanswerable questions to David, who stared at him with nothing at all to say.

"And they don't know what to do about any of it," his grandfather went on. "No more than the dinosaurs knew how to stop their own extinction. We've changed the photochemical reactions of our own atmosphere, and we can't adapt to the new radiations fast enough to survive! There've been hints here and there that this is a major concern, but who listens? The damn fools will lay each and every catastrophe at the foot of a local condition and turn their backs on the fact that this is global, until it's too late to do anything."

"But, if it's what you think, what could they do?" David asked, looking to Dr. Walt for support and finding none.

"Turn off the factories, ground the airplanes, stop the mining, junk the cars. But they won't, and even if they did, it would still be a catastrophe. It's going to break wide open. Within the next couple of years, David, it's going to break. There's going to be the biggest bust since man began scratching marks on rocks, that's what! And we're getting ready for it! I'm getting ready for it! We've got the land and we've got the men to farm it, and we'll get our hospital and we'll do research on ways to keep our animals and our people alive, and when the world goes into a tailspin we'll be alive and when it starves we'll be eating."

Suddenly he stopped and studied David with his eyes narrowed. "I said you'd leave here convinced that we've all gone mad. But you'll be back, David, my boy. You'll be back before the dogwoods bloom, because you'll see the signs."

David returned to school and his thesis and the donkey work Selnick gave him to do. Celia didn't write, and he had no address for her. In response to his questions his mother admitted that no one had heard from her. In February, in retaliation for the food embargo, Japan imposed trade restrictions that made further United States trade with her impossible. Japan and China signed a mutual aid treaty. In March, Japan seized the Philippines and their fields of rice, and China resumed its long-dormant trusteeship over the Indochina peninsula, with the rice paddies of Cambodia and Vietnam.

Cholera struck in Rome, Los Angeles, Galveston, and Savannah. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and other Arab-bloc nations issued an ultimatum: the United States must guarantee a yearly ration of wheat to the Arab states and discontinue all aid to Israel, or there would be no oil for the United States or Europe. They refused to believe the United States could not meet their demands. Worldwide travel restrictions were imposed immediately, and the United States government, by presidential decree, formed a new department with Cabinet status: the Bureau of Information.

The redbuds were hazy blurs of pink against the clear, May-softened sky when David returned home. He stopped by his house only long enough to change his clothes and get rid of his boxes of college mementos before he drove out to the Sumner farm, where Walt was staying while he oversaw the construction of his hospital.

Walt had an office downstairs. It was a clutter of books, notebooks, blueprints, correspondence. He greeted David as if he hadn't been away at all. "Look," he said, "this research of Semple and Ferrer, what do you know about it? The first generation of cloned mice showed no deviation, no variation in viability or potency, nor did the second or third, but with the fourth the viability decreased sharply. And there was a steady, and irreversible, slide to extinction. Why?"

David sat down hard and stared at Walt. "How did you get that?"

"Vlasic," Walt said. "We went to med school together. We've corresponded all these years. I asked him."

"You know his work?"

"Yes. His rhesus monkeys show the same decline during the fourth generation, and on to extinction."

"It isn't just like that," David said. "He had to discontinue his work last year—no funds. So we don't know the life expectancies of the later strains. But the decline starts in the third clone generation, a decline of potency. He was breeding each clone generation sexually, testing the offspring for normalcy. The third clone generation had only twenty-five percent potency. The sexually reproduced offspring started with that same percentage, and, in fact, potency dropped until the fifth generation of sexually reproduced offspring, and then it started to climb back up and presumably would have reached normalcy again."

Walt was watching him closely, nodding now and then. David went on. "That was the clone-three strain. With the clone-four strain there was a drastic change. Some abnormalities were present, and life expectancy was down seventeen percent. The ab-

normals were all sterile. Potency was generally down to forty-eight percent. It was downhill all the way with each sexually reproduced generation. By the fifth generation no offspring survived longer than an hour or two. So much for clone-four strain. Cloning the fours was worse. Clone-five strain had gross abnormalities, and they were all sterile. Life expectancy figures were not completed. There was no clone-six strain. None survived."

"A dead end," Walt said. He indicated a stack of magazines and extracts. "I had hoped that they were out of date, that there were newer methods, or perhaps an error had been found in their figures. It's the third generation that is the turning point, then?"

David shrugged. "My information could be out of date. I know Vlasic stopped last year, but Semple and Ferrer are still at it, or were last month. They may have something I don't know about. You're thinking of livestock?"

"Of course. You know the rumors? They're just not breeding well, no figures available, but hell, we have our own livestock. They're down by half."

"Can you get materials for the hospital?" David asked.

"For now. We're rushing it like there's no tomorrow, naturally. And we're not worrying about money right now. We'll have things that we won't know what to do with, but I thought it would be better to order everything I can think of than to find out next year that what we really need isn't available."

David went to the window and looked out at the farm. The green was well established by now, spring would give way to summer without a pause and the corn would be shiny, silky green in the fields. Just like always. "Let me have a look at your lab equipment orders, and the stuff that's been delivered already," he said. "Then let's see if we can wrangle me travel clearance, out to the coast. I'll talk to Semple; I've met him a few times. If anyone's doing anything, it's that team."

"What is Selnick working on?"

"Nothing. He lost his grant, his students were sent packing." David grinned at his uncle suddenly. "Look, up on the hill, you can see a dogwood ready to burst open, some of the blooms are already showing."

David was bone-tired, every muscle seemed to ache at once, and his head was throbbing. For nine days he had been on the go, to the coast, to Harvard, to Washington, and now he wanted nothing more than to sleep, even if the world ground to a stop while he was unaware. He had taken a train from Washington to Richmond, and there, unable to rent a car, or buy gasoline if a car had been available, he had stolen a bicycle and pedaled the rest of the way. He had never realized his legs could ache so much.

"You're sure that bunch in Washington won't be able to get a hearing?" Grandfather Sumner asked.

"No one wants to hear the Jeremiahs," David said. Selnick had been one of the group, and he had talked to David briefly. His committee was trying to force the government to admit the seriousness of the coming catastrophe and take strict measures to alleviate it. The government chose instead to paint glowing pictures of the coming upturn that would be apparent by fall. During the next six months, Selnick had warned, those with sense and money would buy everything they could to see them through, because after that period of grace there would be nothing to buy.

"Selnick says we should offer to buy his equipment. The school will jump at the chance to unload it right now. Cheap." David laughed. "Cheap. A quarter of a million, possibly."

"Make the offer," Grandfather Sumner said.

David stood up shakily and went off to bed.

People still went to work. The factories were still producing, not as much, and none of the nonessentials, but they were converting to coal as fast as possible. David thought about the darkened cities, and the fleets of trucks rusting, and the corn and wheat rotting in the fields. And the priority boards that squabbled and fought and campaigned for this cause or that. It was a long time before his twitching muscles relaxed enough for him to lie quietly, and a longer time before he could relax his mind enough to sleep.

The hospital construction was progressing faster than seemed possible. There were two shifts at work; again a case of damn-the-

cost. Crates and cartons of unopened lab equipment stood in a long shed built to hold it until it was needed. David went to work in a makeshift laboratory trying to replicate Ferrer's and Semple's tests. And in early July, Harry Vlasic arrived at the farm. He was short, fat, near-sighted, and short-tempered. David regarded him with the same awe and respect that an undergraduate physics student would have felt toward Einstein.

"All right," Vlasic said. "The corn crop has failed, as predicted. Monoculture! Bah! They'll save sixty percent of the wheat, no more. This winter, hah, just wait until winter! Now where is the cave?"

They took him to the cave entrance a hundred yards from the hospital. Inside the cave they used lanterns. The cave was over a mile long in the main section and there were several branches. Deep in one of them flowed a river that was black and silent. Spring water, good water. Vlasic nodded again and again. When they finished the cave tour he was still nodding. "It's good," he said. "It'll work. The laboratories go in there, underground passage from the hospital, safe from contamination. Good."

They worked sixteen hours a day that summer and into the fall. In October the first wave of flu swept the country, worse than the outbreak of 1917 and 1918. In November a new illness swept the country, and here and there it was whispered that it was plague, but the government Bureau of Information said it was flu. Grandfather Sumner died in November. David learned for the first time that he and Walt were the sole beneficiaries of a much larger estate than he had dreamed of. And the estate was in cash. Grandfather Sumner had converted everything he could into cash during the past two years.

In December the family began to arrive, leaving the towns and villages and cities scattered throughout the valley to take up residence in the hospital and staff buildings. Rationing, black markets, inflation, and looting had turned the cities into battlegrounds. And the government had frozen the assets of every business—nothing could be bought or sold without approval. The family brought their stocks with them. Jeremy Streit brought his hardware merchandise in four truckloads. Eddie Beauchamp

brought his dental equipment. David's father brought all that he could from his department store. With the failure of radio and television communication, there was no way for the government to cope with the rising panic. Martial law was declared on December 28, six months too late.

There was no child left under eight years of age when the spring rains came, and the original three hundred nineteen people who had come to the upper valley had dwindled to two hundred one. In the cities the toll had been much higher.

David studied the fetal pig he was about to dissect. It was wrinkled and desiccated, its bones too soft, its lymph glands lumpy, hard. Why? Why did the fourth generation decline? Harry Vlasic came to watch briefly, then walked away, his head bowed in thought. Not even he could come up with any answers, David thought, almost with satisfaction.

That night David, Walt, and Vlasic met and went over it all again. They had enough livestock to feed the two hundred people for a long time, through cloning and breeding of the fertile animals. They could clone up to four hundred animals at a time. Chickens, swine, cattle. If the livestock all became sterile, as seemed likely, then the food supply was limited.

Watching the two older men, David knew they were purposely skirting the other question. If the people also became sterile, how long would they need a continuing supply of food? He said, "We should isolate some of the sterile mice, clone them, and test for the reemergence of fertility with each new generation of clones."

Vlasic frowned and shook his head. "If we had a dozen undergraduate students, perhaps," he said.

"We have to know," David said, feeling hot suddenly. "You're both acting like this is just a five-year emergency plan to tide us over a few bad years. What if it isn't that at all? Whatever is causing the sterility is affecting all the animals. We have to know."

Walt glanced at David and said, "We don't have the time or the facilities to do any research like that."

"That's a lie," David said. "We can generate all the electricity

we can use, more than enough power. We have equipment we haven't even unloaded yet . . ."

"Because there's no one who can use it yet," Walt said patiently.

"I can. I'll do it in my free time."

"What free time?"

"I'll find it."

In June, David had his preliminary answers. "The A-four strain," he said, "has twenty-five percent fertility." Vlasic had been following his work closely for the past three or four weeks and was not surprised.

Walt stared at him in disbelief. "Are you sure?" he whispered after a moment.

"The fourth generation of cloned sterile mice showed the same degeneracy that all clones show by then," David said. "But they also had a twenty-five percent fertility factor. The offspring have shorter lives, but more fertile individuals. This trend continues to the sixth generation, where fertility is up to ninety-four percent, and life expectancy starts to climb up again, and then it's on its way to normalcy." He had it all on the charts that Walt now studied. A, A^1, A^2, A^3, A^4, and then the offspring by sexual reproduction, a, a^1, a^2 . . . There were no clone strains after A^4; none had survived to maturity.

David leaned back and closed his eyes. He thought about bed and a blanket up around his neck and black, black sleep. "Higher organisms must reproduce sexually or die out, and the ability to do so is there. Something remembers and heals itself," he said dreamily.

"You'll be a great man when you publish," Vlasic said softly, his hand on David's shoulder. He then moved to sit next to Walt, to point out some of the details that Walt might miss. "A marvelous piece of work," he said, his eyes glowing as he looked over the pages. "Marvelous." Then he glanced back at David. "Of course, you are aware of the other implications of your work."

David opened his eyes and met Vlasic's gaze. He nodded. Walt, puzzled, looked from one to the other of them. David got up and stretched. "I have to sleep," he said.

But it was a long time before he slept. He had a single room at the hospital, more fortunate than most. The hospital had more than two hundred beds, but few single rooms. The implications, he mused. He had been aware of them from the start, although he had not admitted it even to himself then, and was not ready to discuss it now. Three of the women were pregnant finally, after a year and a half. Margaret was near term, the baby well and kicking at the moment. Five more weeks, he thought. Five more weeks, and perhaps he never would have to discuss the implications of his work.

But Margaret didn't wait five weeks. In two weeks she gave birth to a stillborn child. Zelda had a miscarriage the following week, and in the next week May lost her child. That spring the rains kept them from planting anything more than a truck garden.

Walt began testing the men for fertility. He reported to David and Vlasic that no man in the valley was fertile.

"So," Vlasic said softly, "we now see the significance of David's work."

Winter came early in sheets of icy rain that went on day after day after day. The work in the laboratories increased, and David found himself blessing his grandfather for his purchase of Selnick's equipment, which had come with detailed instructions for making artificial placentas as well as nearly completed work on computer programs for chemical amniotic fluids. When David had gone to talk to Selnick about the equipment, Selnick had insisted—madly, David had thought at the time—that he take everything or nothing. "You'll see," he had said wildly. "You'll see." The following week he hanged himself, and the equipment was on its way to the Virginia valley.

They worked and slept in the lab, leaving only for meals. The winter rains gave way to spring rains, and a new softness was in the air.

David was hardly aware of the spring until one day his mother found him in the cafeteria. He hadn't seen her for weeks, and would have brushed past her with a quick hello if she hadn't

stopped him. She looked strange, childlike; he turned from her to stare out the window, waiting for her to release his arm.

"Celia's coming home," she told him. "She's well, she says."

David felt frozen; he continued to stare out the window, seeing nothing. "Where is she now?" He listened to the rustle of cheap paper and when it seemed that his mother was not going to answer him, he wheeled about. "*Where is she?*"

"Miami," she said finally, after scanning the two pages. "It's postmarked Miami, I think. It's over two weeks old. Dated May twenty-eighth. She never got any of our mail."

David didn't read the letter until his mother had left the cafeteria. *I was in Colombia for a while, eight months, I think. And I got a touch of the bug that nobody wants to name.* The writing was spindly and uncertain. He looked for Walt.

"I have to go get her. She can't walk in on that gang at the Wiston place."

"You know you can't leave now."

"It isn't a question of can or can't. I have to."

Walt studied him for a moment, then shrugged. "How will you get there and back? No gas. You know we don't dare use it for anything but the harvest."

"I know," David said impatiently. "I'll take Mike and the cart. I can stay on the back roads with Mike." He knew that Walt was calculating, as he had done, the time involved, and he felt his face tightening, his hands clenching. Walt simply nodded. "I'll leave as soon as it's light in the morning." Again Walt nodded. "Thanks," David said suddenly. He meant: for not arguing with him, for not pointing out what both already knew; that there was no way of knowing how long he would have to wait for Celia, that she might never make it to the farm.

Three miles from the Wiston farm David unhitched the cart and hid it in thick underbrush. He swept the tracks where he had left the dirt road, then led Mike into the woods. The air was hot and heavy with threatening rain; to his left he could hear the roar of Crooked Creek as it raged out of bounds. The ground was spongy and he walked carefully, not wanting to sink to his knees

in unsuspected mud here in the lowlands. The Wiston farm always had been flood-prone; it enriched the soil, Grandfather Wiston had claimed, not willing to damn nature for its periodic rampages. "God didn't mean for this piece of ground to have to bear year after year after year," he said. "Comes a time when the earth needs a rest, same as you and me. We'll let it be this year, give it some clover when the ground dries out." David started to climb, still leading Mike, who whinnied softly at him now and again.

"Just to the knob, boy," David said quietly. "Then you can rest and eat meadow grass until she gets here." The horse whinnied.

Grandfather Wiston had taken him to the knob once, when David was twelve. He remembered the day, hot and still, like this day, he thought, and Grandfather Wiston had been straight and strong. At the knob his grandfather had paused and touched the massive bole of a white oak tree. "This tree saw the Indians in that valley, David, and the first settlers, and my great-grandfather when he came along. It's our friend, David. It knows all the family secrets."

"Is it still your property up here, Grandfather?"

"Up to and including this tree, son. Other side's national forest land, but this tree, it's on our land. Yours too, David. One day you'll come up here and put your hand on this tree and you'll know it's your friend, just like it's been my friend all my life. God help us all if anyone ever lays an ax to it."

They had gone on that day, down the other side of the knob, then up again, farther and steeper this time until once more his grandfather had stopped and, his hand on David's shoulder, paused for a few moments. "This is how this land looked a million years ago, David." Time had shifted suddenly for the boy; a million years ago, or a hundred million, was all the same distant past, and he had imagined the tread of giant reptiles. He had imagined that he smelled the fetid breath of a tyrannosaur. It was cool and misty beneath the tall trees, and under them the saplings grew, their branches spread horizontally as if to catch any stray bit of sunlight that penetrated the high canopy, and where the

sun did find a path through, it was golden and soft, the sun of another time. In even deeper shadows grew bushes and shrubs, and at the foot of it all were the mosses and lichens, liverworts and ferns. The arching, heaving roots of the trees were clothed in velvet emerald plants.

David stumbled and caught himself against the giant oak tree that was, somehow, his friend. He pressed his cheek against the rough bark, and stayed there for a few minutes. Then he pushed himself away and looked up through the luxuriant branches; he could see no sky beyond them. When it rained, the tree would protect him from the full force of the storm, but he needed shelter from the fine drops that eventually would make their way through the leaves to fall quietly on the absorbent ground.

He examined the farm through his binoculars. Behind the house there was a garden being tended by five people, impossible to tell immediately if they were male or female. Long-haired, jeans, barefoot, thin. It didn't matter. He noted that the garden was not producing yet, that the plants were sparse and frail. He studied the east field, aware that it was changed, not certain how. Then he realized that it was planted to corn. Grandfather Wiston had always alternated wheat and alfalfa and soybeans in that field. The lower fields were flooded, and the north field was grown up in grasses and weeds. He studied the people he could see and swung the glasses slowly over the buildings. He spotted seventeen of them altogether. No child younger than eight or nine. No sign of Celia, nor of any recent use of the road; it was also overgrown with weeds. No doubt the people down there were just as happy to let the road hide under weeds.

He built a leanto against the oak where he could lie down and observe the farm. He used fir branches to roof his shelter, and when the storm came half an hour later, he stayed dry. Rivulets ran among the garden rows below, and the farmyard turned silver and sparkly from this distance, although he knew that closer at hand it would simply be muddy water, inches deep. The ground was too saturated in the valley to absorb any more water. It would have to run off into Crooked Creek, which was inching higher and

higher toward the north field and the vulnerable corn there.

By the third day the water had started to invade the cornfield, and he pitied the people who stood and watched helplessly. The garden was still being tended, but it would be a meager harvest. By now he had counted twenty-two people; he thought that was all of them. During the storm that lashed the valley that afternoon, he heard Mike whinny. He crawled from the leanto and stood up. Mike, down the slope of the knob, wouldn't mind the rain much, and he was protected from the wind. Still he whinnied again, and then again. Cautiously, holding his shotgun in one hand, shielding his eyes with the other, David edged around the tree. A figure stumbled up the knob haltingly, stopping with bowed head often, not looking up, probably blinded by the rain. Suddenly David threw the shotgun under the leanto and ran to meet her. "Celia!" he cried. "Celia!"

She stopped and raised her head, and the rain ran over her cheeks, plastered her hair to her forehead. She dropped the shoulder bag that had weighed her down and ran toward him, and only when he caught her and held her tight and hard did he realize that he was weeping, as she was.

Under the leanto he pulled her wet clothes off and rubbed her dry, then wrapped her in one of his shirts. Her lips were blue, her skin seemed almost translucent; it was an unearthly white.

"I knew you'd be here," she said. Her eyes were very large, deep blue, bluer than he remembered, or bluer in contrast to her pale skin. Always before she had been sunburned.

"I knew you'd come here," he said. "When did you eat?"

She shook her head. "I didn't believe it was this bad here. I thought it was propaganda. Everyone thinks it's propaganda."

He lighted the Sterno. She sat wrapped in his plaid shirt and watched him as he opened a can of stew.

"Who are those people down there?"

"Squatters. Grandmother and Grandfather Wiston died last year. That gang showed up. They gave Aunt Hilda and Uncle Eddie a choice, join them or get out. They didn't give Wanda any chance at all. They kept her."

She stared down the valley and nodded slowly. "I didn't know it was this bad. I didn't believe it." Without looking back at him she asked then, "And Mother, Father?"

"They're dead, Celia. Flu, both of them. Last winter."

"I didn't get any letters," she said. "Almost two years. They made us leave Brazil, you know. But there wasn't any transportation home. We went to Colombia. They promised to let us go home in three months. And then they came one night and said we had to get out immediately. There were riots, you know."

He nodded, although she was still staring down at the valley and couldn't see. He wanted to tell her to weep for her parents, to cry out, so that he could take her in his arms and try to comfort her. But she continued to sit motionless and speak in a dead voice.

"They were coming for us, for the Americans. They blame us for letting them starve. They really believe that everything is still all right here. I did too. No one believed any of the reports. And the mobs were coming for us. We left on a small boat, a skiff. Nineteen of us. They shot at us when we got too near Cuba."

David touched her arm, and she jerked and trembled. "Celia, turn around and eat now. Don't talk any longer. Later. You can tell us about it later."

She shook her head. "Never again. I'll never mention any of it again, David. I just wanted you to know there was nothing I could do. I wanted to come home and there wasn't any way."

The storm was over, and the night air was cool. They huddled under a blanket and sat without talking, drinking hot black coffee. When the cup began to tilt in Celia's hand, David took it from her and gently lowered her to the bed he had prepared. "I love you, Celia," he said softly. "I've always loved you."

"I love you, too, David. Always." Her eyes were closed and her lashes were very black on her white cheeks. David leaned over and kissed her forehead, pulled the blanket higher about her, and watched her sleep for a long time before he lay down beside her.

The next morning they left the oak tree and started for the Sumner farm. She rode Mike until they got to the cart; by then

she was trembling with exhaustion and her lips were blue again, although the day was already hot. There wasn't room for her to lie down in the cart, so he padded the back of the wooden seat with his bedroll and blanket, and let her sit behind him where she could at least put her head back and rest, when the road wasn't too bumpy. She smiled faintly when he covered her legs with another shirt, the one he had been wearing.

"It isn't cold, you know," she said matter-of-factly. "That goddamn bug does something to the heart, I think. No one would tell us anything about it. My symptoms are all in the circulatory system."

"How bad was it? When did you get it?"

"Eighteen months ago. Just before they made us leave Brazil. It swept Rio. That's where they took us when we got sick. Not many survived it. Hardly any of the later cases. It became more virulent as time went on."

He nodded. "Same here. Something like sixty percent fatal, increasing up to eighty percent by now, I guess."

There was a long silence then, and he thought perhaps she had drifted off to sleep. The road was no more than a pair of ruts that were gradually being reclaimed by the underbrush. Already grass covered it almost totally, except where the rains had washed the dirt away and left only rocks. Mike walked deliberately, and David didn't hurry him.

"David, how many are up at the northern end of the valley?"

"About one hundred and ten now," he said. He thought, two out of three dead, but he didn't say it.

"And the hospital? Was it built?"

"It's there. Walt is running it."

"David, while you're driving, now that you can't watch me for reactions or anything, just tell me about it here. What's been happening, who's alive, who's dead. Everything."

When they stopped for lunch hours later, she said, "David, will you make love to me now, before the rains start again?"

They lay under a stand of yellow poplars and the leaves rustled incessantly with a motion that needed no appreciable wind to

start. Under the susurrous trees, their own voices became whispers. She was so thin and so pale, and inside she was so warm and alive; her body rose to meet his and her breasts seemed to lift, to seek his touch. Her fingers were in his hair, on his back, digging into his flanks, strong now, then relaxed and trembling, then clenched into fists that opened spasmodically; and he felt her nails distantly, aware that his back was being clawed, but distantly, distantly. And finally there were only the susurrant leaves.

"I've loved you for more than twenty years, did you realize that?" he said.

She laughed. "Remember when I broke your arm?"

Later, in the cart again, her voice came from behind him, softly, sadly. "We're finished, aren't we, David? You, I, all of us?"

And he thought, Walt be damned, promises be damned, secrecy be damned. And he told her about the clones developing under the mountain, in the laboratory deep in the Great Bear Cave.

Celia started to work in the laboratory a week later. "It's the only way I'll ever get to see you at all," she said when David protested. "I promised Walt I would work only four hours a day to start. Okay?"

David took her through the lab the following morning. The entrance to the cave was concealed in the furnace room of the hospital basement. The door was steel, set in the limestone bedrock. As soon as they stepped through the doorway, the air was cold and David put a coat about Celia's shoulders. "We keep them here at all times," he said, taking a second coat from a wall hanger. "Twice government inspectors have come here, and it might look suspicious if we put them on to go down the cellar. They won't be back," he said. She nodded.

The passageway was dimly lighted, the floor smooth. It went four hundred feet to another steel door. This one opened into the first cave chamber, a large, high-domed room. It had been left almost as they had found it, with stalactites and stalagmites on

all sides, but now there were many cots, and picnic tables and benches, and a row of cooking tables and serving tables. "Our emergency room, for the 'hot' rains," David said, hurrying her through. There was another passage, narrower and rougher than the first. At the end of this passage was the animal experiment room.

One wall had been cut through and the computer installed, looking grotesquely out of place against a wall of pale pink travertine. In the center of the room were tanks and vats and pipes, all stainless steel and glass. On either side of these were the tanks that held the animal embryos. Celia stared without moving for several moments, then turned to look at David with startled eyes. "How many tanks do you have?"

"Enough to clone six hundred animals of varying sizes," he said. "We took a lot of them out, put them in the other side, and we're not using all that we have here. We're afraid our supplies of chemicals will run out, and so far we haven't come up with alternatives that we can extract from anything at our disposal here."

Eddie Beauchamp came from the side of the tanks, jotting figures in a ledger. He grinned at David and Celia. "Slumming?" he asked. He checked his figures against a dial and adjusted it a fraction, and continued down the row checking the other dials, stopping now and again to make a minor adjustment.

Celia's eyes questioned David and he shook his head. Eddie didn't know what they were doing in the other lab. They walked past the tanks, row after row of them, all sealed, with only the needles of the meters and gauges to indicate that there was anything inside. They returned to the corridor. David led her through another doorway, another shorter passage, then unlocked a door and took her into the second laboratory.

Walt looked up as they entered, nodded, turned again to his desk. Vlasic didn't even look up. Sarah smiled and hurried past them and sat down before a computer console and began to type. Another woman in the room didn't seem to be aware that anyone had come in. Hilda. Celia's aunt. David glanced at Celia, but she

was staring wide-eyed at the tanks, and in this room the tanks were glass-fronted. Each was filled with a pale liquid, a yellow so faint that the color seemed almost illusory. Floating in the liquid were sacs, no larger than small fists. Slender transparent tubes connected the sacs to the top of the tanks; each one was attached to a pipe that led back into a large stainless steel apparatus which seemed to be covered with dials.

Celia walked slowly down the aisle between the tanks, stopped midway and didn't move again for a long time. David took her arm. She was trembling slightly.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I . . . it's a shock, seeing them. I . . . maybe I didn't quite believe it." There was a film of perspiration on her face.

"Better take off the coat now," David said. "We have to keep it pretty warm in here. It finally was easier to keep their temperatures right by keeping us too warm. The price we pay," he said, smiling slightly.

"All the lights? The heat? The computer? You can generate that much electricity?"

He nodded. "That'll be our tour tomorrow, or sometime. Like everything else around here, the generating system has bugs in it. We can store enough power for no longer than six hours, and we just don't let it go out for more than that."

She nodded. "Six hours is a lot. If you stop breathing for six minutes, you're dead." With her hands clasped behind her she stepped closer to the shiny control system at the end of the room. "This isn't the computer. What is it?"

"It's a computer terminal. The computer controls the input of nutrients and oxygen, and the output of toxins." He nodded toward the wall. "The animal room is on the other side. Those tanks are linked to it, too. Separate set of systems, but the same machinery."

She nodded again. They went through the nursery for the animals, and then the nursery for the human babies. There was the dissection room, several small offices where the scientists

could withdraw to work, the stock rooms. In every room except the one where the human clones were being grown, people were working. "They never saw a bunsen burner or a test tube before, but they have become scientists and technicians practically overnight," David said. "And thank God for that, or it never would have worked. I don't know what they think we're doing now, but they don't ask questions. They just do their jobs."

In August, Avery Handley got through to a shortwave contact in Richmond who warned of a band of marauders working up the valley. "They're bad," he said. "They took over the Phillpotts' place, ransacked it, and then burned it to the ground."

In September they fought off the first attack. In October they learned the band was grouping for a second attack, this time with thirty to forty men. "We can't keep fighting them off," Walt said. "They must know we have food here. They'll come from all directions this time. They know we're watching for them."

"We should blow up the dam," Clarence said. "Wait until they're in the upper valley and flood them out."

The meeting was being held in the cafeteria, with everyone present. Celia's hand tightened in David's, but she didn't protest. No one protested.

"They'll try to take the mill," Clarence went on. "They'll probably think there's wheat there, or something." A dozen men volunteered to stand guard at the mill. Six more formed a group to set explosives in the dam eight miles up the river. Others would be a scouting party.

David and Celia left the meeting early. He had volunteered for everything and had been turned down. He was not one of the expendable ones. The rains had become "hot" again, and the people were all sleeping in the cave. David and Celia, Walt, Vlasic, the others who worked in the various labs, all slept there on cots. In one of the small offices David held Celia's hand and they whispered before they fell asleep. Their talk was of their childhood.

Long after Celia fell asleep David stared into the blackness, still holding her hand. She had grown even thinner, and earlier that

week when he had tried to get her to leave the lab to rest, Walt had said, "Leave her be." She stirred fitfully, and he knelt by the side of her cot and held her; he could feel her heart flutter wildly for a moment. Then she was still again and slowly he released her and sat on the stone floor with his eyes closed. Later he heard Walt moving about, the creaking of his cot in the next office. David was getting stiff, and finally he returned to his own bed.

The next day the people worked to get everything up to high ground. Nothing could be spared, and board by board they carried a barn up the hillside and stacked the pieces. Two days later the signal was given and the dam was destroyed. David and Celia stood in one of the upper hospital rooms and watched together as the wall of water roared down the valley. It was like a jet takeoff; a crowd furious with an umpire's decision; an express train out of control; a roar like nothing he had ever heard, or like everything he had ever heard, recombined to make this noise that shook the building, that vibrated in his bones. A wall of water, fifteen feet high, twenty feet high, raced down the valley, accelerating as it came, smashing, destroying everything in its path.

They walked back through the empty hospital, through the long dimly lighted passage, through the large chamber where the people were trying to find comfortable positions on the cots, on the benches, through the smaller passages and finally into the lab office.

"How many people did we kill?" she asked, stepping out of her jeans. She turned her back to lay her clothes on the foot of her cot. Her buttocks were nearly as flat as an adolescent boy's. When she faced him again, her ribs seemed to be straining against her skin. She looked at him for a moment, and then came to him and held his head tight against her chest as he sat on his cot and she stood naked before him. He could feel her tears as they fell onto his cheek.

There was a hard freeze in November, and with the valley flooded and the road and bridges gone, they knew they were safe from attack, at least until spring. The people had moved out of the cave again, and work in the lab went on at the same numbing

pace. The fetuses were developing, growing, moving now with sudden motions of feet and elbows. David was working on substitutes for the chemicals that already were substituting for amniotic fluids. He worked each day until his vision blurred, or his hands refused to obey his directions, or Walt ordered him out of the lab. Celia was working longer hours now, still resting in the middle of the day for several hours, but she returned after that and stayed almost as late as David did.

David was aware of her, as he always was, even when preoccupied with his own work. He was aware that she stood up, that she didn't move for a moment, and when she said, in a tremulous voice that betrayed disbelief, "David . . . David . . ." he was already starting to his feet. He caught her as she crumpled.

Her eyes were open, her look almost quizzical, asking what he could not answer, expecting no answer. A tremor passed through her and she closed her eyes, and although her lids fluttered, she did not open them again.

"David, are you going to pull yourself together? You just giving up?" Walt didn't wait for a reply. He sat down on the only chair in the tiny room and leaned forward, cupping his chin, staring at the floor. "We've got to tell them. Sarah thinks there'll be trouble. So do I."

David stood at the window, looking at the bleak landscape, done in grays and blacks and mud colors. It was raining, but the rain had become clean. The river was a gray swirling monster that he could glimpse from up here, a dull reflection of the dull sky.

"They might try to storm the lab," Walt went on. "God knows what they might decide to do."

"I don't care," David said.

"You're going to care! Because those babies are going to come busting out of those sacs, and those babies are the only hope we have, and you know it. Our genes, yours, mine, Celia's, those genes are the only thing that stand between us and oblivion." He was white, his lips were pale, his eyes sunken. There was a tic in his cheek that David never had seen before.

"Why now?" David asked. "Why change the plan and tell them now, so far ahead of time?"

"Because it isn't that far ahead of time." Walt rubbed his eyes hard. "Something's going wrong, David. I don't know what it is. Something's not working. I think we're going to have our hands full with prematures."

David couldn't stop the rapid calculations he made. "It's twenty-six weeks," he said. "We can't handle that many premature babies."

"I know that." Walt put his head back and closed his eyes. "We don't have much choice," he said. "We lost one yesterday. Three today. We have to bring them out and treat them like preemies."

Slowly David nodded. "Which ones?" he asked, but he knew. Walt told him the names, and again he nodded. He had known that they were not his, not Walt's, not Celia's. "What are you planning?" he asked then, and sat down on the side of his bed.

"I have to sleep," Walt said. "Then a meeting, posted for seven. After that we prepare the nursery for a hell of a lot of preemies. As soon as we're ready, we begin getting them out. That'll be morning. We need nurses, half a dozen, more if we can get them. Sarah says Margaret would be good. I don't know."

David didn't know either. Margaret's four-year-old son had been one of the first to die of the plague, and she had lost a baby in stillbirth. He trusted Sarah's judgment, however. "Think between them they can get enough others, tell them what to do, see that they do it properly?"

Walt mumbled something, and one hand fell off the chair arm. He jerked upright.

"Okay, Walt, you get in my bed," David said, almost resentfully. "I'll go down to the lab, get things rolling there. I'll come up for you at six-thirty." Walt didn't protest, but fell onto the bed without bothering to take off his shoes. David pulled them off. Walt's socks were mostly holes, but probably they kept his ankles warm. David left them on, pulled the blanket over him, and went to the lab.

At seven the hospital cafeteria was crowded when Walt stood

up to make his announcement. "There's not a person in this room hungry tonight. We don't have any more plague here. The rain is washing away the radioactivity. We have food stores that will carry us for years even if we can't plant crops in the spring. We have men capable of doing just about anything we might ever want done." He paused and looked at them again, from left to right, back again, taking his time. He had their absolute attention. "What we don't have," he said, his voice hard and flat now, "is a woman who can conceive a child, or a man who could impregnate her if she was able to bear."

There was a ripple of movement, like a collective sigh, but no one spoke. Walt said, "You know how we are getting our meat. You know the cattle are good, the chickens are good. Tomorrow, ladies and gentlemen, we will have our own babies developed the same way."

There was a moment of utter silence, of stillness, then they broke. Clarence leaped to his feet shouting at Walt. Vernon fought to get to the front of the room, but there were too many people between him and Walt. One of the women pulled on Walt's arm, almost dragging him over, screaming in his face. Walt yanked free and climbed onto a table. "Stop this! I'm going to answer any questions, but not this way."

For the next three hours they questioned, argued, prayed, formed alliances, reformed them as arguments broke out in the smaller groups. At ten Walt took his place on the table again and called out, "We will recess this discussion until tomorrow night at seven. Coffee will be served now, and I understand we have cakes and sandwiches." He jumped from the table and moved to the door too fast to let any of them catch up to him. He and David hurried to the cave entrance and went through, locking the massive door behind them.

"Clarence was ugly," Walt muttered. "Bastard."

David's father, Walt, and Clarence were brothers, David reminded himself, but he couldn't help regarding Clarence as an outsider, a stranger with a fat belly and a lot of money who expected instant obedience from the world.

"They might organize," Walt said after a moment. "We'll have to be ready for them."

David nodded. They had counted on delaying this meeting until they had live babies, human babies that laughed and gurgled and took milk from the bottle. Instead they would have a roomful of not-quite-finished preemies, certainly not human-looking, with no more human appeal than a calf born too soon.

They worked all night preparing the nursery. Sarah had enlisted Margaret, Hilda, Lucy, and half a dozen other women. They were all gowned and masked professionally. One of them dropped a basin and three others screamed in unison. David cursed under his breath. They would be all right when they had the babies, he told himself.

The bloodless births started at five forty-five, and at twelve thirty they had twenty-five infants. Four died in the first hour, another died three hours later; the rest of them thrived. The only baby left in the tanks was the fetus that would be Celia, nine weeks younger than the others.

The first visitor Walt permitted in the nursery was Clarence. After that there was no further talk of destroying the inhuman monstrosities.

There was a celebration party, and a drawing was held to select eleven female names and ten male. In the record book the babies were labeled R–1 strain: Repopulation 1. But in David's mind, as in Walt's, the babies were W–1, D–1, and soon, C–1 . . .

For the next months there was no shortage of nurses, male or female, no shortage of help doing any of the chores that so few had done before. Everyone wanted to become a doctor or a biologist, Walt grumbled, but he was sleeping more now, and the fatigue lines on his face were smoothing out. Often he would nudge David and tow him along, away from the nursery, propel him toward his own room in the hospital and see to it that he remained there for a night's sleep. One night as they walked side by side back to their rooms, Walt said, "Now you understand what I meant when I said this was all that mattered, don't you?"

David understood. Every time he looked down at the tiny, pink new Celia he understood more fully.

David watched the boys from the window in Walt's office. There was Clarence, already looking too pudgy—he'd be fat in another three or four years. And a young Walt, frowning in concentration over a problem that he wouldn't put on paper until he had a solution. Mark, too pretty almost, but determinedly manly, always trying harder than the others to endure, to jump higher, run faster, hit harder. And D–4, himself . . . He turned away and pondered the future of the boys, uncles, fathers, grandfathers, all the same age. He was starting a headache again.

"They're inhuman, aren't they?" he said bitterly to Walt. "They come and go, and we know nothing about them. What do they think? Why do they hang so close to each other? Why won't they talk to us?"

"Remember that old cliché, generation gap? It's here, I reckon." Walt was looking very old. He was tired, and seldom tried to hide it any longer. He looked up at David and said, "Maybe they're afraid of us."

David nodded. He had thought of that, too. "I know why Hilda did it," he said. "I didn't at the time, but now I know." Hilda had strangled the small girl who looked more like her every day.

"Me too." Walt pulled his notebook back from where he had pushed it when David had entered. "It's a bit spooky to walk into a crowd that's all you, in various stages of growth. They do cling to their own kind." He started to write then, and David left him.

Spooky, he thought, and veered from the laboratory where he had been heading originally. Let the damn embryos do their thing without him. He knew he didn't want to enter because D–1 or D–2 would be there working. The D–4 strain would be the one, though, to prove or disprove the experiment. If Four didn't make it, then chances were that Five wouldn't either, and then what? A mistake. Woops, wrong, sir. Sorry about that.

Behind the hospital, he climbed the ridge over the cave, and sat down on an outcrop of limestone that felt cool and smooth. The boys were clearing another field. They worked well together, with little conversation and much laughter that seemed to arise spontaneously. A line of girls came into view from nearer the

river; they were carrying baskets of berries. Blackberries and gunpowder, he thought suddenly, and he remembered the ancient celebrations of the Fourth of July, with blackberry stains and fireworks, sulfur for the chiggers. And birds. Thrushes, meadowlarks, warblers, purple martins. Three Celias came into view, swinging easily with the weight of the baskets, a stairway succession of Celias. He shouldn't do that, he reminded himself harshly. They weren't Celias, none of them had that name. They were Mary and Ann and something else. He couldn't remember for a moment the third one's name, and he knew it didn't matter. The one in the middle might have pushed him from the loft just yesterday; the one on the left might have been the one who rolled in savage combat with him in the mud.

Once, three years ago, he had had a fantasy in which Celia-3 had come to him shyly and asked that he take her. And in the fantasy he had taken her; in his dreams for weeks to come, he had taken her, over and over and over again. And he had awakened weeping for his own Celia. Unable to endure it any longer, he had sought out C–3 and asked her haltingly if she would come to his room with him, and she had drawn back quickly, involuntarily, with fear written too clearly on her smooth face for her to pretend it was not there.

"David, forgive me. I was startled . . ."

They were promiscuous, indeed it was practically required of them to be free in their loving. No one could anticipate how many of them eventually would be fertile, what the percentage of boys to girls would be. Walt was able to test the males, but since the tests for female fertility required rabbits, which they did not have, he said the best test for fertility was pregnancy. The children lived together, and promiscuity was the norm. But only with one another. They all shunned the elders. David had felt his eyes burning as the girl spoke, still moving away from him.

He had turned and left abruptly, and had not spoken to her again in the intervening years. Sometimes he thought he saw her watching him warily, and each time he glared at her and hurried away.

C–1 had been like his own child. He had watched her develop, watched her learn to walk, talk, feed herself. His child, his and Celia's. C–2 had been much the same. A twin, somewhat smaller, identical nevertheless. But C–3 had been different. No, he corrected himself, his perceptions of her had been different. When he looked at her now he saw Celia, and he ached.

He had grown chilled on the ridge, and he realized that the sun had set long ago and that the lanterns had been lighted below. The scene looked pretty, like a sentimental picture titled "Rural Life." The large farmhouse with glowing windows, the blackness of the barn; closer, the hospital and staff building with the cheerful yellow lights in the windows. Stiffly he descended into the valley again. He had missed dinner, but he was not hungry.

"David!" one of the youngest boys, a Five, called to him. David didn't know whom he had been cloned from. There were many people he hadn't known when they were that young. He stopped and the boy ran to him, then past him, calling as he went, "Dr. Walt wants you."

On Walt's desk and spread over a table were the medical charts of the Four strain. "I've finished," Walt said. "You'll have to double-check, of course."

David scanned the final lines quickly, H–4 and D–4. He didn't look up, but nodded. "Have you told the two boys yet?"

"I told them all. They understand." Walt rubbed his eyes. "They have no secrets from each other," he said. "They understand about the girls' ovulation periods, about the necessity of keeping records. If any of those girls can conceive, they'll do it." His voice was almost bitter when he looked up at David. "They're taking it over completely from now on."

"What do you mean?"

"W–1 made a copy of my records for his files. He'll follow it through."

David nodded. The elders were being excluded again. The time was coming when they wouldn't be needed for anything—extra mouths to feed, nothing else. He sat down and for a long time he and Walt sat in companionable silence.

In class the following day nothing seemed different. No pair bonding, David thought cynically. They accepted being mated as casually as the cattle did. If there was any jealousy of the two fertile males, it was well hidden. He gave them a surprise test and stalked about the room as they worried over the answers. They would all pass, he knew—not only pass, but do well. They had motivation. They were learning in their teens what he hadn't grasped in his twenties. There were no educational frills, no distractions. Work in the classroom, in the fields, in the kitchens, in the laboratories. They worked interchangeably, incessantly—the first really classless society. He pulled his thoughts back when he realized that they were finishing already. He had allowed an hour, and they were finishing in forty minutes—slightly longer for the Fives, who, after all, were two years younger than the Fours.

The two oldest D's headed for the laboratory after class, and David followed them. They were talking earnestly until he drew near. He remained in the laboratory for fifteen minutes of silent work, then left. Outside the door he paused and once more could hear the murmur of quiet voices. Angrily he tramped down the hallway.

In Walt's office, he raged. "Damn it, they're up to something! I can smell it."

Walt regarded him with a detached thoughtfulness. David felt helpless. There was nothing he could point to, nothing he could attach significance to, but there was a feeling, an instinct that wouldn't be quieted.

"All right," David said, almost in desperation. "Look at how they took the test results. Why aren't the boys jealous? Why aren't the girls making passes at the two available studs?"

Walt shook his head.

"I don't even know what they're doing in the lab anymore," David said. "And Harry has been relegated to caretaker for the livestock." He paced the room in frustration. "They're taking over."

"We knew they would one day," Walt reminded him gently.

"But there are only seventeen Fives, eighteen Fours. Out of the lot there might be six or seven fertile ones. With a decreased life expectancy. With an increased chance of abnormality. Don't they know that?"

"David, relax. They know all that. They're living it. Believe me, they know." Walt stood up and put his arm about David's shoulders. "We've done it, David. Can't you understand that? We made it happen. Even if there are only three fertile girls now, they could have up to thirty babies, David. And the next generation will have more who will be fertile. We have done it, David. Let them carry it now if they want to."

By the end of summer two of the Four girls were pregnant. There was a celebration in the valley that was as frenetic as any Fourth of July holiday any of the older people could remember.

The apples were turning red on the trees when Walt became too ill to leave his room. Two more girls were pregnant; one of them was a Five. Every day David spent hours with Walt, no longer wanting to work at all in the laboratory, feeling an outsider in the classrooms, where the Ones were gradually taking over.

"You might have to deliver those babies come spring," Walt said, grinning. "Might start a class in delivery procedures. Walt–3 is ready, I guess."

"We'll manage," David said. "Don't worry about it. I expect you'll be there."

"Maybe. Maybe." Walt closed his eyes for a moment and said, "You were right about them, David. They're up to something."

David leaned forward, and involuntarily lowered his voice. "What do you know?"

Walt looked at him and shook his head. "About as much as you did when you first came to me early this summer. David, find out what they're doing in the lab. And find out what they think about the pregnant girls. Harry tells me they have devised a new immersion suspension system that doesn't require artificial placentas. They're adding them as fast as they can." He sighed. "Harry has

cracked, David. Senile or crazy. W–1 can't do anything for him."

David stood up, but hesitated. "Walt, I think it's time you told me. What's wrong with you?"

"Get out of here, damn it," Walt said, but the timbre of his voice was gone, the force that should have propelled David from the room was not there.

David walked by the river for a long time. Find out. How? He hadn't been in the lab for weeks, months perhaps. No one needed him there any longer. The winters were getting colder, starting earlier, lasting longer, with more snows than he could remember from childhood. As soon as man stopped adding his megatons of filth to the atmosphere, he thought, the atmosphere had reverted to what it must have been long ago, moister weather summer and winter, more stars than he had ever seen before: the sky a clear endless blue by day, velvet blue-black at night with blazing stars that modern man had never seen.

The hospital wing where W–1 and W–2 were working now was ablaze with lights when David turned toward it. As he neared the hospital he began to hurry; there were too many lights, and he could see people moving behind the windows, too many people, elders.

Margaret met him in the lobby. She was weeping silently, oblivious of the tears that ran erratically down her cheeks. She wasn't yet fifty, but she looked older; she looked like an elder, David thought with a pang. When had they started calling themselves that? Was it because they had to differentiate somehow, and none of them had permitted himself to call the others what they were? Clones! he said to himself vehemently. Clones! Not quite human.

"What happened, Margaret?" She clutched his arm but couldn't speak, and he looked over her head at Warren, who was pale and shaking. "What happened?"

"Accident down at the mill. Jeremy and Eddie are dead. A couple of the young people were hurt. Don't know how bad. They're in there." He pointed toward the operating-room wing. "They left Clarence. Just walked away and left him. We brought

him up, but I don't know." He shook his head. "They just left him there and brought up their own."

David put Margaret aside and ran down the hall toward the emergency room. Sarah was working over Clarence while several of the elders moved back and forth to keep out of her way without leaving entirely.

David breathed a sigh of relief. Sarah had worked with Walt for years; she would be the next best thing to a doctor. He flung his coat off and hurried to her. "What can I do?"

"It's his back," she said tightly. She was very pale, but her hands were steady as she swabbed a long gash on Clarence's leg and put a heavy pad over it. "This needs stitches. But I'm afraid it's his back."

"Broken?"

"I think so. Internal injuries."

"Where the hell is W–1 or W–2?"

"With their own. They have two injuries, I think." She put his hand over the pad. "Hold it tight a minute." She used her stethoscope deliberately, peered into Clarence's eyes, and finally straightened and said, "I can't do a thing for him."

"Stitch his leg. I'm going to get W–1." David strode down the hall fast, not seeing any of the elders who moved out of his way. At the door to the operating room he was stopped by three of the young men. He saw an H–3 and said to him, "We have a man who's probably dying. Where's W–2?"

"Who?" H–3 asked, almost innocently.

David couldn't think of the name immediately. He stared at the young face, and he felt his fist tighten. "You know damn well who I mean. We need a doctor, and you have one or two in there. I'm going to bring one of them out."

He became aware of movement and turned to see four more of them approaching, two girls, two boys. Interchangeable, he thought. It didn't matter which ones did what. "Tell him I want him," he said harshly. One of the newcomers was a Cl–2, he realized, and still more harshly he said, "It's Clarence. Sarah thinks his back is broken."

Cl–2 didn't change his expression. They had moved very close. They encircled him, and behind him H–3 said, "As soon as they're through in there, I'll tell them, David." And David knew there was nothing he could do, nothing at all.

He stared at their smooth young faces; so familiar, living memories every one of them, like walking through his own past, seeing his aged and aging cousins rejuvenated, but with something missing. Familiar and alien, known and unknowable. Behind H–3 the swinging door opened and W–1 came out, still in surgical gown and mask, now down about his throat.

"I'll come now," he said, and the small group opened for him. He didn't look at David after dismissing him with one glance.

David followed him to the emergency room and watched his deft hands as he felt Clarence's body, tested for reflexes, probed confidently along the spinal column. "I'll operate," he said, and that same confidence came through with the words. He motioned for S–1 and W–2 to bring Clarence, and left once more.

Sarah had moved back out of the way, and now she slowly turned and stripped off the gloves she had put on in preparing to stitch up the leg wound. Warren watched the two young people cover Clarence, strap him securely, and wheel him out the door. No one spoke. Sarah methodically started to clean up the emergency-room equipment. Sarah finished her tasks and looked uncertainly about for something else to do.

"Will you take Margaret home and put her to bed?" David asked. She looked at him gratefully and nodded. When she was gone, David turned to Warren. "Someone has to see to the bodies, clean them up, prepare for burial."

"Sure, David," Warren said in a heavy voice. "I'll get Avery and Sam. We'll take care of it. I'll just go get them now and we'll take care of it. I'll . . . David, what have we done?" And his voice that had been too heavy, too dead, became almost shrill. "What are they?"

"What do you mean?"

"When the accident happened, I was down to the mill. Having a bite with Avery. He was just finishing up down there. Section

of the floor caved in, you know that old part where we should have put in a new floor last year, or year before. It gave way somehow. And suddenly there they were, the kids, out of nowhere. No one had time to go get them, to yell for them. Nothing, but there they were. They got their own two out of there and up to the hospital like their tails was on fire, David. Out of nowhere."

Several of the elders were still in the waiting room when David went there. Lucy and Vernon were sitting near the window, staring out at the black night. Since Clarence's wife had died, he and Lucy had lived together, not as man and wife, but for companionship, because as children they had been as close as brother and sister, and now each needed someone to cling to. Sometimes sister, sometimes mother, sometimes daughter, Lucy had fussed over him, sewed for him, fetched and carried for him, and now, if he died, what would she do? David went to her and took her cold hand. She was very thin, with dark hair that hadn't started to gray, and deep blue eyes that had twinkled with merriment once, a long, long time ago.

"Go on home, Lucy. I'll wait, and as soon as there is anything to tell you, I promise I'll come."

She continued to stare at him. David turned toward Vernon helplessly. Vernon's brother had been killed in the accident, but there was nothing to say to him.

"Let her be," Vernon said. "She has to wait."

David sat down, still holding Lucy's hand. After a moment or so she pulled it free gently and clutched it herself until both of her hands were white-knuckled. None of the young people came near the waiting room. David wondered where they were waiting to hear about the condition of their own. Or maybe they didn't have to wait anywhere, maybe they would just know. He pushed the thought aside angrily, not believing it, not able to be rid of it. A long time later W–1 entered and said to no one in particular, "He's resting. He'll sleep until tomorrow afternoon. Go on home now."

Lucy stood up. "Let me stay with him. In case he needs something, or there's a change."

"He won't be left alone," W–1 said. He turned toward the door, paused and glanced back, and said to Vernon, "I'm sorry about your brother." Then he left.

Lucy stood undecided until Vernon took her arm. "I'll see you home," he said, and she nodded. David watched them leave together. He turned off the light in the waiting room and walked slowly down the hall, not planning anything, not thinking about going home, or anywhere else. He found himself outside the office that W–1 used, and he knocked softly. W–1 opened the door. He looked tired, David thought, and wasn't sure that his surprise was warranted. Of course, he should be tired. Three operations. He looked like a young, tired Walt, too keyed up to go to sleep immediately, too fatigued to walk off the tension.

"Can I come in?" David asked hesitantly. W–1 nodded and moved aside, and David entered. He never had been inside this office.

"Clarence will not live," W–1 said suddenly, and his voice, behind David, because he had not yet moved from the door, was so like Walt's that David felt a thrill of something that might have been fear, or more likely, he told himself, just surprise again. "I did what I could," W–1 said. He walked around his desk and sat down.

W–1 sat quietly, with none of the nervous mannerisms that Walt exhibited, none of the finger tapping that was as much a part of Walt's conversation as his words. No pulling his ears or rubbing his nose. A Walt with something missing, David thought. They all had something missing, a dead area. Now, with fatigue drawing his face, W–1 sat unmoving, waiting patiently for David to begin, much the same way an adult might wait for a hesitant child to initiate a conversation.

"How did your people know about the accident?" David asked. "No one else knew."

W–1 shrugged. A time-consumer question, he seemed to imply. "We just knew."

"What are you doing in the lab now?" David asked, and heard a strained note in his voice. Somehow he had been made to feel like an interloper; his question sounded like idle chatter.

"Perfecting the methods," W–1 said. "The usual thing."

And something else, David thought, but he didn't press it. "The equipment should be in excellent shape for another ten years or more," he said. "And the methods, while probably not the best conceivable, are efficient enough. Why tamper now when the experiment seems to be proving itself?" For a moment he thought he saw a flicker of surprise cross W–1's face, but it was gone too swiftly and once more the smooth mask revealed nothing.

"Remember when one of your women killed one of us a long time ago, David? Hilda murdered the child of her own likeness. We all shared that death, and we realized that each of you is alone. We're not like you, David. I think you know it, but now you must accept it." He stood up. "And we won't go back to what you have."

David stood up also, and his legs felt curiously weak. He gripped the edge of the desk. "What exactly do you mean?"

"Sexual reproduction isn't the only answer. Just because the higher organisms evolved to it doesn't mean it's the best. Each time a species has died out, there has been another higher one to replace it."

"Cloning is one of the worst ways for a higher species," David said. "It stifles diversity." The weakness in his legs seemed to be climbing, and he felt his hands start to tremble. He clenched the desk harder.

"That's assuming diversity is beneficial. Perhaps it isn't," W–1 said. "You pay a high price for individuality."

"There is still the decline and the inevitable slide to extinction. Have you got around that?" David wanted suddenly to end this conversation, to hurry from the sterile office and the smooth unreadable face with the sharp eyes that seemed to know what he was feeling.

"Not yet," W–1 said slowly. "But we have the fertile members to fall back on until we do." He moved around his desk and walked toward the door. "I have to check my patients," he said, and held the door open for David.

"Before I leave," David said, "will you tell me what is the matter with Walt?"

"Don't you know?" W–1 shook his head. "I keep forgetting, you don't tell each other things, do you? He has cancer. Inoperable. It metastasized. He's dying, David. I thought you knew that."

David walked blankly for an hour or more, and finally found himself in his room, exhausted, unwilling yet to go to bed. He sat at his window until dawn, and then he went to Walt's room. When Walt woke up he reported what W–1 had told him.

"They'll use the fertile ones only to replenish their supply of clones," he said. "The humans among them will be pariahs. They'll destroy what we worked so hard to create."

"Don't let them do it, David. For God's sake, don't let them do it!" Walt's color was bad, and he was too weak to sit up. "Vlasic's mad, so he'll be of no help. You have to stop them somehow." Bitterly he said, "They want to take the easy way out, give up now when we know everything will work."

David didn't know if he was sorry or glad that he had told Walt. No more secrets, he thought. Never again. "I'll stop them somehow," he said. "I don't know how, or when. But soon."

A Four brought Walt's breakfast, and David returned to his room. He rested and slept fitfully for a few hours, then showered and went to the cave entrance, where he was stopped by a Two.

"I'm sorry, David," he said. "Jonathan says that you need a rest, that you are not to work now."

Wordlessly David turned and left. Jonathan. W–1. If they had decided to bar him from the lab, they could do it. He and Walt had planned it that way: the cave was impregnable. He thought of the elders, forty-four of them left, and two of that number terminally ill. One of the remaining elders insane. Forty-one then, twenty-nine women. Eleven able-bodied men. Ninety-four clones.

He waited for days for Harry Vlasic to appear, but no one had seen him in weeks, and Vernon thought he was living in the lab. He had all his meals there. David gave that up; he found D–1 in the dining room and offered his help in the lab.

"I'm too bored doing nothing," he said. "I'm used to working twelve hours a day or more."

"You should rest now that there are others who can take the load off you," D–1 said pleasantly. "Don't worry about the work, David. It is going quite well." He moved away, and David caught his arm.

"Why won't you let me in? Haven't you learned the value of an objective opinion?"

D–1 pulled away, and still smiling easily, said, "You want to destroy everything, David. In the name of mankind, of course. But still, we can't let you do that."

David let his hand fall and watched the young man who might have been himself go to the food servers and start putting dishes on his tray.

"I'm working on a plan," he lied to Walt again and again in the weeks that followed. Daily Walt grew feebler, and now he was in great pain.

David's father was with Walt most of the time now. He was gray and aged but in good health. He talked of their boyhood, of the coming hunting season, of the recession he feared might reduce his profits, of his wife, who had been dead for fifteen years. He was cheerful and happy, and Walt seemed to want him there.

In March, W–1 sent for David. He was in his office. "It's about Walt," he said. "We should not let him continue to suffer. He has done nothing to deserve this."

"He is trying to last until the girls have their babies," David said. "He wants to know."

"But it doesn't matter any longer," W–1 said patiently. "And meanwhile he suffers."

David stared at him with hatred.

W–1 continued to watch him for several more moments, then said, "We will decide." The next morning it was found that Walt had died in his sleep.

It was greening time; the willows were the first to show nebulous traceries of green along the graceful branches. Forsythias

and flaming bushes were in bloom, brilliant yellows and scarlets against the gray background. The river was high with spring runoffs up north and heavy March rains, but it was an expected high, not dangerous, not threatening this year. The air had a balminess that had been missing since September; the air was soft and smelled of wet woods and fertile earth. David sat on the slope overlooking the farm. There were calves in the field, and they looked the way spring calves always looked: thin legs, awkward, slightly stupid. No fields had been worked yet, but the garden was green: pale lettuce, blue-green kale, green spears of onions, dark green cabbage. The newest wing of the hospital, not yet painted, crude compared to the finished brick buildings, was being used already, and he could even see some of the young people at the windows studying. They had the best teachers, themselves, and the best students. They learned amazingly well from one another, better than they had in the early days.

They came out of the school in matched sets: four of this, three of that, two of another. He sought and found three Celias. He could no longer tell them apart; they were all grown-up Celias now, and indistinguishable. He watched them with no feeling of desire; no hatred moved him, no love. They vanished into the barn, and he looked up over the farm, into the hills on the other side of the valley. The ridges were hazy and had no sharp edges anywhere. They looked soft and welcoming. Soon, he thought. Soon. Before the dogwoods bloomed.

The night the first baby was born, there was another celebration. The elders talked among themselves, laughed at their own jokes, drank wine; the clones left them alone and partied at the other end of the room. When Vernon began to play his guitar and dancing started, David slipped away. He wandered on the hospital grounds for a few minutes, as though aimlessly, and then, when he was certain no one had followed him out, he began to trot toward the mill and the generator. Six hours, he thought. Six hours without electricity would destroy everything in the lab.

David approached the mill cautiously, hoping the rushing creek would mask any sound he might make. The building was

three stories high, very large, with windows ten feet above ground, on the level where the offices were. The ground floor was filled with machinery. In the back the hill rose sharply; David could reach the windows by bracing himself on the steep incline and steadying himself with one hand on the building. He found a window that went up easily when he pushed it, and in a moment he was inside a dark office. He closed the window, and then, moving slowly with his hands outstretched to avoid any obstacle, crossed the room to the door and opened it a crack. The mill was never left unattended, but he hoped that those on duty tonight would be down with the machinery. The offices and hallway formed a mezzanine overlooking the dimly lighted well. Grotesque shadows made the hallway strange, with deep pools of darkness and places where he would be clearly visible should anyone happen to look up at the right moment. Suddenly David stiffened. Voices.

He slipped his shoes off and opened the door wider. The voices were below him. Soundlessly he ran toward the control room, keeping close to the wall. He was almost to the door when the lights came on all over the building. There was a shout, and he could hear them running up the stairs. He made a dash for the door and yanked it open, slammed it behind him. There was no way to lock it. He pushed a file cabinet an inch or so, gave up, and picked up a metal stool by its legs. He raised it and swung it hard against the main control panel. At the same moment he felt a crushing pain in his shoulders, and he stumbled and fell forward as the lights went out.

He opened his eyes painfully. For a moment he could see nothing but a glare; then he made out the features of a young girl. She was reading a book, concentrating on it. Dorothy? She was his cousin Dorothy. He tried to rise, and she looked up and smiled at him.

"Dorothy? What are you doing here?" He couldn't get off the bed. On the other side of the room a door opened and Walt came in, also very young, unlined, with his nice brown hair ruffled.

David's head began to hurt, and he reached up to find bandages that came down almost to his eyes. Slowly memory came back and he closed his eyes, willing the memory to fade away again, to let them be Dorothy and Walt.

"How do you feel?" W–1 asked. David felt the cool fingers on his wrist. "You'll be all right. A slight concussion, badly bruised, I'm afraid. You're going to be pretty sore for a while."

Without opening his eyes, David asked, "Did I do much damage?"

"Very little," W–1 said.

Two days later David was asked to attend a meeting in the cafeteria. His head was still bandaged, but with little more than a strip of adhesive now. His shoulder ached. He went to the cafeteria slowly, with two of the clones as escorts.

Most of them were in the cafeteria. D–1 stood up and offered David a chair at the front of the room. David accepted it silently and sat down to wait. D–1 remained standing.

"Do you remember our class discussions about instinct, David?" D–1 asked. "We ended up agreeing that probably there are no instincts, only conditioned responses to certain stimuli. We have changed our minds about that. We agree now that there is still the instinct to preserve one's species. Preservation of the species is a very strong instinct, a drive, if you will." He looked at David and asked, "What are we to do with you?"

"Don't be an ass," David said sharply. "You are not a separate species."

D–1 didn't reply. None of them moved. They were watching him quietly, intelligently, dispassionately. David stood up and pushed his chair back. "Then let me work. I'll give you my word of honor that I won't try to disrupt anything again."

D–1 shook his head. "We discussed that. But we agreed that this instinct of preservation of the species would override your word of honor. As it would our own."

David felt his hands clench, and he straightened his fingers, forced them to relax. "Then you have to kill me."

"We talked about that, too," D–1 said gravely. "We don't want

to do it. We owe you too much. In time we will erect statues to you, Walt, Harry. We have very carefully recorded all of your efforts in our behalf. Our gratitude and affection for you won't permit us to kill you."

David looked about the room again, picking out familiar faces. Dorothy. Walt. Vernon. Margaret. Herbie. Celia. They all met his gaze without flinching. Here and there one of them smiled at him faintly.

"You tell me, then," he said finally.

"You have to go away," D–1 said. "You will be escorted for three days, downriver. There is a cart loaded with food, seeds, a few tools. The valley is fertile, the seeds will do well. It is a good time of year for starting a garden."

W–2 was one of the three who accompanied him for the first three days. They didn't speak. The boys took turns pulling the cart of supplies. David didn't offer to pull it. At the end of the third day, on the other side of the river from the Sumner farm, they left him. W–2 lingered a moment and said, "They wanted me to tell you, David. One of the girls you call Celia has conceived. One of the boys you call David impregnated her. They wanted you to know." Then he turned and joined the others. They vanished among the trees very quickly.

David slept where they had left him, and in the morning he continued south, leaving the cart behind, taking only enough food for the next few days. He stopped once to look at a maple seedling sheltered among the pines. He touched the soft green leaves very gently. On the sixth day he reached the Wiston farm; alive in his memory was the day he had waited there for Celia. The white oak tree that was his friend was the same, perhaps larger, he couldn't tell. He could not see the sky through its branches covered with new, vivid green leaves. He made a leanto and slept under the tree that night, and the next morning he told it good-bye solemnly and began to climb the slopes overlooking the farm. The house was still there, but the barn was gone, and the other outbuildings. Swept away by the flood they had made so long ago.

He reached the antique forest late in the afternoon. He watched a flying insect beat its wings almost lazily and remembered his grandfather telling him that even the insects here were primitive—slower than their more advanced cousins, less adaptable to hot weather, dry spells.

It was misty and very cool under the trees. The insect had settled on a leaf spread out horizontally to catch what sun it could. In the golden sunlight the insect was also golden. For a brief moment David thought he heard a bird's trill—a thrush. It was gone too fast to be certain, and he shook his head. Wishful thinking, no more than wishful thinking.

In the antique forest, a cove forest, the trees waited, keeping their genes intact, ready to move down the slopes when the conditions were right for them again. David stretched out on the ground under the great trees and slept, and in the cool, misty milieu of his dream saurians walked and a bird sang.

MELTING

"It is the use of temporal arresters—such is my own opinion—which have rendered delectable these celebrations."

Gene Wolfe

> I am the sound a balloon makes falling into the sky;
> the sweat of a lump of ice in a summer river.

It was the best cocktail party in the world. It took place in someone's (never mind whose) penthouse apartment; and it spilled over into the garden outside, among the fountains and marble ruins, and into the belly of the airship moored to the building, and the ship spilled over into the city, taking off from time to time to cruise the canyons of clotheslines and neon signs, or rise to the limbus of the moon. Many were drinking, and certain of the fountains ran with wine; many were smoking hashish—its sweet fumes swirled into men's pockets and up women's skirts until everyone was a trifle dazed with them and a little careless. A few were smoking opium.

John Edward was drinking, but he was fairly certain he had been smoking hashish an hour before, and he might have been

smoking opium, but it was the best cocktail party in the world, a party at which he knew everyone and no one.

The man on his left was British, and had a clipped mustache and the thin, muscled look John Edward associated with Bagnold and the Long Range Desert Group. The man across from him was Tibetan or perhaps Nepalese, and wore a scarlet robe. The girl beside him (who stood up often, sometimes bringing other people drinks, sometimes drinking herself, sometimes only to wave at the airship as it circled overhead while partygoers threw confetti from its balconies) was tall and auburn-haired, and wore a white gown slit at one side from hem to armpit. The girl to John Edward's right was blond, and beautiful, and had a cage of singing birds, living but too small to be alive, in her hair.

"This is a good party," John Edward said to the man on his left.

"Smashing. You know why, I take it?"

John Edward shook his head, but before the Englishman could tell him, a being from the Farther Stars who resembled not so much a man as a man's statue—with some of the characteristics of a washing machine—interrupted them to ask for a light. The Tibetan leaned forward, kindling a blue flame in the palm of his hand; and the man from the Farther Stars walked away puffing gentle puffs, his cycle on Delicate Things.

The girl with the birdcage in her hair said: "Some of these people are from the past. Mankind's mastery of the laws of Time makes it possible to ask the people of the past to parties. It makes for a good crowd."

The auburn-haired girl, she of the slit dress, said: "Then that man at the piano who looks like Napoleon must *be* Napoleon."

"No, that's his brother Joseph; I don't think Napoleon's here right now."

The Tibetan (leaning forward, so that his robe opened to show a hairless chest puckered with old scars) said: "It is the use of temporal arresters—such is my own opinion—which have rendered delectable these celebrations." He was talking half to the auburn-haired girl, half to the birdcage girl, totally to John Edward. "So. One pays one's fee. One receives a machine so subtle

that it is in a card contained. One attends. When wishes, one absents. That, too, is good. One returns at the time of absenting."

"Damned good," the Englishman put in, "for sweating up conversational crushers. You've all the time in the world. If you've got the card."

"I don't," John Edward said.

"Didn't think you had, really."

The birdcage woman, who no longer had a birdcage in her hair, but wore instead chaste coiled braids, said: "The card lets you sparkle as a wit—be Queen of Diamonds. And it's a Chance card, because when you leave, you Go to Jail out there." She drew John Edward's hands to her until they were cupping her breasts. "Do you like my Community Chest?"

"Very much," John Edward said. The auburn-haired girl stood up and waved her glass, shouting, "Everybody's under temporal arrest!" No one paid any attention.

"High cost for cardholders," the Tibetan continued. "Oh, high cost. Others selected for interesting people, as I. Or look nice." He made a little bow toward the (ex)birdcage woman.

Who said to John Edward: "Would you in the dark?"

"Yes, but it's better with a nightlight."

"Or candle," the Tibetan.

The auburn-haired girl: "Or with a bar sign outside. I was born under Aquarius, but conceived over the sign of the Pig and Whistle." John Edward watched her hair to see if it had changed, but it had not.

"Under a blanket at noon," the Englishman said. "Had a Belgian girl up to my room at Shepheard's like that once. I was on Allenby's staff then . . ."

"Many are *tulpas,*" remarked the man from the Farther Stars, who was passing by once again, and seemed to remember with gratitude the light the Tibetan had given him. "At least ten percent." (His voice was water dashing against stone.)

"But would you in the dark?" the braided-haired blond woman continued to John Edward. "If I asked you."

He nodded.

"A Belgian girl," the Englishman continued. "Refugee. Didn't know if the Boche would ever be out of Belgium—none of us did then—and would do anything. The colonel one night and the sergeant the next. She's saving you, m'boy. Going to save your bacon—save your sausage. Ha ha!" He hit John Edward on the shoulder.

"What's a *tulpa?*" the auburn-haired girl asked the Tibetan.

"For a little while," the blond woman said. Her hair was straight now, the style John Edward liked best, but it seemed a trifle too young for her. "Not anything that would disgust you, darling."

He stared at her, uncomprehending.

"Ten years. Ten little years, darling. That's nothing. With all they can do now—and I have money, darling—it's less than nothing. In the dark, sweetheart, promise."

The Englishman said: "He's a *tulpa,* old girl. Why bother. A nice chap, but a *tulpa.* I knew at once. Look at those shoulders. See how regular his features are? Handsome devil, eh? Not greasy at least, like so many of them."

"What's a *tulpa?*" the auburn-haired girl asked John Edward.

"I don't know." John Edward turned to the Englishman. "What do you mean, when you say she's saving me?"

"For her old age, you idiot. You flick off the lights and she flicks out for a quarter century or so. Then when no lover will have her, back she comes. One doesn't know in the dark, eh? Not unless the gal's been gone a devil of a long time."

"Please," the blond woman said to the Englishman. "You didn't have to."

"The chap's a *tulpa,* I tell you. If that's what you want, you can get an adept to stir one up for you anytime."

"But don't you understand? I knew him when I was young."

"Certain lamas," the Tibetan was telling the auburn-haired girl, "learn *siddhis* to flesh images from mind-stuff. Much same as ghosts, but never lived. Has been stolen and perverted in West, as all things."

"Can't understand how the blasted Chinese could conquer your country if you could do that," the Englishman said. "Inexhaustible armies."

The man from the Farther Stars, who was leaning over the auburn-haired girl's shoulder now (and peeking down her dress, John Edward thought), moved his head rhythmically from side to side. "Sunspots," he said. "Sunspots destroy *tulpas.*"

John Edward said, "But *between*—"

The man from the Farther Stars continued to shake his head. "Always sunspots on the sun, sun-where."

The auburn-haired girl stood up, ducking from under his white marble chin. "I'm going to be sick," she said. "Take me to a lavatory."

She was looking at John Edward, and he stood too, and took her hand, saying, "This way." He had not the least idea where he was, and discovered that the end table beyond the sofa was a rosebush. They were in the garden. *Sober up,* he thought, trying to give himself orders. *Sober up, sober up, straighten out. Find a restroom.*

The auburn-haired girl said, "At least we're away from those terrible people."

"Aren't you really sick?"

"Oh, yes I'm sick. Oh, Lord, am I." She was clinging to his arm. "And drunk. Am I drunk. Are they staring at me? I can't even tell."

The ramp of the airship was in front of them. There would be bathrooms on that; there would have to be.

"The last time my hair went in the toilet. Will you hold it up for me? You can lie down with me afterwards. I want to lie down afterwards; I want to go to bed."

Somewhere a cock crowed.

It could not be heard, of course. It was a hundred miles away, out in the country. But it crowed, and the sun came up, and people went out like candles in the wind.

From the top of the ramp he looked back and saw them go, their glasses crashing to the flagstoned paths and brick-paved

patios, their cigarettes dropping like poisoned fireflies.

"I loved you," the girl said. "Or at least I liked you. You'll be gone in a moment and I can't even ask you to kiss me, because I'm going to be sick."

"We're still here," John Edward told her, "both of us." And she was gone.

He walked down the ramp and into his apartment, stamping out every cigarette he saw. Sunshine was making hard shadows on the walls, and the airship vanished like mist. "Mr. Richbastard," he said to himself. "I wonder how much all those *tulpas* cost me."

The garden vanished, and the walls of the apartment rushed in, growing dirty as they came. He sat up. His head was splitting, and he thought that he was going to be sick to his stomach. The book was still propped open on his dresser where he had left it. His eyes were too gummy to read the print, but he remembered it: "Repeat, 'I am the sound of an owl's wings, the heartbeat of a banyan tree.' " He closed the book, and noticed that the hair on the back of his hand was gray; tried to remember how old he really was, then made himself stop.

In the next apartment the washing machine said: "Sun-where, sun-where, sun-where," then "sunspots destroy *tulpas,*" as it switched to Rinse.

"By the Lord Harry," John Edward said, "in a day or so—when I'm feeling better—I'm going to do that again." Then he vanished. I was tired of him, anyhow. (I'm getting tired of all of you.)

IN THE LILLIPUTIAN ASYLUM

A Story in Eight Poems & an Interrogation

. . . But his Imperial Majesty fully determined
against capital punishment, was graciously pleased
to say, that since the Council thought the Loss
of your Eyes too easy a Censure, some other
may be inflicted hereafter.

Michael Bishop

i Prelude: A Semi-political Reminiscence

The Mildendo Madhouse is stone.
I am blood and bone.

When the Man-Mountain left,
He cut us adrift

Like unstrung puppets,
Persnickety habits

Not worth commiseration.
We aren't a nation

To take that lightly:
We shook our fists and cursed the sea.

Man-Mountain, Mountain-Man,
Slogging out of our ken.

The Mildendo Madhouse is bleak.
I am earnestness. I ache.

His outraged Reverence,
The Prince,

Stooped to this scheme:
"Whoever thinks himself sane

Will—let me be blunt—
Forget the Giant,

Extirpate the Huge,
And take refuge

From the Dissident!"
Every patriot, of course, assented.

The Mildendo Madhouse is voices.
I am silent. I am choruses.

Man-Mountain, Mountain-Man,
Slogging off from land

With one stray boat in tow,
Because I acknowledged you (and still do),

They plopped me in a cell.
People poke fun. The guards belittle

Every swollen one of us.
In fact, the guard Polonius

Told me to write like this: small.
I do. Also ironical.

Mostly, the Mildendo Madhouse is quiet.
I am at the window. I leer out.

ii In-Processing: How We Are Put in Our Place

They fiddle at you.
Roll back your eyelids.
Put your arms in iron bands:

The skin turns blue.
March you off for haircuts.
Barbers lay on hands

And clip away the fringes
Of your bigness.
Every vestige of size comes off.

Afterwards, truth lozenges.
Very precious.
Especially if you have a cough.

Then barefooted
To your cot. You fold your clothes
Under the transom, on cold stones.

Me, I'm suited
To this life, the agues
That shake and shrink the bones.

Or say I am. Glassy, slick,
My eyes are microscope lenses;
My fingers tweezers.

It isn't politic
To say, "Humility cleanses."
Once I was filthy with caesars.

iii Dwarves, Midgets, Pygmies, Others: A Meditation

Sometimes I think myself out of here.
It's sweet, sweet: not to be bound.

Dwarves can't help it;
neither can midgets.
It has to do with glands.
Pygmies are another story:
Deep in the Ituri
a blue brown blue people
under a green roof
they undergo circumcision sing the molimo dance under
elephants.
They would be thoroughly awed
if their leaf cover buckled,
greenly rolled back
(a tidal brocade sloughing, leaf by leaf its constituent
elements),
and
in one flashing
loud moment of apocalypse
revealed the sky.

The sky.

Sometimes I think I see it.
The pain of not being bound.

Most of us are pygmies,
born that way,

congenitally slight:
nothing wrong with our pituitaries,
nothing inherently out of kilter
in our genes.
Were we midgets, dwarves,
we could blame the glands do somersaults, handstands
refuse to worry
but pygmies, a blue people
blindly gazing up,
are another story.
Only when the roof's rolled back here in Mildendo there in
the Ituri
do
we quick others
(pygmies little ones)
feel the sting.

The sting.

This is one such moment.
My roof has rolled back.
An epiphany: painful and sweet.
Pygmies dance on the asylum lawn and the hurt the hurt is
sweet.
Is sweet.

Not to be bound is sweet.
Why do I like the other?

iv A Letter to Lemuel

DEAR QUINBUS FLESTRIN:

Yes, it embarrasses me, too. I was one
who knew you, Quinbus, before you changed your name.

Call this a fan letter, from the sort of fan
who likes to make celebrities squirm,

squirm and sweat. We have been intimate, Lemuel,
though not, I suppose, to the point of blackmail.
Besides, no one here believes in you any more.
It's not that we lack confidence in your

talents; just that it's against the law. A crime.
(The belief and the statute against belief, I mean;
both are crimes—but the statute the more heinous.)
After all, I saw you with my own eyes. Once.

No, you don't know me, but we *have* met. It went
something like this: During a brief, brief moment
when the torchlit calvacade drawing you toward
our capital had halted for a rest, I fired

my own torch and in company with two
other officers scaled the breastworks to your eyes.
Shadows flickered, the wind blew, our flambeaux guttered.
The bridge of your nose was swept with tatters

of firelight. I threw my torch into the wind,
watched its ragged fall, asked a comrade to hand
me his half-pike. Upon the other man's dare,
I thrust it nimbly up your nostril, Gulliver,

and you dislodged the three of us with a sneeze.
Before you rocked us off, though, I believe
your eyes came open: unearthly blue and marbled,
like planets seen from orbit. Shaken, I fled

quaking down your waistcoat without a thought
for my fellows (who escaped, thank God). You and I met

later under different circumstances;
I got to explore the pockets in your pants

after some of our regiment had skirmished
on horseback over your handkerchief.
For me, an unforgettable day. An engine
thundered like hooves in the fob next your skin;

crouched in a pouch in your breeches, I heard it
ticking above your groin. Still, I'll bet
you don't remember me, though I was once important to the state, a dashing officer of horse.

So you see, that's how I know you. Now I'm
in the Mildendo Madhouse for failing to seem
a more proper sort of citizen. It's odd.
I'm no martyr. I've never liked the sight of blood—

but here I am, championing you by voice
in a nitre-traced cell where nightly I rehearse
your marvelous feats to anyone who'll listen.
I won't shut up. Cryptic, my attitude. But then,

dear Quinbus, I once saw your unabashed eyes
like new worlds in our puny, smoke-bleared fires,
and I could not forget. I could not. The fact
that you were sometimes small is only tacit

confirmation of your humanity. I remember the great deeds, the miracles, the eerie
glinting of a gigantic scimitar.
That we need. And that, cruel star, is why I'm here,

why I'm off my track. Though you should be ashamed
of how you deserted us, it's hard to blame

a colossus for cutting his enemies:
Had you come back, they would have torched your eyes.

Enough, enough. This will never reach you,
and we are living well without our awe . . .

v An Episode in the Lilliputian Wild

One day I escaped. Seeking a brief surcease,
I pushed my door and on naked foot stalked
down the empty hall, as if a ring of keys
were mine to test in the doors that were locked.
No one interfered. I was nearly balked
by the utter lack of opposition,
but found a door that issued onto the lawn,

made myself go out, marveled at the feel
of morning grass (moist with the heavy dew
we know in Lilliput), and said: "This is real,
this is how it was when we could all see through
our pettiness, to that in us which was You."
No one answered. Three or four old war horses
watched me walk by. The furore and the hush

of my barefoot freedom bore me beyond
the asylum's gates, into the rural wild.
No one shouted at me. There was not a sound
to shudder at anywhere—only a mild
sibilance of sun and of water spilled
into the forest from a mountain stream.
Then I saw it stalking: it was no dream.

What was it? Nothing. A praying mantis
of Brobdingnagian size, as large as I,
that lumbered up to say, "How like you this?"

What could I answer? I had no reply,
but faced it in astonishment, eye to eye
with a tyrant Gulliver would have sneezed at,
a green fuselage with grim jaws. Please it,

dear God, I couldn't hope to do. I backed
off. Then watched the monster totter in the leaves
strewn all about, collapse, and lie there: sick,
ludicrously six-legged, and perceived
only by a madman, who could not grieve.
Rain fell. Through its big, bruising drops I ran,
barefoot, to the asylum—and sneaked back in.

vi o small rain: an asylum lament

o small rain, the small
rain, always down may
rain in lilliput, the small
rain of smaller rains than this old

rain we
rain ourselves in with now, a small
rain less imperial
than cold.

god, that my
rainy woman were
raining with me now, then would our
rain be large and we bright

rainers who might
rain and drown, in the white,
warm rain that always may
rain down!

vii Seven Questions on Tuesday Morning

At the eye of my cell's eye,
skinned back:
Polonius like a helium balloon
bobbing beyond the bars for our ritualistic
Tuesday morning interview.

The Game is Seven Questions.
Interrogation (available
in an inexpensive cell edition, fun for
every inmate). I hang Polonius
in a noose of constricting
condensation, skirling it on the wall
with a broken and indifferent fingernail. I
hang my boorish moderator high—
but not too high.

In this, as in all
things, moderation. Even the
elevation of the spirit, one understands, can be
lifted to the point of
presumption. Says Polonius, even love.

> *Here we go, folks. Our inmates*
> *here at home have an opportunity to win*
> *an allexpensespaid*
> *vacation. For two. In the beau-*
> *tiful Fountain Ble-*
> *fuscu hotel. Don't let your eyes roam*
> *from the inquisition. If you haven't played*
> *before, just match answers*
> *with this morning's interogee,*
> *and keep your fingers crossed. (We keep*
> *our fingers crossed.) No one loses;*

no one has ever lost, no siree,
no siree

And here's PO O O O Lonius!

with this morning's initial question.

1. When will Quinbus Flestrin,
your Man-Mountain, come back?

(Although, you comprehend,
by asking this
we intend
no substantiation of
the rumor that he actually existed.)

When a giant turns his back,
there is no redress
from his cold, carven shoulder:

A halo of gold containing a disc of black,
like the other side of the moon in your imagination.
If he turns round, your eyes will be wrenched
from their sockets and thrown into a chaos
more orderly than your prejudices.

He won't come back for you. He never
existed for you. There was never
a dark side for you, not a single secret beyond
the halo of his shoulders. But I

I wait for my eyes to be thrown into chaos.

2. You used to be a reasonable fellow, they say.
Weren't you once an Equestrian? an officer of horse?

A horseman dismounts
when the terrain begins shuddering,
when sunstruck moles
issue from treacherous burrows,
like the excreta
of the world's body, nauseated with too much light.

Now I wear your epithets,
or wish I could,
with better conscience than I ever did
your scimitars, your insignia, and your epaulets.

My only regrets are these:
having lately given up my horse and failing,
while I had the chance, to skewer
even one blind burrower with my sword.

Now your horseman has his feet in words;
the stirrups shudder,
although not so impressively as the earth can do.

They say I used to be a reasonable fellow.
Why do I love the Mildendo Asylum?

3. My third question precisely:
Why does an escapee (if you escaped)
return voluntarily?

The stench of a dead praying mantis
is bearable only over a distance, a distance like the one
from there to here.

4. Threadbare symbols,
a turnabout out at the elbow.
Who are the insane, always to insist on their sanity?

Men and women without perspective:
who grimace at nightmares, who get food in
their teeth, who void
their bowels, and who spoil their children;
who fumble with abstracts and abstract their
longings, who don't
know what's good for them, and who copulate between
nightmares and
dream between birthings.

Having perspective, the sane wouldn't be caught
dead
in such postures.

5. Why don't you recant?

I'm glad you asked that question. It gives me the chance to tell a little story. I told it last Tuesday, of course, but you always ask me the same questions.

For a long time, Polonius, we kept mighty Quinbus chained in a temple. You didn't know that, did you? A temple long ago profaned by a murder, that's where we kept him. It isn't far from here.

Anyway, two men were appointed to haul away the waste that daily accumulates about the person of a Gargantua of regular habits. Two men with wheelbarrows. One of those appointed was my uncle.

A man of no perspective and small importance, my uncle. A man committed to the service of his state, my uncle. A man who liked to pick his teeth and hear an occasional dirty story, my uncle.

Just one of the men who was commissioned to haul off giant's shit. Not so terribly different from you, Polonius. Nor, I suppose, from me. Who among us is really that different?

At any rate, "It's just a job," my uncle liked to joke. "It's no great matter." One sniff would have convinced you otherwise.

It was great matter indeed, and offensive.

But my uncle did his duty, every time the Man-Mountain was moved to do his, and he made a little extra pocket money selling fetish items to the curious, the kinky, the artistically sensitive.

In only a week's time he had enough to buy a new wheelbarrow, a red one. He pushed it with his head in a cloud, serving the state. The exquisite vapor of the proud laborer emanated from every pore.

Of course, this could not last. People lost interest; my uncle's markets dried up. The High Museum of Art can put on display only so many artificially fossilized, free-form coprolites.

The red wheelbarrow remained, that and my uncle's pride. Although my aunt had adjusted to the new wheelbarrow and her husband's pride, she could not accept her family's sudden effluviance.

Eventually she moved. Later she suggested a trial separation. Finally she filed for divorce. And there was my uncle, a man of no perspective, brokenheartedly pushing his barrow in the service of the state.

Why don't I recant? How can I deny the existence of our departed giant when my very own uncle still moves within the aura of his presence? How betray my uncle again? The answer is, I can't.

6. Just what is it you want?

Pygmies on a green strand, the roof rolled back.
The glinting of a gigantic scimitar.
Two marbled eyes bathing in the zodiac.
And whinnying horses on a brackish shore.

7. That's all very well, but not very precise.
Would you like some advice?

The bitten gold coin
Leaves its spittle on the palm:
A philanthropy.

So too with advice.
Cruel girls, studying ballet,
Laugh at the legless.

And that, inmates, is our show for today.
Look in tomorrow for
fun, prizes, excitement galore.
Try to guess
the identity
of our mystery interogee. . . .

It could be
YOU!

*

I go to the skinned eye of my cell
and with my fingernail
slide the panel across the screeing balloon of Polonius' face:

Pop!

And all around me the perspiring mortar
of the Mildendo Madhouse, the night sweat of expressionless stone.
I see Polonius hanging on the wall. I see his grin.

viii Dissertation on the Burial Customs of the Lilliputians

We bury the dead man on his head, inter
his corpse upside down. Mouthing dirt, he grows

into the encoffining loam like a tuber;
not carrots, nor turnips, nor sweet potatoes

point downward more tenaciously than he.
In eleven thousand moons the Earth will turn
over upon itself. The dead will shake free,
their eyes clotted with poinsettia and fern.

Each corpse will slip through bog: a human plant
writhing its tendrils at a tarnished sun,
moving its mired roots, doffing wet dirt,
mouthing bald bulbs.
Little wonder that I can't
term such topsy-turvy interment fun:
What vegetable love does not traduce the heart?

ix A Vision of Horses Comforts the Madman

On the lawn,
on the asylum lawn are horses,
many horses.

Years ago,
we evacuated them from the beach
at Blefuscu,
under heavy assault, martial duress:
banners, helmets, half-pikes, blades—
a veritable parade of slaughter.

(See
how their entrails—
horses' entrails—
spill from their bellies
like
sodden ladies' scarves

glistering
in the rain!)

Still,
many were saved
& hoisted up onto
the slimy decks of men-of-war
& galleon-galloped home.

Now,
on the asylum lawn
(where we retired them),
they scarcely move, but wear out
the grass
with yellow teeth & heavy hooves.

I am behooved
to watch them,
grey apparitions
in the incandescent sun—
nightmares & nightgeldings,
also nightstallions,
all in the full noon
of an incandescent sun.

Because I must,
I watch: In the apparitions
of old horses
resides a kind of balm,
an unguent
without urgency,
but not without sting.

It is
an infinitely equine,
infinitely patient thing.

Like them,
like black, like bay,
like dapple-grey horses,
I have never learned
to say
the thing which is not—

except in dreams,
like this equivocal little one
that I have sung:

Gulliver, one day, will return.

Unlike
my horses on the lawn
(the black, the bay, the dapple-grey),
substantial apparitions all,
I am myself
a thing which is not.

Ergo,
my every equivocation
is the truth.

In my singing,
the thing which is not
is a thing which is not,
for in my singing
is the equivocal truth:
Gulliver, one day, will return.

In the madhouse outside Mildendo
I sit at the window. I leer out.

ERNIE

Someone who really cared about you, in a place
like that—how could he be real?

Lowell Kent Smith

They took him to L. A. General.

He was an old man and he was sick.

When he woke up he was in a hospital bed. He was scared. He was afraid of hospitals. He'd never been sick before. So he was scared. The room was too clean. When you're used to the street, clean places make you edgy. And there were no smells in the room. And it was sunny—too bright for his eyes.

They had him in a hospital gown. He felt naked. He rarely took a bath and just having his clothes off frightened him.

He felt cut off from his past, from reality. While he was unconscious the real world had seeped away from him. Or they had stolen it.

He closed his eyes, put his hands over his face and tried to remember. Tried to see in his mind's eye what had happened, why he was in the hospital. But all he could see in the past was the street. An endless succession of nights in the street, all alike. And then this room.

He shivered. Then, after gazing at the clean, odorless, sunny room for some time, he pulled the blanket over his face, closed his eyes and waited.

After a time he slept.

He awoke because someone was calling his name.

"Bill," the voice said. "Bill?"

He was Bill. The voice knew him. He opened his eyes and pulled the blanket down so he could see where the voice came from.

There was a screen in the ceiling over his bed. A gray-haired man, dressed in rumpled white, was on the screen. "Are you feeling any better, Bill?"

"Who are you?" said Bill.

"My name's Ernie," said the man.

"I don't know you, do I?" said Bill, hoping that after all he did know the man.

"No, Bill, you don't know me. I work here at the hospital. I just got your name when they brought you in. Are you feeling any better now?"

Bill looked the man over. He looked all right.

"You're not a doctor, are you," said Bill.

"No, Bill, I'm not a doctor. They just asked me to keep an eye on you while you're in the hospital, and see that you're treated okay. How do you feel?"

Bill considered how he felt, and for the first time noticed all the little buttons stuck all over his body.

"What are the buttons for?" he said.

"They help the doctors keep track of how you're doing. Temperature, breathing, heart—things like that. None of them hurt you or anything, do they?"

"No—no, they're okay, I guess. And I feel all right, I think. Can I go home now?"

The man—Ernie—looked pleased that Bill was feeling good. He smiled and sat back in his chair. "Where's home, Bill?"

Bill frowned and thought a moment. "Just the street, I guess."

He studied the man in the screen. The man was lighting a cigar.

Bill said, "Say, Ernie? Could I have a smoke—is it okay to smoke in the hospital? Just one cigarette maybe?"

Ernie smiled and sat forward in his chair. "Sure, Bill. There's a pack of cigarettes in the drawer of that table next to your bed. Here, I'll push it over." The table slid toward the bed.

After he'd lit up, Bill sat studying Ernie in the screen. They both just smoked for a while. Then Bill said, "What's wrong with me, Ernie? Do they know? What happened?"

"You passed out on the street. Cops brought you in. The doc isn't sure what's the matter, so he wants you to stay here a few days and get some tests done. I'm here to keep you company—keep an eye on you. Make sure you're treated right. That's my job here."

"What kind of tests, Ernie? They won't hurt, will they?"

Ernie sat forward and tapped the ash off his cigar. "No, they won't hurt, Bill. The buttons are making some of the tests. Some of the other tests they'll have to take you places for, but they won't hurt. And I'll be along with you. That's my job."

Bill said, "Can you come to my room here? We could talk. I could tell you stuff they might need to know, or something."

Ernie took the cigar out of his mouth. He looked sad for a moment, then he smiled again and said, "Bill—see, I watch over some other guys, too, so I can't actually come to your room. But we can talk this way, see. Just as long as I can be here so I can watch the other guys, too. You understand?"

"Yeah—sure, sure. But we can talk, right? We can talk?"

"Sure, Bill, all you want. Whenever you're awake I'll be here to talk, and I'll look in on you when you're asleep, every once in a while."

Ernie stubbed out his cigar. "You look sleepy, Bill. Why not sleep a while? I'll see you later."

But Bill had already drifted off, the cigarette falling to the floor.

There was a gentle hiss and the cigarette disappeared into a slot in the wall.

Clinging to the jumpseat of the bounding helicopter ambulance, James Lambert, M.D., watched L. A. International Airport drop away into the darkness until it was just another floating island near the megalopolis.

His stomach turned over. He shouldn't be riding this ambulance. It was a job for the young interns or a paramedic. He should be sleeping. In three days he'd had ten hours of sleep—most of that on table tops or carts, and all of it taken in snatches between emergencies. Though he was thirty-three he felt about fifty, a tired fifty at that. Three years of interning and these last two as a resident had done it to him.

He winced and looked out the window. They were passing over the fusion-powered generating plants in Laguna. The near-shore ocean farms receded into the darkness toward both Santa Barbara and San Diego—a seemingly endless line.

He lit a cigarette. He smoked too much. He drank too much coffee. His wife was thinking about leaving him. Sometimes, like now, when the days and nights were too long, he would think briefly about his own problems and relax. He would smile over his salary, the working conditions and his prospects for the future. Maybe even think about getting a nice practice someplace in the country where he and Janet could relax more, where his wife could go out during the day without fear of being attacked.

An easy practice. He smiled and looked out the other cabin window.

Looking ahead toward the foothills to pick out the hospital towers, he knew why he flew these runs whenever he could. The fusion plants that supplied the water for the land, that air-conditioned the whole south-coast basin, that supported the ocean farms—those same plants also carpeted the valley with lights. Miles of lights. A river, no, an inland sea of lights. A profligate display of lights—of man's power, holding the darkness at bay.

The lights drew him. They gilded the reality below. By day he knew that the teeming cities were places where men suffered and died. At night they became lights and he could forget the days. The shadows concealed the hurts, the pain, the death agonies below him. For a time he could rest, buoyed up by the lights

beneath him. He could be awed by the technical miracles spread out below, without being depressed that no corresponding miracles had taken place in the men who lived and worked down there.

The cigarette burnt his fingers. He shivered inside his white jacket and glanced at his patient, studied the monitoring unit on the cabin wall.

The twin hospital towers loomed ahead now, three-quarters of a mile high, dominating the foothills. Earthquake-control engineering made the structure possible, and man's frailty caused it to be built. Cancer was gone, stroke was gone, heart disease was going; but men were still frail and they sickened. This giant of the hospitals in the west was built to minister to that human weakness, that infirmity, that still-present mortality. L. A. General: enormous, ever active, demanding, heartbreaking. The only place Jim Lambert had ever really loved—the only place he felt at home.

They were landing. Leaving self behind, Dr. Jim Lambert turned to his patient and took up his profession.

An hour later Jim was drinking another cup of coffee and finishing yet another cigarette. A backlog of work had built up during his flight.

He picked up the top paper on the stack before him. "Who's caring for this man Bill the police brought in three days ago? The shock and intestinal-bleeding case."

The screen opposite his desk lit up and Ernie appeared there.

"Good evening, Dr. Lambert. I'm Ernie. Bill is in my care." Ernie looked calm and rested and in complete control of his work. Jim caught himself liking the man in the screen.

"Okay, Ernie. How is Bill feeling?"

"Here is his record since he was admitted," said Ernie, and his image was replaced by the standard format for patient data.

"What does it look like to you, Ernie?" said Jim.

"Old age, probably bleeding ulcers of the large and small intestine, systemic infection."

"Treatment?"

"Control the infection, remove the damaged portions of the bowel before there's a stoppage."

"Prognosis?"

Jim studied Ernie's face very carefully when he asked the last question. He wanted to see if he could detect anything in the screen image to go with what Ernie would say.

Ernie paused a moment before answering, then said evenly, "Bill is going to die here, Dr. Lambert, sometime this week, no matter what treatment he receives."

Jim watched the man's face. Did he detect any sorrow there? He could not be sure. He thought about the old man, Bill; and about Ernie.

"Ernie, how many patients have died under your care here?"

Ernie seemed to study the doctor for a few moments before answering the question. As though pondering the answer, or perhaps seeking to guess why Jim had asked.

"As of this minute, one hundred twenty-five thousand three hundred and twenty-eight. Four more are dying now."

Jim thought about all those deaths, and about Bill, who would be one more.

"Are you sorry for the dying and the dead, Ernie?"

Again Ernie seemed to study Jim's face before answering. "Death comes to all men, Doctor."

"But not to you, Ernie."

"No, not to me."

The two men said nothing for some moments. Then Ernie said, "You seem well, Dr. Lambert, but are you having trouble with your wife? Are your hours too long?"

Jim smiled at the question. Then Ernie smiled too.

"I'm not the patient, Ernie. Not yet." He sighed and picked up the paper on Bill.

"I suppose there is no point in doing the surgery at Bill's age?" Jim said.

"We can't be sure yet, but that is the estimate, yes." The two discussed the case further. Finally Jim said, "He has no relatives, no friends?"

Ernie shook his head.

"Should he be told about his chances?"

"I think he knows, Doctor, but does not want to be told."

"Should I see him and talk it over with him, do you think?"

"He would be frightened at first if you came, but I think it would give him courage. He is an old man and he is not afraid to die, but I think your seeing him might help."

"And you'll be there, of course."

"I'll be there with Bill until the end. We've talked about that. I think we are friends now."

Jim thought about it for a time. He made an appointment to see Bill. Then he picked up the next paper on his desk.

"I'd like to talk with the person in charge of Mrs. Robert Barnes, please."

The image of Ernie was replaced by that of a trim, beautiful woman in her early thirties, elegantly dressed and coiffed.

Two days went by. Bill got to know Ernie better in that time. They mostly talked. Exchanged stories. Ernie knew some of the men Bill had known, and they talked about those men—things they'd said or done. And Ernie knew a lot of men Bill wished he'd known. Bill listened to Ernie's stories about those men by the hour. It was amazing how many men Ernie had met or heard about.

Bill asked Ernie if he'd traveled much, been places.

"No," said Ernie a bit wistfully, "I've just worked here in the hospital. I've seen places, but never really been anywhere."

So Bill didn't ask that question any more.

Bill slept a lot, but when he awoke Ernie was always there on the screen. When they took Bill somewhere for tests Ernie would show up on a screen there, explain to him what they were doing and make sure they took good care of Bill.

Bill wondered how Ernie could be with him so much and still watch other guys too. But for some reason he never wanted to ask Ernie about it, until the day he met Bobby Winston.

Bill had been out of his room for a test, down some long halls

and into a room with shiny machines. It wasn't X rays, it was some other kind of rays. Maybe it was ultrasonics or the infrared, or some other things Ernie had explained—they all got mixed up in Bill's head unless Ernie was explaining them.

Anyway, Bill was waiting to be taken back to his room when they wheeled in a small boy. He looked very sick, he had been crying and was obviously scared to death.

They stopped the boy's cart next to Bill's, and Bill could see how thin and frail the little boy looked. He could see the tag on the boy's wrist. It said "Bobby Winston." Bill was just beginning to wonder if Ernie could help this little boy when he heard a gruff voice from the wall behind him.

"Say, Bobby," the voice said, "didn't I tell you this wouldn't hurt? Don't you believe old Andy? Andy will be right here with you while they do the test—and he won't let anyone hurt you. Trust old Andy, won't you, Bobby?"

Bill could see Bobby's face light up when he heard the voice, and Bobby rolled over so he could see the wall behind Bill. Bobby was still sniffling, but he was trying to dry his tears.

"I didn't know they'd let you come down here, Andy," said the little boy. "Will they really let you stay?"

"Sure they will, Bobby," said the gruff voice. "Who's going to stop me, hey?"

Bill wanted to see Andy, so he rolled over on his cart.

There on the wall screen was an enormous, smiling, black and white panda. It went on talking to Bobby in that gruff voice.

When he got back to his room, Bill asked Ernie about the boy and the panda. Ernie told Bill about the little Winston boy. He was very sick and everybody in the hospital had been upset when it was discovered that Bobby wouldn't talk to any of the staff.

"But we found out he would talk to the panda," concluded Ernie.

Bill lay in his bed looking at Ernie for a while. Then he said, "But bears can't talk, can they, Ernie?"

"No, bears can't talk—even pandas," said Ernie.

Bill said, "Ernie, could you come up to my room today? Just

for a minute? Just drop in for a minute—I mean, we haven't seen each other—we . . ." His voice trailed off. "Could you, Ernie?"

"Bill, I've got all these other guys to watch. I can't come," said Ernie, smiling. Maybe a bit wistfully. Maybe just smiling calmly.

"Ernie? Are you—are you—like the panda? Is that why you can't come up to my room?"

Ernie didn't say anything for a moment. Bill waited.

"You mean, Bill, that the panda isn't real, don't you?"

Bill nodded. His eyes stung. He closed them.

"But the panda *is* real to Bobby, Bill. The panda is Bobby's friend. So far it's the only friend we've found for Bobby in the whole hospital." Ernie sighed. "Bobby trusts the panda in the same way you trust me, because Bobby's found out that the panda is on his side, that the big bear won't let anybody hurt Bobby, that the bear is always there when Bobby needs him. Andy *is* a good friend. Do you see how it is, Bill?"

But Bill turned his face to the wall and would not answer.

Dr. Lambert knocked on Bill's door and went in. Bill was sitting up in bed, looking out the window.

"I'm Dr. Lambert, Bill. I'm your doctor while you're here."

Bill did not turn, seemed not to hear.

"I came because I hear there's been some trouble between you and Ernie. Is that right?"

"Ernie?" said Bill. "Who's he? I never met him. What's this Ernie got to do with me?"

Dr. Lambert waited. Bill said, "You got a cigarette, Doctor?"

Before Lambert could answer, the table slid noiselessly over to Bill's bed and a drawer opened. There were cigarettes in the drawer.

"Forget it," said Bill quickly. "I changed my mind."

The drawer of the table slid shut.

Bill looked at the drawer awhile. He said, "He's here, isn't he? Even when I can't see him."

"You mean Ernie. Yes, Bill, he's always here, making sure you're all right."

"Ernie's the panda, too, isn't he. The little boy's panda."

"In a way, yes, he is."

Bill turned to look at the doctor. He looked old and sick and alone.

"Why didn't he tell me that he wasn't a real person—that he was some kind of damned machine? Why didn't you tell me, Doc? Why'd you fool me like this? I can't hurt anybody. I'm just a sick old man—and I'm going to—" He stopped.

Lambert sat on the bed and took out a cigarette. He started to light it and then put it back in his pocket. He studied his hands for a while and thought about a practice in the country.

"Bill," he said, "You *knew* Ernie wasn't a man, didn't you? You knew after that first day, I think. Most of the patients do. I think Bobby probably knows, somewhere inside, that Andy isn't real, that he couldn't be real. We all know, because we know that Ernie and Andy are too good to be true. Nobody has time to follow us around everywhere, and talk to us whenever we want to talk, and not talk when we don't want to. Nobody cares as much about us as Andy and Ernie. They can't. Nobody has time. They have to worry about themselves a lot of the time."

Lambert stopped talking. He looked at Bill. Bill was looking back at him, into his eyes.

"I'm your doctor. Your *doctor.* Your life is in my hands, but I can't be with you all the time. I can't always be thinking about what you need. I've got other patients."

Lambert looked down at his hands again. "I've got other patients, and a wife, and money problems, and I've got to eat and get some sleep sometimes. And I worry about myself sometimes, too. You see? Do you see, Bill? About Ernie? About Andy?"

Bill said nothing.

The two men sat together awhile, and then Lambert said goodbye and went away.

It was silent in the room for some time. It was clean, and odorless, and very sunny. And silent.

"Ernie?" said Bill. "I'll take that cigarette now."

"Sure, Bill," said Ernie as the screen lit up. "Or maybe you'd like to try one of my cigars?"

The Memory Machine

It strikes me as funny, don't you?

—Dorothy Kilgallen

Toward a More Kreative Speling

"Why's the dog named Bisk?"

"Short for b,i,s,q,u,i,t. You want to see something whorish and altogether delightful? Call her by name, then ask if she wants one of those things I spelled."

Blake leaned close to the dog, now sitting as on a throne, smiling as at a circus, and said, "Good girl, Bisk, want a bisquit?"

—"Monitored Dreams and Strategic Cremations: 1: The Bisquit Position," by Bernard Wolfe, in *Again, Dangerous Visions*, edited by Harlan Ellison (Doubleday, 1972), p. 287f.

Lady Lean had bent to whisper something in her ear Blake had heard, "Girl, sweet thing, want a bisquit?"

—*Ibid.*, p. 293

". . . You come here and give me all the best bisquits. I've been long without."

—*Ibid.*, p. 295

"... Report to your brain what's craving all over your eyes from all over your bed. Be my lavish bisquit man."

—*Ibid.*, p. 296

Now she did the only thing she knew to do, when the ultimately wanted was not forthcoming, flopped over on her back in the bisquit position.

—*Ibid.*, p. 301

The magnificently blue eye quivered, began to take the dim view, then dimmer, then closed altogether, and Bisk was cool again, as finally, Blake thought, with luck, we'll all, the invaded and the sucked, all bisquit wanters, be free from burning.

—*Ibid.*, p. 303

Quis Judicet?

In the six years since the initiation of the "Obit" series, its stories have won four of the yearly Nebula awards. In one year, seven of the eight nominees for "Best short story of the Year" were Obit selections. Obit 12 maintains the past regorous standards for inventiveness, excitement, intelligence and style ... Of course, Obit 12 is a Science Fiction Book Club selection.

—Review signed "LKF" in the *Lewiston* (Maine) *Daily Sun and Lewiston Evening Journal*

Although this book doesn't mark Heinlein's first incursion into an area previously the province of Traveller's Companion and Grove Press, et. al., it does signal the farest out he's reached. In the ebullient *Glory Road,* Hero had hankey-pankey only with the Princess.... [This book] teaches you the heart-wrenching sorrow of having to part, after a normal lifetime, with someone you have

loved . . . an ephemeral, who's span is only a pitifully short 50 or 70 years. . . . It's the thundering thrill of the great Diasphora . . .

—Review by Richard Ashby of *Time Enough for Love,* by Robert A. Heinlein (*Vertex,* October 1973)

Pay Attention, Dammit!

The young man lying rigid on the platform, without moving a muscle, began to ascend horizontally. He arose slowly, almost imperceptively at first, but soon with a steady and unmistakable acceleration.

—"Levitation," by Joseph Payne Brennan, in *Stories Not for the Nervous,* edited by Alfred Hitchcock (Random House, 1965)

Watch Out for Those Snakes—They're Made of Meconium, the Miracle Metal

Deep in thought, she had arrived at the great computer building and had crossed the magnificent inner hall without gawking at the famous sculpture depicting man overpowering the Laeconia of science.

—"Dull Drums," by Anne McCaffrey, in *Future Quest,* edited by Roger Elwood (Avon, 1973)

Scalpel. Retractor . . .

She would mildly bawl out Caesar for biting by the slack of the neck and trying to rape his mother Cleopatra—he really should have been called Caesarean—with Mark Antony interestedly looking on.

—"Cat Three," by Fritz Leiber (*F&SF,* October 1973)

LIVE? OUR COMPUTERS WILL DO THAT FOR US

"There is no art," says Shakespeare, foolish man,
  "To read the mind's construction in the face."
The physiognomists his portrait scan,
  And say: "How little wisdom here we trace!
He knew his face disclosed his mind and heart,
So, in his own defence, denied our art."

Brian W. Aldiss

Colding Marchmain held out his hand to Gloria Blake, but she elevated and turned away, shielding her sympathetic nervous system from his learned scrutiny.

"I don't want you to leave for Earth just now," she said. "I keep getting glimpses of other rooms. Bare rooms, with people weeping."

"You've experienced it all before," he said reasonably. "You've had it explained to you. You're a Sensitive of the Unrealised Multi-Schizophrenic Type B. It's nothing to worry about."

"Oh, you have it all memorised." She turned back to him, so that he could see fully that clear luminous face of hers, with the long nose, well-chiseled lips, and lucid blue eyes, framed in coils of her gretchen-green hair. He gauged the degree of contraction of her pupils. "You have lived with me on Turpitude for five years, yet how much do you understand about responding to me?" she said.

"This is an au revoir, Gloria, not a first-class row!"

"There are times when I don't want you, times when I do. I want you now, and you insist on going back to Earth, not caring at all if you shatter the composure of my mood."

Studying her kinesics, he saw she was not as concerned as she pretended.

"Haven't we had this conversation before? I know how you modulate your sensory input, Gloria, my love, and I remain fascinated because there's not another woman like you, not anywhere on the Zodiacal Planets. You can use heat and thirst, social isolation, and dance, to induce your deliriums. By your breathing and your fasting and your sleeplessness, you alter your body chemistry. Your very gestures and words are so rhythmic that one conversation puts you in a trance. That's why you are too subliminally aware for your own good. And for mine."

She moved towards him in a serpentine way and positioned her mouth some fifty centimetres from his, as she breathed, "I didn't say you didn't understand me; I said you didn't understand how to respond to me. To go to Earth is such a crude thing."

"My father is dying."

"Fuck him, let him die! And I suppose you will see your ex-wife while you're there?"

He laid his fingers across her left palm, measuring her psychogalvanic response. "I want you to miss me, but you aren't going to miss me greatly—your whole body image says as much. Gloria, you always escape me; this whole big act we play out on Turpitude consists of your being elusive. Now I have to go and see my father, and elude you for a change. So you feel obliged to be angry."

"All right." She draped her arms loosely round his neck. "I elude you, Colding, and you regard that—if not as deliberate on my part—at least as a piece of my character composition. Suppose you are wrong? Have you ever in your life enjoyed a satisfactory relationship with anyone, man or woman, in which you weren't feeling they eluded you?"

At considerable expense, Colding had had their egg-shaped eight-room transferred to a point high up the cliff of the outer urbstak of Turpitude I, to a socket in the sunward face. His firm, Gondwana Inc., had financed the move, anxious to keep so talented a predestinographologist happy. Unable to bear Gloria's probing—she was sweet as pie until threatened by any kind of parting, however temporary—Colding retreated to his rec room.

For a moment he stood looking out the noctures at the view, consoled by the immense concave chip of a world in which he made his way, and by the view of many other Zeepees, glinting out in space like malformed sequins, all basking in the giveaway energies of the sun. It was a fine sight, although Colding knew that less successful men, with apts embedded deep in the urbstak, had falsies which showed scenes even more striking than this, with whole mantillas of Zodiacals riding round Earth. Well, his view was real and theirs wasn't, whichever looked better. As befitted the brains behind the new destimeter.

One of the prototypes of the Gondwana destimeter stood in a corner of the rec room. Colding went over to it, sat down, removed his socks, and placed his bare feet on the lower screens. His hands he placed, flat-palmed, on the middle screens, juxtaposing his face against the lines etched on the upper screen. A pressure with the right elbow, and the machine was working. His astrological and biophysical data were already recorded. Now the machine was merely updating dermatoglyphic, chirological, physiognomical, and secretional readings against previous data, and formulating them out against Colding's projected Earth trip.

It had long been recognised that the hand—and the foot to a lesser degree—mirrored the internal condition, physical and mental, of its owner. The destimeter was a sophisticated way of tallying all information groups and producing an extrapolative graph. Eventually, Colding knew, later models of his machine would come to rule the everyday life of men and women; they should prove more trustworthy than oneself.

Gloria entered as he sat there. She was slightly in awe of the destimeter.

"Sorry I was bitchy, darling. I do realise that you must see your father."

"*And* that I shall go nowhere near my ex-wife?"

She hesitated. "You'll go and see your daughter?"

"Of course I'll flaming well go and see Rosey—what do you think I am? Don't I neglect her enough as it is, poor kid? But that doesn't mean to say I have to see her mother—Rosey lives alone, as well you know. Christ knows where Phyllis is."

"I'm sorry. Relax!"

He couldn't. The destimeter computer had switched to Readout, and was giving him the likely action (86–87.5 percent probability) on his Earth trip. He clutched at it, reading sickly. As usual these readouts, or Pre-Destinations as they were called by the media, seemed to be talking nonsense; and as usual their veiled terms produced queasiness in Colding.

Space-passage Discomfort-rating 3. No incidents. Blonde smiling No overtures intended. Item misplaced. Ramp stumble. Disorientation. First Aid station relief. Injection. Random images. Gravity Traffic Highrise increase.

Hospitalization surprise with parent vocal. Noncommunication. Days in Santos. Time confusion Senile incest obsession causes pain. Memory of other parent weeping in Santos boudoir Nausea of Regret. Argumentation Avoid. Promises Keep now later. Visionary horse.

Random accommodation Tension. Encounter with Death. Previous encounter trigger Fresh onslaught Paranoia Type Lyra 2. Green suit assault. Palms a blank. Superior position. Trinket deserted . . .

So it went, growing ever more threatening and less comprehensible. His thinking brain was coolly deciding that the delphic element in these predictions would have to be eradicated before the model went commercial, while another and more basic part of his metabolism was whipped into terror by the menacing phraseology. Before he could read to the end of the recital, he sensed Gloria looking at him intently (it *was* Gloria?); he was unaware of what she was saying until she repeated it.

"Will you look up Anna Kavan?" The very question seemed to echo implications in his readout.

He swung round. "Damn it, Anna's dead. You know she died in the Alaska Trophy. Must you keep resurrecting her?"

She took in his anxiety, came nearer, and said gently, "Bad prognosis, I take it?"

He screwed up the readout, would not speak. *Pain, Weeping, Regret, Encounter with Death* . . . Yet he was destined to go to Earth; otherwise the readout would have been blank. She read his expression.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry," she said. "Why can't things seem to hold together? Why can't you ever grasp anything? Why does it all slide away? What have you got to go through while you're Earthside? Tell me, at least let me smell your palm."

Colding pulled his hand away from her and stroked her cheek with it. "It can't happen as the machine says. It's not always right. I told you the other day it was playing up . . . I'll just see Father and Rosey, then I'll be back. I'll go straight to the hospital. Nothing will happen."

"*What* won't happen?"

"Nothing," he said. What the hell good was communication, anyway?

As it happened, Colding saw his father first from the other end of the hospital corridor. The old man was walking slowly, but with a stiff upright carriage Colding remembered; people walked like that only on Earth. Colding himself proceeded slowly, uncomfortably aware of the thickness of the great natural globe revolving beneath his feet. He hoped he would never reach his father. Yet with every step the old man became clearer, with every step some piece of the past, long rejected, returned. An intricate relationship formed in the mild autumn air between them. The old man wore old clothes now. There had been a time when he had been younger, had driven planes and ridden horses, and had swum in the ocean off Santos, where they were both born.

Colding remembered Santos, where the lorry drivers slept un-

der their vehicles in string hammocks to escape the Brazilian sun. He remembered the failing coffee plantation, the farm where he helped raise Zebu-type cattle. The seasons of love. Lights and singing among the trees, the well-maintained church. Cars smashing off the *autopista.* A dead snake. His wife, the arrival of his children, the ranch hands gripped by *macumba,* floating little lights out across the flood of the placid river, chanting as they did so. *Days in Santos.*

This sick old man with the goat's face brought it all back, a whole lifetime and more, structures of hope and failure, and love read in a snake's entrails.

"Hello, Father. I didn't expect to find you walking about."

"If you're coming to see Phyllis, my boy, I must warn you that she's really upset about you. She will wear black. I told her the other day, I said, 'It's not becoming. Only old ladies and horses wear black.' " He laughed. There was a stale smell about him, Colding found, as he took his father's arm.

"Phyllis and I were divorced five years ago, Father. I came back to Earth to see you. Is this your room in here?"

"Well, it's nice to see you again. You aren't wearing black, are you? You're certainly looking older. You look more like your grandfather every time I see you. There must be something in predestination . . . According to the palm of my hand, I shan't die till next year. How long's that? What month is this?"

"We have a different dating system on the Zeepees."

"It seems all wrong to me . . . Doesn't make sense. I said to Phyllis the other day, 'To think that a son of ours should be forced to live on a manmade chunk of plastic out there in space . . .' "

"Father, Phyllis is my ex-wife, not my damned mother." *Senile incest obsession.* One hundred percent—God, the machine was good!

"Yes, yes, of course, I'm sorry. I didn't mean Phyllis, I meant Pauline. No, let's see, Pauline's dead too, isn't she? It's sometimes difficult to keep track of who's alive and who's dead . . . People keep coming and going . . . Anyhow, this is my room. Come in, son."

They went into it, father and son, linked by more than arms. A wide white room with eight sides, auburn light filtering through a large falsie. A bed, tables, lamps, a cabinet, the big mediscanner, various old-fashioned books and static pictures littering tables and walls. Colding received a distinct glimpse of someone weeping in a black-and-gold boudoir, weeping because she was haunted by other rooms. Then the vision was gone, forgotten, irrecoverable. One more damned unwanted image. Beyond every room lay others, onwards and onwards, like some complex and old-fashioned astronomic clock representing an unworkable theory of the universe. He went and sat down in a white voluptuous chair, sickened.

"This is home, son. We live in petty times. As Krohshaw says, we're all inmates of the same astro-organic house. The world's grown too small . . . All this predestination. A petty time to die in." He stood alone in the middle of his room, looking at the palm of his right hand, leaning slightly on his stick, nodding his sick old goat head at the incoherent thoughts that filled it.

"Predestination's been round a long time. I must go and see Rosey while I'm here."

"Of course. Your daughter's more important . . . I suppose you're still living on What's-It with that woman Gloria."

"Turpitude. We live on Turpitude. One of the outer and cheaper Zeepees."

"That's where predestination came from. Pernicious theory . . ." The old man sat on the side of the bed and looked across at Colding. "All those little ticky-tacky planetoids or whatever you call 'em—they're all limited environments. Of course they limit thinking. You need a big world to grow up in, to live in, to think big. Turpitude . . . Predestination is a typical product of the Zodiacal Planets. A tiny thing. Now you've exported it back to Earth, the way we used to buy U.S. instant coffee in Santos made from beans grown in our own good alluvial soil. Why, that soil was so rich . . . Before you were born . . ."

Colding stirred impatiently. There was a whispering in the room.

"Predestination is a science now, Father," he said. "An exact science. The most complex science ever devised, and still evolving. When it is fully developed, it will embrace all knowledge. It represents the marriage of the human metabolism back into its local and cosmic environment."

"Marriage? I don't understand you." The sick man went and sat down, saying resignedly, "You never worked out your life, did you? How old are you now? Rosey understands more than you do—or me, come to that. Why don't you marry Rosey?"

"You're senile, Dad! Rosey's my daughter, you keep forgetting."

"Oh, yes, I keep forgetting. She's a good girl, though, is Rosey. Time means nothing to me now. What about that artist woman you used to knock about with? Anna?"

"Anna Kavan? She died on the Skidmore Glacier in a car race, if you remember."

The remark appeared to focus the old man's attention. For the first time he lifted his head to look straight at Colding.

"I'll tell you something, Colding. I know you were making love to her during your first marriage, when we were all living in Alaska. Well, *I* made love to her once, when the two of us were alone in the house. I must have been sixty then."

"You're lying, Father. You told me that before. You're lying."

His father's voice took on a womanish note. "You've experienced it all before—you've had it explained to you. You're a Sensitive of the Unrealised Multi-Schizo Type C. It's nothing to worry about. I'm not a child anymore."

"You have it all memorised, I know. You keep repeating yourself."

"Why not? It's a petty world . . ."

Colding, in a fit of energy, shook the newsfax lying on the arm of his chair and took it across to the old man. "Petty? Look at this. Read the headlines. Ingratitude is at war with Ecstasy and Knowledge II. The Third Philosophical Lever has been found at last. The abeings of Saturn are reproducing in the Moscow Exohouse. The shapes of five thousand notable smells have been identified;

scentologists are now investigating the shapes of consciousness. It has just been proved on a statistical basis that rigorous application of the three laws of immobility can overcome malnutrition. Holman Hunt's 'The Awakening Conscience' has been animated. Antarctic icebergs five miles long and more are being sold to United Mars and shipped entire to the Red Planet. Spontaneous generation is now known to be as much a reality as the luminiferous ether. Isn't all that important?"

"Petty," the old man said, turning his head away in disgust. "Petty. People don't have command of their lives anymore. That's a fact. Petty . . ."

As Colding went towards the door, he said, "I shall look in again tomorrow, Father."

"I dreamed about a horse last night," his father said. "Or I think it was last night. Is that good or bad, do you believe?"

Not without misgiving, Colding decided that he would visit his daughter Rosey on the following day. He became lost when he left the hospital, failing to recognise a single item in the immense urban landscape which stretched across a continent; in their profusion, their determination to reach their target, the covered ways had obliterated any true destination. Life here was a temporary shift between mobility and mobility. A trajaxi carried him to a five-star Belvedere Hotel, where he hired an interior room, ate a modest meal, and settled on the bed to sleep.

The doorbell rang.

He went to answer it, and stood there blinking.

The woman was small and dark and something less than pretty. She wore some sort of a green suit and smiled at him with a nervous familiarity. What was that hateful phrase in the readout? *Green suit assault . . .?*

"I saw you come in. I just happened to be stopping by the hotel to bring a picture to a client. Colding, my pet, how are you?"

He backed away. "Hello, Anna," he said. She had been dead five years. He could hear the traffic outside and wondered where everyone was endlessly going. The readout from his own ma-

chine had specified that Anna would reappear—his own machine, yet he had refused to believe. And the destimeter could not distinguish between objective and subjective experience . . .

She came towards him. "It was always you, Colding. I know I made things difficult for you. But you were the one man with meaning for me. I've had time to think it over. I want to come back to you."

But he had seen her on the slab after the car crash. She had been dead five years—or had the crash been a paranoid hallucination? He stood against a wall. Always he lived totally enclosed. No wonder people chose to die in space these days.

"I've got a wife, Anna. And an ex-wife. And a mistress. My life —the surface of it has closed over. There isn't any room in it for you." He could hardly speak for trembling.

She smiled. The teeth were loose. "Always your excuses, Colding. And mine of course . . . But I've come to the end of mine. We can pick up where we left off—"

"You mean, at the bottom of an abyss on the Skidmore Freeway? That's where we left off, lady. Come on, get—"

"Don't live in the past! Touch me, feel me, put your hands on my breasts—I won't mind anymore. What are you doing here, anyway? You're staring at me as if I was a ghost. Do you like my wig? Are you sick?"

"Look, I'm—yes, I'm sick. Anna—you're . . . you aren't here, or I'm not—"

"I'm off drugs, I swear, right off them. Mix me a drink. This swine Currey, I want to escape him, he has a power over me. He won't let me alone. You know how doctors are. I'm prepared to leave everything with him and start again, take up where we left off. Currey is a hateful man, we'll have to hide, leave Earth—"

She had touched him, put her delicate hands on his chest. He recognised her pressure, could feel her, smell her perfume. *Green suit assault.* He was in terror. He ran, jumped over the bed, said, "Anna, go away, I want no part of it—"

"You know Currey, don't you? He's the secretary of Wombud —you must know him. Why be silly? Are you drunk?"

He knew Wombud, the new sect believing that life after death was available to all, because real life took place in the nine months from conception to birth; expulsion from the womb was death, into a less real world, into a disembodied world after an intense tactual-sensual one. Human beings were living an afterlife, according to Wombud. And Anna . . .

"You swallow that Wombud nonsense, Anna? Currey's a madman, a menace just as great as the leader, Mister Queen Elizabeth—"

"So you *do* know him! First you say you don't, then you do! You're not in league with him, are you? I'm going to get all the things from you that you refused me before, Colding . . ."

She was coming round the bed.

"I refused you nothing. You sucked from me all I had, over and over again, and you kept coming back for more. No more, Anna, no more—you're dead, shit you, you're bastarding dead!"

"We're all dead, darling—"

He was screaming as he flung the bedding, mattress and all, at her, over her, and threw himself on top of it. They went down with noise and hell and hatred and confusion. Under him, under the muddled pile, she struggled, goading him to shout more.

Then he rolled off onto the carpeting, burying his face, saying over and over, "The bloody wreckage of my life, the bloody wreckage of my life . . ."

"*Life, life, you're always mouthing that stupid word . . .*" Who had said that to him recently?

Pulling himself onto his knees, he wiped his sodden hair from his eyes and looked at the muddle of sheets. One of Anna's hands lay exposed, its fingers half curled, the nails carmine with her old paint. The palm was innocent of all lines. No readout.

"Oh, Anna, darling, you'd understand. I kill everyone I meet . . ."

That damned night, he slept on top of her, leaving the body where it lay under the sheets.

There were a few late flies in the room next morning. Earth's last wildlife.

The cleaning robots were purging the apartment commentlessly as he grabbed up his suitcase and left.

With misgivings, he decided he would go and visit his daughter Rosey after seeing his father again. He was lost again when he left the hospital, failing to recognise one single item in the immense urban landscape which stretched across the whole continent. The covered ways, in their riotous proliferation, their madness to reach target, had obliterated any real destination. Life—life—had to fit where it could between interstices of mobility and mobility. Maybe Wombud had something.

A trajaxi fled miles with him, depositing him in Trinket Gardens.

Trinket Gardens was a gigantic pyramid, windowless on the outside. Vegetation perched here and there on ledges and levels. Trinket Gardens had been left in a parched desert of urbanisation, a Yucatan Peninsula of modernity. The gate that slid open for him had lost its glass. Ninety thousand people had lived here once, packed in their octagonal boxes. Before he was on the first climbing walk, he knew that little was left but boxes.

At 15492, his daughter opened the door to him and smiled.

She took him in and put her arms around him, whereupon he began to weep. The same old robot, Motown, was there, but Rosey pushed it aside and mixed him a strange drink that he took down in gulps.

"Oh, Rosey, my little pet, it's good to see you. I'm sick, sick or something."

"Daddy, you always live in the past. Come on, it's not so bad. You're upset. What are you doing here anyway? You're staring at me as if I was a ghost."

He shook his head. "Your granddad's dying. I had to come back to see him. It's like getting stuck in the past. And I think I'm undergoing a Lyra 2–type paranoia onslaught, but I'll be okay again in a minute."

As he went on talking to her, gradually getting his feelings in order, he tried to absorb her through his gaze. She was a big girl for twelve, well built, self-possessed, with a fine neat crop of mousy-yellow hair cut short about her ears and long at the back.

She stood before him, smiling with a gentle friendliness. It occurred to Colding that she probably looked a lot like him.

"I'm sorry I had to leave you here, Rosey. You should have stayed with your mother. Are you making out okay, with just Motown to look after you?"

She looked away momentarily. "I see Mother about once a month, Earthtime. There are times when I don't want you, times when I do. My existence has to belong to me sometime, doesn't it? Come and see my secret garden—if you're well enough."

"I'm okay. I'm overwrought."

"How's Gloria?" Rosey asked, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"Gloria? Oh, she's fine . . ." He stood up. "I must find you a nicer place to live in. It's terrible being a failure of a parent—one of the terrible things about it is that although you know you're a failure, it seems impossible to change. Well, that's what predestination's all about."

"I don't agree with that viewpoint, but let's not argue. Come and see my secret garden. Motown, you stay here."

"Take care," Motown said.

She led him out of the apartment and along the passage, down to another passage where all the doors were shut up with metal sheeting and litter lay thick about their feet.

"It's all broken down."

"People have moved out of Trinket. I like it better without them. There used to be awful fights and I was scared. I'm not scared anymore."

Down more corridors where desolation and perspective reigned.

At a corner suite, they came to a broken door.

"You have to push it a bit," she said, leading the way. They stood in a wrecked apartment. Some furniture was left, all ruined. Someone had had a fire in the room and one wall was burned.

"I'll find you a better place to live, Rosey, my darling. I know I've said it before, but this time I will. You can come and stay with us on Turpitude."

"I don't want to leave Earth. I don't want to leave Trinket. This is my place. Look what I've found!"

She climbed over debris into a rear room. There was a shattered window frame through which she scrambled. Sighing, her father followed.

The long-dead planners of Trinket Gardens had made an error in design, or so it appeared to Colding. A wedge of ground was left between sheer walls on three sides. Just a wedge of ground, not much wider at its widest point than a fair-sized room.

"Real ground, Daddy, real soil!" She squatted in the grass. "And just look what I've got!"

A green thing had seeded itself. Colding knew that it was a tree or a bush. Something moved under it and came towards them, so that for an instant he was alarmed. It waddled towards Rosey's outstretched hand, making small soothing noises at her.

"A chicken!" he said.

She looked up, laughing, her face all alight and unfamiliar in the open air. "It's a goose, Dad, a real live goose. I call her Jinny. Jinny, come and meet my pop."

The goose walked about them, craning her neck and opening and shutting her beak.

"Isn't it dangerous? Doesn't it bite or peck or something?"

"She's hoping I might have brought her some food. I generally do."

He leaned against one of the walls, taking in the miserable wedge of derelict land, the bedraggled bird, the green growth, the sky overhead, fighting against another urge to weep.

"Your old grandfather keeps dreaming about horses."

"Don't you think I'm lucky to have this little garden all to myself, Dad? It's mine alone, my secret. I found the goose. She wasn't here. She was in a lorry that crashed a way from Trinket, and I rescued her, or else she would have died, and carried her here. The lorry driver was dead, so it wasn't stealing or anything. I come to see her every day. Jinny's safe here, aren't you, Jinny?"

The destimeter readout had even included the goose, terming it "a feathered animal"—at least an 87.5 percent success.

"Look, Rosey, let's get back, you can't hang around this filthy scrap of ground—it's unhealthy, and dangerous." The readout had implied there was someone else here, doing something.

"Nonsense, Dad, don't say that! This is my own special desert island, I love it here."

He grasped her hand. "You can't stay here with this chicken, girl, now don't be so silly. Suppose someone discovers you? Aren't there any parks left you can go to?"

She stood up and looked sadly at him. "Daddy, this is *my place,* do you understand? Do you ever understand?"

Colding moved his leg away from the bird and said, "I don't know. Maybe I understand better than you. You'll go crazy here. You're still only a child. Now, please, let's get back. I'll take you to see your grandfather in hospital; you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

As they returned through the cavernous perspectives, she said, "I do get sad sometimes. Not so much that you're away, just that you never understand. And I'm not a child anymore, either, so it's no good your going on thinking so."

"Dear, dear Rosey, come and live with us and I will attempt to understand, or I'll keep quiet when I don't. I'm trying to work out my life, and I'm on the verge of a big breakthrough. I'm getting old . . . I get confused. I don't know, it's such a petty world."

"No, that's not true, either. To me it's not petty, and it hurts me to hear you say it."

"Now you don't understand." He achieved a smile.

Rosey stood right where she was, so that Colding was also forced to halt. He looked at her with love and impatience.

"That makes me sad, Daddy . . . You see, I've now come to the end of my childhood. It's going from me, I can feel it—slipping away. Everything's changing, so I must cling to what I've got . . ."

"You've got so little—I've given you so little."

"No, I've got—most things. Only . . . my dear secret garden isn't quite such a secret anymore. Look, you'd better know, but I've got a boy friend. I'm grown up now. He comes here. He loves the garden, and Jinny, and . . ." She read his face, put a hand up

to her mouth, inclined her head, and started to weep.

"Oh, my darling . . ." He put his arm about her shoulder. An awful black thing rose inside him, choking him. He seized her hand, staring at the lines there, to see if what she said was true.

From a great distance, he heard himself say, "It's time to go to the hospital. Let's go together."

Two days later, Colding caught a shuttle belonging to the Chinese line which had virtual monopoly of the Earth–Turpitude route. His father had not died, he had found no alternative to Trinket for his daughter, he had managed to make himself see that the green suit assault had simply been a Lyra-2 paranoia onslaught; he contained his despairs and behaved like an average man, ergatoid among his fellow passengers.

Sitting in the soft-class lounge, he watched Turpitude float closer in the big screen. It was shaped like a rose petal which, falling, turns towards the sun that has been both its reason and its downfall. Colding was moved by the sight. The planetoid had been designed and built by a Japanese-Brazilian consortium; they had wrought well. He jotted down a note on his pad to call Kai Tak at Gondwana and discuss the design of the production model of the destimeter. There were, after all, little important things to be done; one could hide from oneself.

And was predestination—"the exact science of the future"—really being built there, on the energy-loaded surface of that petal, to spread outwards and transform the minds and habits of men? Was there really something new under the sun? How would Rosey's generation accept it?

The petal was changing contour and shape now, as the *Verbena Star* swung in towards its homing boom. It was becoming a confusion of sine curves, growing like a three-dimensional drawing in a computer, just as its precise ergonomic shape had once been conceived in a computer.

For a moment, Colding felt himself to be in the computer, *knew* he functioned only as a statistic, *knew* predestination was truth: all of science, and in consequence all of religion, all of thought.

He might suffer, and feel himself alive through that suffering; but the biochemistries of his system secreted a specific, predetermined, and consequently computable meed of suffering. Of happiness, too. The ration was not random. Every emotion that ever moved mysteriously through whatever life now could be charted with as much rigour as a comet, visiting and fleeing from the sun on tight celestial schedule.

Something of that moment of perception lingered with him as he stepped out into the transportation station and caught a tube home, whistling through the plastic core of Turpitude towards Urbstak East.

He bought a pill on the train, warding off tachycardia and other maladies which afflicted him after space flight, and in consequence was feeling no more than slightly sick as he stepped off at Equinoctial E and grafted home.

Part of his ill-ease was the final wording of his destimeter readout: *Unfaith causes Resignation.* At Gondwana, they'd have to sort out the way the destimeter's language grew vaguer as its event horizon grew more distant and probability levels sank.

Unfaith causes resignation? His lack of faith in himself? Gloria's unfaithfulness to him? His betrayal of everyone close to him? Or did "unfaith" simply imply doubt? And what sort of resignation? Was he going to resign from Gondwana, or Gloria from their compatibility contract? Or did it mean a sort of philosophical acceptance?

There was that clear face of hers, the features so beautifully formed. She stood and smiled at him. All innocence.

Colding always had to remember, as he took her into his arms, how small she was, how tall he was. Physically, they were not well matched.

She kissed him on the lips. He knew by her breathing and the moisture index of her mouth that she was in a special mood. Holding her, he placed his left palm across the cervical plexus at the back of her neck, so that the resonances in his palmar arch told him that her central nervous system was on the high.

He smelled and listened, catching vibes from under her parietal bones.

"Lovely to have you back," she said quickly. "I'll put on some musuc and make a fuss of you. How was Rosey—and your father?" Her movements over to the veeps system were too fast. "Is he getting better?"

"Who was here just now?" he asked. "He's still dying."

He was aware of the buzz of the fluorescents and conditioning before she said, "Someone from Gondwana—your boss, actually."

"Tab Polymer? What did he want?"

"Nothing. Just a social call. Don't be so uneasy!"

"You've promiscued again, you rotten bitch! It's what the destimeter predicted."

"You'd believe its word rather than mine, wouldn't you? You get more like a machine every day, Colding, you know that?"

"I am a machine. So are you. We just happen to be human machines, treading a computed path. That's how the destimeter can predict events. That's how I know you've betrayed me again."

Gloria started the musuc automatically. It was a modal hushkit vibration, and instantly the chamber seemed to fill with cloud that saturated all but objects under direct gaze. She had always enjoyed the tunnel-vision effect better than he.

Facing him, she said, through the long white perspective, "All right, all right. You want a computer that will do all your living for you. You'd like a machine for a wife. You want predestination because it gives you all sorts of excuses. I did go with Tab, I admit it. Your damned oracle is right. I want to be human, I want to *feel*— this vision of myself weeping in a black-and-gold room, I can't stand it, I can't stand to be shut out. I love you, Coldy, but I want to be human . . ."

He went to her. He stooped. "We'll work it out, Gloria. I'll try to understand. You must have your secret garden. I don't forget that you're a Sensitive of the Unrealised Multi-Schizophrenic Type B. It's terrible being a failure of a husband—one of the

terrible things about it is that you know you're a failure—"

"Don't tell me that again! I know what you're going to say." She turned away from him. "Don't you ever understand?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. Maybe I understand better than you do. You say you want to be human. What you have to do is revise your understanding of what a human being *is* . . ."

"Don't give me that sort of argument—comfort me! You just stand there talking and talking! Comfort me!"

Making a great effort, he moved forward through the solid sound, stretching out his hands to her. Like all the others for whom he felt pity and responsibility, she was being left in an obsolescing version of the present, unable to face the future.

"I love you, Gloria," he said. Even if it was not as much as 86 percent true, he thought hopefully, it just might provide her with some sort of workable hypothesis for existence.

He kissed her, letting his hand stray down her body, sensing the tautness of her muscles, searching for warmth in her and in himself.

ACE 167

What we sometimes forget about the future is that it may break the hearts of ordinary people.

Eleanor Arnason

It was after I lost my job as the manager of a traveling troupe of precision unicyclists that I met Ace 167. I was down and out in a bar in Venusport, my last credit gone to buy cheap Venusian wine. The jukebox was playing an old, tinny-sounding Beatles tape and on the jukebox screen tiny grey figures cavorted: the Beatles in their prime, back in the magic sixties. *Gone, all gone,* I thought. *The moving finger writes and having writ moves on, nor all thy piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.* I drank the last of my wine, set down the glass and turned around, just in time to see Ace come in. His clothes were ragged and his feet were bare. He had long red hair, pulled back into a ponytail. His mustache was red too, a big, bristly handlebar. "167" was tattooed on his forehead: three big numbers, as bright blue as his eyes.

"Out," the bartender said.

Ace stopped and scratched his nose. "Don't be primitive, mister."

"Out."

Ace shrugged, turned and went outside. His shirt was torn across the back, so I could see a couple of the gill lines, slanting down on either side of his spine. When they're shut, gills don't bother me. But I've seen gillies underwater with their red gill slits open. My ancestors were vikings, and one of the nastier things they did was to make blood eagles. To make a blood eagle, you take a man and cut into his back on both sides of his spine, going right through his ribs. Then you pull his lungs out through the cuts and spread them across his back. That's a blood eagle. You do this while the man is alive, and it makes the Allfather Odin happy. Whenever I saw open gills, I thought of the blood eagle and got a sick feeling in my gut. But, as I said, the gills didn't bother me when they were shut.

" 'Nother?" the bartender asked me.

I shook my head, slid down off the bar stool, and followed Ace out. It was foggy. The streetlights were dim white areas of luminescence floating in darkness. There were docks across the street. I could hear ropes creaking and water slapping against the sides of the boats.

"You got any money, lady?"

I jerked away from the sound. The guy behind me laughed. "I'm begging, not robbing."

I turned around. It was Ace, of course. I said, "I'm broke."

"My luck. The rest of them in there look like they wouldn't give their grandma burying money."

I nodded and started back toward my hotel. I figured I had two or three more days before they asked me for money. A foghorn was honking somewhere out in the harbor. Ace stayed beside me.

"Isn't there any work here?" I asked.

"Yeah. Underwater. You want to know something funny? I don't like it down there. It's too cold, too dark and too full of things I don't want to meet. Ain't that a laugh?"

I stopped. We were under a streetlight, so I could see him. "I thought it was supposed to be wonderful down there."

Ace shook his head. "It's a job, lady. Only you got fish nibbling

on your toes while you work. Tasting you out, sort of."

"You can't get work up here?"

"You crazy? Take a job away from a regular person and give it to a gillie?"

We started walking again. The air was cold and wet. I put my hands in my jacket pockets, then looked over at Ace. He had his arms folded and his shoulders hunched against the cold. "Look," I said. "I don't have any money. I lost my job. But I have an extra jacket. Why don't you take this one?"

After a moment, Ace said, "Okay. I will. Thanks."

I took the jacket off and gave it to him. He put it on, then laughed. "You know what I'm going to do with it, lady?"

"Pawn it."

"Yeah. Thanks again."

We parted then. I went back to my hotel and found a message from a friend on Tanit Island who was putting together a trained-fish act. She'd sent money, enough so I could pay my hotel bill and buy a hydroplane ticket. I left Venusport the next morning.

As was to be expected, the fish act was a disaster. We ended up selling it to a fish market in Ishtar. They put it in a tank in the front, so the customers would have something to watch while they waited for service. My friend got a job in the market working as a counterwoman. She said she'd gotten used to being around fish. Me, I found a hydroplane that needed a bartender and worked my way back to Venusport. That town was the same as ever, cold and wet and foggy, full of steep hills and rickety prefab buildings. I got another job as a bartender in a bar by the docks, where the dock workers and the artists came. After a while, I was managing a sculptor on the side, also a couple of dock workers who wanted to be singers. One night Ace 167 came into the bar. He stopped at the door, waiting to be told to get out. He was as ragged as before and still barefoot. His mustache had turned into a beard and his hair was short. He looked at me, grinned and came over.

"What'll you have?" I asked.

He laid a one-credit piece on the bar. "What'll that buy?"

"A glass of wine."

"Okay."

I got him his wine, then pushed the credit back toward him. "You're not working yet."

"I was. Salvage job out in the harbor. Then a guy I knew got stung by a spine worm. Ever seen one of them?"

I nodded. "In the aquarium. It was pretty, I thought."

"Yeah. You know what the poison does? Paralyzes the respiratory system. So Mad Hat drowned before we could get him to the first-aid station. Me, I thought I'd sooner starve." He sipped a little wine. "Seeing as how you're buying the wine, would this credit buy a piece of pizza?"

I nodded and told the cook to heat up a cheese-and-tomato. "You work salvage. Does that mean you can handle a torch?"

"Uh-huh." He finished his wine and I refilled the glass. "Thanks."

"I know a sculptor who's building something big. He might need help."

"Yeah?"

"I'll give you his name."

Ace nodded and the cook brought out the pizza. I went down the bar to draw beers for a couple of dock workers. Later on, I gave Ace the sculptor's name and my name too. He said, "Thanks. How come you're doing all this?"

I shrugged, which was a lie in gesture. I knew all right and Ace probably knew too. I did it for his bright blue eyes and his thick red hair that had gold highlights in it.

"Anyway, thanks." He held out his hand and I shook it. "I guess I should introduce myself. I'm Ace."

"Glad to meet you," I said.

He left and I didn't see him for a while. My singing dock workers got a recording contract right after that. I quit my job and told the sculptor I was going to be too busy to handle his business, and the three of us lit out for Isis, which was where the recording company was.

Now that was a city! There were almost as many canals as streets. Their still, green water reflected flowering trees and

white, graceful bridges. At the city's center were the water gardens and, all around them, skyscrapers made of blue glass. In the suburbs the many-domed houses of the rich shone like clusters of pearls. On an island in Isis Bay was the famous Night Market, where the nocturnal Venusians came to sell their wares: kilts made from strings of shells, baskets woven out of feathers, and other bits of useless esoterica. I went out there once. The Venusians came in after nightfall, their long canoes emerging from the darkness into the dim light of the torches along the shore. To the sound of flutes and drums, they brought the canoes in and beached them. Then they set out their kilts and baskets, their god-symbols made of flowers tied together, their tiny cages with brightly colored insects inside them. And then they waited, squatting in the midst of their goods, their huge eyes blinking rapidly, till the tourists moved in to buy. The whole spectacle made me sick to my stomach. I didn't know why.

I was in Isis four months. My singing dock workers made several recordings, which nobody liked. Finally they decided to go back to the docks, and I decided to go back to Venusport. As soon as I got there, I got another job as a bartender. Then I looked up the sculptor I'd sent Ace to.

He worked and lived in a warehouse down by the docks. At the moment, the warehouse was full of "The Triumph of Steam," an enormous construction consisting of a lot of steam engines all welded together. He'd had a hell of a time building it, since there weren't any steam engines or steam-engine builders on the planet. He insisted that all the steam engines had to work.

When I got to his place he was drinking wine, sitting on his bed, which was in one corner of the warehouse, next to a bright yellow dresser with a blowtorch on top of it. "You back?"

"Uh-huh." I waved at the construction. "Is it done?"

He nodded. "Now what do I do?"

"Sell it. What else? Where's Ace 167?"

"The gillie? I fired him."

"Why?" He handed me the wine. I drank some and handed the bottle back.

"He made me nervous. How could I work with him flapping his gills at me?"

"Don't be ridiculous. They never open their gills above-water. I'm not sure they can."

"He still made me nervous. I couldn't stop thinking about those gills. Hey, I need someone to help me sell this."

"I'll see what I can do. Okay?" I left the sculptor and went back to my bar.

I couldn't sell the construction, but I can't say I tried too hard. I was getting interested in bartending. The place where I worked was quiet, with the same customers every night. They came in and watched the 3–D, played pool on the new table that changed its surface at thirty-second intervals, and drank. The best thing was, I didn't have to push the product. People came in and bought it without a word of encouragement.

The next time I heard anything about Ace was on the evening news. There was an implosion in a sea lab they were building at the edge of the continental shelf. Three gillies were caught inside when the dome collapsed. One of them was Ace 167. I stopped whatever it was I was doing and looked up at the 3–D. Bodies on stretchers were being carried off a boat. I hadn't been listening till I heard Ace's name. Was he still alive?

"Harry," I said to the boss, "I'm suddenly sick. See you tomorrow."

Harry opened his mouth, but I was gone before he could say anything. I caught the monorail to Bayside, where the gillies lived. Down the hill the car slid, then swung out over the shoddily built apartment complexes of Bayside. It was crazy, I thought, looking through the window at the rows of identical buildings and the dimly lit streets. It cost a fortune to make a person into a gillie. The first modifications were genetic and took place before conception, when there wasn't a person yet, only an egg and a sperm under some kind of amazing microscope. Later on, there usually had to be surgical corrections. The host-mother had to be paid, and there was all that special training, ten or fifteen years of it. Gillies were terribly expensive. So why were they

housed in tenements? It was like having the Kohinoor diamond set in dung.

But what sane person can understand modern economics? The car came to a stop next to the white, bright gillie hospital, and I got off. *What am I doing here,* I wondered as I went down the stairs from the station and in through the hospital's front entrance. The waiting room was empty. The lady at the information desk looked at me, saw my brow, which was as blank as hers, and looked surprised.

"Where do I find out about the gillies who were hurt in the sea-lab implosion?"

"Are you a reporter?"

"No."

"Then I'm afraid that information is confidential."

"Look, one of them is a friend of mine. I want to know if he's still alive."

She stared at me, frowning. I knew what she was thinking. Friends with a gillie? For shame. She shook her head. "I'm sorry."

Like hell you are, I thought. May your forehead sprout warts shaped like numbers, may gills open in your back, may you become what you most dislike.

"Thanks," I said, and smiled and left. There was a bar down the street from the hospital, its sign flashing WINE, Beer, WINE, Beer. I walked toward it. The night was cold and misty. The wet air had a harbor stink. Foghorns were blaring and honking out in the bay. Into the bar I went, braving all the gillie stares, the black, white, brown faces all marked with blue numbers, all turned toward me.

I ordered a beer from the bartender, who was a regular human being. Gillies didn't work air jobs, even in their own section of town.

The bartender shook his head. "Please leave, miz."

Here goes, I thought, and turned around to face all those gillies. "There's a friend of mine in your hospital. They won't tell me anything about him. Could one of you find out how he is?"

"What's his name?" a black gillie woman asked.

"Ace One Sixty-seven."

A gillie man, who was brown-skinned and black-haired and looked Mexican, said, "He's alive. He was lucky. Taki died and Slim ain't in good health. Nothing happened to Ace except he lost an arm."

"Oh," I said. "Thanks." I started toward the door.

"Hey, lady," the black woman said.

I stopped. "Yes?"

"How come you got gillie friends?"

"*De gustibus non est disputandum,*" I answered. "Or do I mean *honi soit qui mal y pense?*" I got out of there.

The next day I asked Harry to switch me to the day shift. He grumbled a lot and said the daytime bartender wouldn't like it. But I'd already talked to her, and she'd agreed to trade shifts till my friend was out of the hospital. So Harry had to give in. After work, I went down to the hospital. Ace was allowed no visitors, they said. I came back the next day and the day after. Finally, after four days, they let me see him. His face was white as a fish's belly, and he had dark blue bags under his bright blue eyes. He'd been clean-shaven several days before, but now his beard was beginning a comeback. His red-gold hair was long again. Tubes went from bottles into him. His right arm was half as long as it used to be and all wrapped up in white bandages.

"Hey, lady," he said.

"How're you doing, Ace?"

"How does it look?"

"It looks like you're sick. I'll bring flowers the next time I come. I brought them a couple of times, but they died in the waiting room." I sat down. "I'm sorry about the arm."

"They'll grow me another one. I can collect workers' comp till it's ready to graft, and I won't have to work underwater."

"An aspect I hadn't considered," I said.

"You don't know what it's like down there. If you did, you'd've considered. Those walls started buckling, and I thought, this is it. You know, there's no big religion that's figured out how to fit

in gillies. Suppose we become angels. Where do they attach the wings? On top of our gills? If they do that, will we still be able to breathe underwater? Can gillies fly underwater in the afterlife?"

I laughed and the security guard came in to tell me time was up.

"I'll be back tomorrow," I said.

"Okay." Ace shut his eyes. He really looked sick. I tried to imagine what it was like, working way down where the water was cold and dark, and the pressure could push a wall in on top of you. *Thank God I'm not a gillie,* I thought, and went home.

The next day at work, a guy came in who wanted me to help him organize a Venusian ethnic festival. The idea was to get together a bunch of the poor lunks, who'd hop around in their shell kilts and wave feather staffs and tell tourists they were propitiating some native sex god.

I pointed out that as far as I knew, the Venusians did not have any sex gods.

"They must have. This is Venus, the planet of sex."

I'd read up on Venusian religion in *National Geographic,* and I could've told him that the Venusian gods, if gods was the right word, were not beings but levels of spiritual power. When the Venusians said a sorcerer had become such-and-such a god, they meant he'd reached the power level that had that god's name on it. It wasn't only sorcerers who gained power and became gods. Trees, rocks, flowers, fish, insects, and even Earth people could too. I didn't think this guy would appreciate my lecture, so I told him I wasn't interested in his ethnic festival. He left, and I went back to selling wine.

That evening I brought Ace a bunch of crimson trumpets, a bright-red lilylike flower native to Venus. They reminded me of Isis. They grew in the water gardens there, blossoming so profusely that the pools were red from side to side. Ace had gotten a shave and looked a little better than he had the day before. He watched while I stuck the flowers in a vase. "I like 'em."

"Good." I fiddled with the flowers for a while, trying to make

them look as if they'd been arranged, then gave up and sat down. We didn't know each other very well, so we talked about current events. There's no safer subject than a flood in China or the discovery of corruption in city government. Hardly anybody is in favor of floods or corruption. The security guard came around before we ran out of noncontroversial disasters, and I went home.

I went to the hospital every night till Ace was released. He told me about working underwater, and I told him about bartending and promoting. Then we talked about our childhoods—his in a Venus Company crèche in Ceylon, mine in Windsor, Ontario, across the river from the ruins of Detroit. Finally, we got onto the meaning of life. Neither of us knew what it was.

I have confused memories of that period of my life: the white hospital bed, the rows of fake bottles behind my bar, flowers, girders going up on an undersea building site, Ace's face and half-gone arm, sea thorns and serpent fish, the mechanical pool table—its top green as water, moving up and down like waves.

Finally the hospital let Ace go. We exchanged com numbers and promised to call each other up. But we didn't. I was pretty sure we wouldn't. It was too hard for us to figure out how to get along outside the hospital. Our lives were too different. All we had going for us was an irrational affection.

So I went back to working nights at the bar. After a month or two or three, my friend the fish trainer showed up. She'd started feeling guilty working at the fish market. All those rows of dead fish had seemed to reproach and accuse. "There's more to fish than edibility," she said. "I'm going to prove it. I'm putting together another fish act."

Somehow I ended up agreeing to manage the act. This time we went out of business in Inanna. We let the fish go in the sea. My friend borrowed some money and went back to Tanit Island. I got a job in a curio store, selling little animals made out of seashells and 3-D panoramas of the famous Inanna Heights where, legend said, the Venusians had sacrificed young maidens to the goddess of procreation—or was it chastity? Needless to say, the legend was not Venusian.

One day I looked up from a pink shell elephant and saw Ace out in the street, staring in the store window. For the first time since I'd met him, he was well dressed, his white shirt shimmering like a pearl, his dark green pants covered with embroidery. He had a new right arm and a Brigham Young beard. I got out into the street as quickly as I could. "Ace."

"Hey, lady." He grinned. "What you doing in that dump?"

"Working."

"Yeah? So am I. On the mining complex they're building out in the Narrows."

"That isn't like you."

He shrugged. "The workers' comp stopped when I got the arm. Listen, I got plenty of money, and there's a restaurant down in the gillie district that'll serve both of us, or else get broken up. I'll buy you dinner."

I said okay and went back to sell someone a set of monkey musicians made of pale blue shells. At six Ace came back and we went to Nathan's, a gillie dive on the waterfront. The jukebox was full of tapes of gospel greats from the late twentieth century. Ace put in money and played "Take Me in the Lifeboat" by the Transcendent Nightingales. The jukebox screen lit up and showed three women in glittering green dresses, singing and dancing in front of a golden wall. We sat down at a window table. Outside were the dark waters of Inanna Inlet. On the other side the lights of North Inanna shone, and beyond them was the Heights. The weather engineers had been working for a quarter of a century and at long last the weather was changing: the ever present clouds were beginning to break apart. Once in a while we could see the sun or a couple of stars. Tonight, Earth was visible, a bright blue-white point of light blazing above the Heights. We ordered drinks and Ace said, "You staying here?"

I shook my head. "I'm going back to Venusport as soon as I have the money and find a nice, quiet bar in need of a nice, quiet bartender. How about you?"

"This job's going to last a year. I figure I'll try to stick it out and save all the money I can. Next time I'm out of work, I want something in the bank. I'm getting tired of poverty. It's okay

when you're young, but I'm starting to feel old." He grinned. "Of course, I say that now. Two, three months, and I'll probably think there's nothing worse than working."

The drinks came, and we ordered serpent-fish stew, then ice cream flavored with the fruit of the nettle tree, coffee and Venusian brandy. After dinner we walked along the wharf. The waves sloshed around the pilings below us, and a boat came up the inlet, a big yacht, aglitter with light. The air smelled of seaweed and fish. There were streetlights shining here and there. I looked at Ace's face. He was right, he was getting old. I could see lines around his mouth and eyes. Soon that magnificent red hair would start fading. Well, I was getting old too. And what did either of us have to show for all that time except wrinkles? *The world is too much with us,* I thought. *Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: little we see in nature that is ours; we have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

I'd forgotten the next few lines, but I remembered, looking out at the dark inlet and the lights shining on the other side, how the poem ended:

> —Great God! I'd sooner be
> A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

BITING DOWN HARD ON TRUTH

The most anxious man in a prison is the governor.

George Alec Effinger

For Julie and Butch Roe

It was the second week in December; the weather was actually fairly mild, bright, clear, temperature in the high fifties. The yard was brown and grassless. Where rain had made mud a few days before, there were hard, dry ridges of a lighter buff color. The high gray walls around the yard were close and cold.

BOOK ONE: HEALTHFUL SPORT IN THE COOL, CLEAR AIR

Mac was playing middle linebacker, as usual. He was of medium height but very thin, with an ascetic face, narrow shoulders, and small hands. On his right was Willie, as complete an opposite for Mac as one could hope to find: tall, heavy, well-

muscled. On Mac's other side was Sam, Willie's wife. She was the shortest of the three, though she was built as solidly as her husband. They stared ahead at the other team. The opponents were coming up to the line of scrimmage; their quarterback flicked his eyes across Mac's team, examining the defensive alignments. Mac looked past him, at the fullback who was Mac's responsibility. Willie watched the halfback, Sam watched the tight end.

"I will observe their fingertips," thought Mac. He had been taught that the fingertips of the other team's linemen could give the impending play away. If the play was a pass, an inexperienced lineman might have his weight on the balls of his feet, as he prepared to pull out of position and drop back to protect the quarterback. On the other hand, if the play was a run, and the lineman would be blocking forward, his weight might be supported by that hand and his fingernails would show white. Mac glanced at the appropriate fingertips, but he picked up no clues.

It was fourth down and four yards to go for the opponents' first down. There was less than a minute to play, and the other team was behind by six points. They were going for the first down.

The center snapped the ball. The other team's quarterback faked a hand-off to the halfback, who ran toward the sideline; Willie followed. The quarterback faded back with the football and faked a pass; meanwhile, the tight end ran a square-out to the other sideline, and Sam followed. Mac was going for the quarterback. He saw the man hand the ball to the fullback. "Watch the draw!" shouted Mac. "Draw! Draw!" The running back took the ball and ran through the vacated middle of the line. Sam recovered and came back to help on the tackle. Mac hit the runner low, knocking the man's feet out from under him. At the same time, Sam hit the runner again, higher, and the other team was stopped short of its first down. Willie jogged over and helped Sam up, then gave a hand to Mac. The three defensive players left the field, happy and tired. For all practical purposes, the game was over.

On the sidelines, Mac saw Jennings staring at the defensive team. Jennings said nothing, gave them not even a smile by way of congratulations. In his eyes, the defense had merely done its

job. Mac looked away. One of the assistant coaches said something and laughed. Mac nodded wearily. The assistant coach slapped Mac on the back of his helmet.

"I have always thought that invigoration was one of the worst of impositions," thought Mac. "I have always thought that invigoration was one of the worst of impositions." He repeated the line to himself again and again, hoping that he would remember it the next day. He took a deep breath, and his chest ached and was sore. He took another deep breath.

BOOK TWO: INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT IMPLEMENTS OF WAR

The room was wide and long; the low ceiling made the room seem like a slot in a desk or an empty drawer. The walls were gray, the same color as the ceiling, a little lighter than the floor, which showed the marks of years of traffic. The lights were dim, and the large windows let in little additional illumination. Willie looked around the hall, waiting for the lecture to begin. Through the windows all he could see were the immense walls. The chairs in the room were filled; Sam sat in her place sixteen ranks ahead of Willie, twenty-two files to his left. Mac was nine ranks behind Willie, and forty-one files to his right. Willie opened his notebook. The page on which he had made his notes at the previous lecture was gone. There was no writing at all in the notebook. Willie clicked his ballpoint pen and wrote *Lecture* at the top of the first page. Then he sat back uneasily and waited for Jennings.

After a few minutes Jennings came in and went to his podium on the short platform at the front of the room. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," said Jennings. "Today we have some bombs to look at. I hope you take adequate notes. I do not want any failures on the examination. I'm sure that you do not want to fail, either. Take adequate notes."

Willie noticed for the first time that there were, indeed, three large objects on one side of Jennings' platform. They must be bombs, Willie decided.

"What we have here, ladies and gentlemen," said Jennings, "is

what you call your regular AN/M65A1 general-purpose bomb." Jennings walked over to the tallest of the bombs, which was almost exactly as tall as he was, which was almost exactly six feet tall. "That is, again, your what you call your Alpha November slash Mike Six Five Alpha One. I called this beauty a general-purpose bomb. Can anyone recall from our previous discussions how this beauty is delivered? Come, come, ladies and gentlemen." Jennings waited a moment, smiling coldly. "From aircraft, ladies and gentlemen. From your so-called aircraft. It is a thousand-pound bomb, ladies and gentlemen. Much too heavy for a man to carry on his back, I'm sure you will agree. Perhaps a few of you could imagine it buried in the ground like a mine, with only its detonator sticking up in the air. But, consider. What a job, ladies and gentlemen, to dig the hole, to lift it down into the hole. Ah, ladies and gentlemen, perhaps a jeep runs over this beauty! Like killing a mosquito with a howitzer. Make a note, my lovely intelligences. We drop these beauties from aircraft."

Willie wrote in his notebook, *AN/M65A1 . . . general purpose . . . 1000 lb . . . dropped from the skies.*

Jennings continued his lecture. Along with the first bomb was a medium-sized bomb, which Jennings identified as an Alpha November slash Mike Seven Eight five-hundred-pound nonpersistent gas bomb. The third bomb was a small Alpha November slash Mike Eight Eight two-hundred-twenty-pound fragmentation bomb. Willie noted all three, then thought about making a sketch of each. They looked pretty much the same to him, except for their different sizes. In that case, he decided, the sketches would be relatively pointless. Thinking the lecture must be over, Willie closed his notebook. Jennings hadn't finished, however.

"Ah, yes, ladies and gentlemen," said Jennings sternly, a sneer as evident in his tone of voice as in his expression, "will any of you tell me what is meant by a 'general-purpose bomb'?"

Not one member of the audience ventured a reply. Jennings slapped his thigh impatiently. Willie looked over toward Sam's seat; he thought about the other men that sat between them. When the lectures ended and they all marched back to their cells, Willie had noticed that some of the men whispered to Sam in the

halls. He had never seen one of the men touch her. That would be too much. He had once hurried through the crowd to catch up to one of the creeps; Willie had seen the man bend forward during a lecture and make some comment to Sam. She had not reacted, not even made a gesture of annoyance. Still, afterward, Willie had followed the man and pushed him against the gray concrete-block wall. Willie had made it seem like an accident, in case anyone was watching. In a few seconds he had doubled the man over with three quick blows, then vanished into the streaming crowd. Willie hated the kind of creeps that leered at his wife.

"If no one can devise an adequate response," said Jennings in a slow, quiet voice, "we may have to cancel all reinforcement rations. We may even have to schedule additional punishment." One man, thirty-eight ranks in front of Willie and twenty-seven to his right, stood and nervously indicated that he had an answer. "Go on, Larry," said Jennings. "Let's hear it."

"An all-purpose bomb is one that, well, like you said, you drop it from a plane," said Larry. "You're trying to destroy or at least hurt some kind of target. You're trying to blow the thing up. The target, I mean. As opposed to photoflash bombs or gas bombs or like that."

"No," said Jennings. "Not 'all-purpose bomb.' The term is 'general-purpose bomb.' I'm sorry, Larry. Your answer was good enough to get the rest of these clowns off the hook. I'm sure you're happy to hear that, ladies and gentlemen. But, Larry, I'm afraid it wasn't precise enough to get *you* off the hook. Now, now, ladies and gentlemen, no rustles of annoyance. Let's have no little murmurs of pique, out there." Jennings laughed briefly. He nodded to a man uniformed in gray, who was standing near one of the exits at the front of the room. The man walked to Larry's seat and escorted him from the room. There were no further whispers or sounds from the audience.

Willie watched his wife's head, now bent over her notebook in study. The man sitting behind Sam, the same man Willie had beaten on the previous occasion, slouched in his seat. Willie still didn't like the way that guy looked.

"All right," said Jennings, "get the hell out of here."

The audience stood up and began walking toward the exits. Willie flipped his notebook open again; the notes that he had taken on Jennings' lecture were already gone. He shrugged, closed the notebook, and tried to catch up to Sam.

BOOK THREE: THE INTELLIGENT USE OF THE MYSTIC IMPULSE

The alarm bell rang, and Sam woke up. She yawned and stretched, then remembered that it was Sevenday morning. She hated Sevendays; she always wondered why Jennings couldn't let them sleep a little later. They didn't have any work to do, after all. She put her head back on the pillow and waited for Grigarskas to come by. Sam's cell was still dark. It was about half an hour before sunrise; the lights on top of the gray walls around the yard were already turned off. She felt warm and sleepy.

"All right, Sam," shouted a woman on the other side of the cell door. "Let's get going. You may be a Lion, all right, but the rituals won't wait for no Lion. Get your ass moving."

"I'm up, Miss Grigarskas," said Sam, unhappily throwing back the thin gray blanket and swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. It was Sevenday. Time for rituals. Then reinforcement—and punishment.

Sam dressed quickly. She brushed her hair and splashed a little water in her face from the pitcher on her bureau. Then she went to the window that occupied the entire wall opposite the door. The window was made of plastic, a single thick sheet of the stuff, mounted slablike in the gray concrete blocks of the building. It wouldn't break; it was about eight inches thick, and when Sam put her palms against it, it was very cold. All she could see was the high wall across the yard. She couldn't see anything beyond the wall. The yard itself was patched with blackness and lighter areas of gray, some fifty stories below her.

Sam left her cell and joined the crowd of women in the hall. They were all walking quickly toward the elevators. The Sevenday rituals were held in the vast assembly hall in the lower part

of the same building in which she attended Oneday, Threeday, and Fiveday lectures. The hall was large enough to accommodate everyone from every dorm building. The hall was so immense that a person standing in its center could see none of its walls. From that vantage point, it was like standing on a dim, featureless plain. Only the checkerboard pattern of tiles on the floor reminded one that the room was, after all, inside a still larger building.

Sam was proud that she was a Lion. Willie, her husband, was only a Raven, and their friend Mac was a Soldier, one level below Sam. Few of the other women in Sam's dorm had risen above Occult, the second level in the ritual.

During the walk from her dorm to the assembly hall, Sam wondered if she would see Willie during the ritual. They would likely get together later; it seemed probable to her that they would receive reinforcement, because of their performance on the football field in the Fourday game. Sam hoped that Willie wouldn't do anything to disrupt the ritual; his angry jealousy had caused him to start fighting right in the middle of the Sevenday services. It had happened several times, and each occasion cost him whatever progress he had made through the levels. He always had to begin over again, as a Raven. It never seemed to bother him, but it caused Sam private embarrassment.

Sam entered the assembly hall. On the seven large doorways were repeated murals showing Mithra slaying the bull. Inside, the gigantic hall filled her with awe, as it did every Sevenday. She took her place with her fellows, the other men and women who held the rank of Lion. While she waited for everyone to arrive, she looked toward the vast congregation of Ravens, hoping to see Willie. She couldn't find him in the crowd.

Jennings entered after a short while, dressed in the white and gold robes of the Pater patratus. "Nama, Nama Sebesio," he called.

"Nama, Nama Sebesio," answered the congregation. Jennings then ritually greeted each group, beginning with the other Patres. He gave each degree its particular and secret sign, and he was

acknowledged by the chief of that degree. After the Patres, Jennings saluted the Runners of the Sun, the Persians, the Lions, the Soldiers, the Occults, and finally, the Ravens.

The ritual itself held little interest for Sam. She had never had any enthusiasm for it, and even less faith in the meaning of it all. She thought of other things, and made her responses out of habit. After quite a long time, Jennings gave the crowd his Sevenday benediction and walked slowly from the hall, attended by seven groups of seven Patres. A bell was rung when he had left the assembly hall, the signal that the remainder of the congregation was free to depart. Sam sighed, and hurried toward the group of Ravens. Willie met her; Sam put her arms around his neck and kissed him. He frowned. "Not here, Sam," he said.

She laughed. "I love you, Willie," she said.

"I know, I know," he said impatiently. "But can't you wait? You know I don't like you hanging on me all the time."

"Sure," she said. "Sure, Willie."

BOOK FOUR: A PLEASANT INTERLUDE IN THE RIGORS OF THE WEEK

On Sevenday evenings, reinforcement or punishment was given to everyone, according to the judgment of Jennings. Punishment was a terrifying thing; it, all by itself, was enough to motivate Mac, Sam, and Willie. They played as hard as they could during physical training, even Sam, whose appreciation of sports could be excited no other way than by the hope of avoiding punishment. The three friends studied diligently during the lectures, even Willie, whose academic interests were virtually nonexistent. And they made a great show of enthusiasm for the Sevenday ritual, even Mac, whose intellectual pride prevented his involvement on any level beyond avoiding punishment.

Reinforcement was not, in itself, a pleasurable thing. Reinforcement was only the lack of punishment.

Every Sevenday evening, half of the people were punished. Precisely half. And the rest waited fearfully in their cells, praying

that they would be passed over for another week. The punishment was delivered in different forms: in the food, in the water, in the air, on tactile surfaces so that it might be absorbed through the skin. Jennings had more ways of administering the punishment than his charges had of avoiding it. It was no use to refuse a meal, abstain from drinking, or shun one's cell. The white-uniformed trusties would observe whether a person listed for punishment was serving his sentence. If not, the punishment would be rescheduled for the next day, increased, and the person penalized for time missed on Oneday. That would mean automatic punishment the next Sevenday.

Punishment was terror. Punishment was being trapped within one's own mind, helplessly frightened beyond endurance, until one became a shrieking animal. The memory of past punishments was often enough to induce a spontaneous recurrence. This, too, was cause for punishment. As the time for distribution of punishments approached each week, Mac, Sam, and Willie grew increasingly nervous. Even this Sevenday, when they had no reason to expect punishment, they sat each in his own cell, anxious and cold. Perhaps there hadn't been enough people listed for punishment to make up the needed fifty percent. Perhaps Jennings had picked people at random to fill the quota.

The warning bell rang. In every dorm, on every floor, the agonized screams of the unlucky people filled the corridors. Those who had earned reinforcement were relieved; every one of them felt the same intense gratitude. Every one of them wore the same rather silly smile. They stood up, shuddered once in nervous reaction, and went out to meet their friends.

On this particular Sevenday, Sam and Mac joined Willie at the latter's dorm, to watch an old movie and then play some pinball. Jennings had announced at the Fiveday lecture that the movie would be Philip Gatelin and Roberta Quentini in *Slaves of Blood.* It was one of Willie's favorites. Mac always enjoyed Gatelin's old adventure pictures, and Sam had never seen the movie before. They took seats as close to the front of the dorm's rec room as possible. They sat in silence through the entire movie. Mac

wanted to point out special sequences to the other two, but he restrained himself. Willie laughed and applauded during the love scenes and the battle scenes. Sam was entertained but said little.

"Well, then, Prince Collante," said Gatelin, in the role of Gerhardt Friedlos, based on the character made famous by Ernst Weinraub's trilogy, "we seem to be alone."

The evil prince smiled. He removed his huge plumed hat and his black, gem-studded gauntlets. He dropped these articles to the richly patterned carpet of his apartment. "Yes," he said languidly, "we are quite alone. I have planned this moment well. You may expect no aid from your, ah, comrades."

Friedlos laughed. He leaned easily against a gigantic mirror. "You may discover that in my difficult journey here, I have taken the liberty of disposing of your guards. You, also, may expect little succor from that quarter."

"I am not dismayed. Observe," murmured Prince Collante. He undid the sword belt that girdled his hips. "I ask that you do the same, in the interests of delicacy. I have assembled a wide variety of blades, there, upon that divan. You may take your choice, and then I shall make my own. There is no reason to hurry."

"As you wish, Collante," said Friedlos, likewise unbuckling his scabbard and casually allowing it to fall to the floor. He turned and went to the divan. Sam cried out.

"Watch," said Willie. "Just be quiet and watch."

While Friedlos was carefully examining the swords, Collante unsheathed his rapier, which he had not let fall from his hands, and attacked Friedlos' unprotected back. With one quick slash, Collante opened a long, bloody wound in Friedlos' right arm.

The audience booed. Mac and Willie laughed at their reaction. Friedlos was equally without anger as he turned to face his antagonist. "I see that you have leaped to a somewhat unfortunate conclusion," he said. "If you had not always been so eager to flee our appointed confrontations, to leave the actual swordplay to your underlings, you might have learned that I fence with my left arm. That lesson will cost you dearly." Friedlos snatched a rapier and came quickly to his fighting posture, his torn right arm hang-

ing lifelessly at his side, the sleeve of his satin shirt soaked red with his blood. The audience cheered him through the scene, as Friedlos and Collante fought back and forth across the prince's magnificent room.

"He did it all himself, too," said Willie. "I always wanted to be Philip Gatelin when I was a kid."

"Me, too," said Mac. "Until I found out about him."

"I didn't never believe any of that stuff," said Willie.

"Quiet," whispered Sam. "Watch the movie."

Friedlos' sword caught the prince's, and his blade slipped down the other's until their basket hilts clanged together. Smiling grimly, Friedlos made a quick circular motion with his wrist, and Collante's sword flew across the room. "Now, you fools!" cried the evil prince. Five secret doors opened, and five men dressed in the uniforms of the Suprina's guard rushed to Collante's aid. Friedlos made no move other than to engage the nearest guardsman.

"Oh, hell," said Sam. "The prince is a creep."

"You're getting the hang of it," said Mac. He immediately regretted saying anything.

"What?" asked Sam.

"Nothing," said Mac.

"Quiet," said Willie. "Watch the movie."

BOOK FIVE: A SLIGHT FRACTURE IN THE FACADE OF LIFE

When Sam awoke the next morning, her cell was brightly lit by sunlight shining through the clear plastic wall opposite the door. The day was beautiful, though evidently windy, judging by the sheets of paper blowing in unrhythmic gusts across the yard, so far below her room.

There ought not to have been any light in the cell when she got up. The sun should not have yet risen. Everything should still be black. Sam was frightened.

Even if the alarm bell had rung and she had slept through it,

Grigarskas would have made sure that Sam got up in time for the Oneday lecture. Sam couldn't understand what had happened, but she knew what she had to do. She had to get dressed as quickly as possible and run to the lecture hall. And she had to be prepared to be punished the following Sevenday. Sam got herself ready with tears in her eyes.

She opened the door to her cell. It was dim beyond, much darker than her cell. It was also not the corridor that ought to have been there; Sam stepped out curiously into a marvelously decorated room, filled with grotesque, expensive objects and a perplexing jumble of colors and textures. For a moment, she did not know where she was. A man she had not seen spoke to her. "You are never late, are you, Friedlos?" said the man.

Sam smiled. She recognized the tall, dark man who lounged so impudently on the far side of the chamber. "Well, then, Prince Collante," she said, "we seem to be alone."

The man smiled in reply. He took off his bizarre feathered hat and his heavy black gloves. "Yes," he said, "we are quite alone."

Sam listened to Collante, knowing what he would say, what he would do. She felt a thrill of excitement; if this strange affair developed in the same way, exactly as in *Slaves of Blood,* it would be fun. She had a flash of panic: Collante was at least eighteen inches taller than she, and with a comparable reach and strength, not to mention the fact that she had never touched a sword in her life. She was momentarily terrified that she would depart the script and her life at the same moment, with Collante's rapier right through her. The feeling passed; she spoke her lines with no conscious prompting, and she trusted that her movements would be similarly directed. "You, also, may expect little succor from that quarter," she said confidently.

Anxiously Mac dressed and left his cell. No one else was about. The corridors were oddly, oppressively silent. He ran to the elevator. He hated the sound his heels made on the black and white checkerboard tiles. The noise echoed.

Outside, the day was very cold, though bright. There was no

one in the yard. The walls stood out against the deep blue of the sky; the walls were as blank as dreamless sleep, taller than anything built by men should be. The only sounds were the clumsy noises of Mac's feet as he ran across the distance to the lecture hall. The wind was cold, and Mac's cheeks and ears stung after a little while.

"Jennings isn't going to be crazy about this," thought Mac. "I don't think anybody's missed a lecture in years. And it has to be me, huh? Terrific." He felt a cold, heavy feeling in his bowels. He was a little lightheaded with fear, and his ears buzzed. "Jennings isn't going to be none too fond of this trick."

"I am not dismayed." Mac looked up in surprise. He had just pushed open the door of the lobby in the lecture hall. He turned around, but there was only a satin-padded door with a silver knob in the shape of a dryad and a goat copulating. Mac turned around again. The stranger was removing a belt with a scabbard from his waist. "Observe," said the man, whom Mac had no difficulty identifying, but more trouble accepting. "I ask that you do the same, in the interests of delicacy."

"Delicacy," thought Mac scornfully. "I know exactly why, you creep. I seen this before." He wondered for a moment what he was going to do, realizing that he was not Philip Gatelin, and, even more, he definitely was not Gerhardt Friedlos.

"As you wish, Collante," said Mac, wondering where the words had come from. He removed his own sword belt, amazed that he even had one. He relaxed then, understanding that the situation was some sort of fantasy, and that matters were likely out of his control. He turned to the divan to make a choice of swords, knowing what was certainly to happen. He tried to turn, to watch, to prevent Collante's stroke, but he couldn't. The swords on the divan caught his interest with their variety and excellence.

Willie woke slowly; he snorted when he saw how late it was. He got dressed, neither more quickly nor more fearfully than usual. Willie had seen many horrible things in his life, and he had flinched at none of them; his outlook had been justified, time

after time. Every horrible thing had gone away, eventually. He yawned as he walked to the elevator in his dorm. He crossed the yard, perhaps a little more hurriedly than usual, but not so much as to make him out of breath. The cold air finished the job of waking him up, and he liked the almost savage wind that cut so forcefully through the layers of his clothing. Willie could appreciate anything, human or otherwise, that earned his respect. Jennings had long ago earned Willie's respect. The wind was a lesser thing. The walls were nothing at all.

Willie pushed through the lobby doors of the lecture hall. He heard no voices, saw no one, was surprised at the chilliness of the building. It seemed like the heat had been turned off during the weekend and not raised again on Oneday morning. He shrugged, and waited for the elevator to take him to the lecture hall.

The elevator arrived, its warning light blinked on, then off, and the doors opened. Willie entered. It was the only time that he had been in an elevator—any elevator, in any building—alone. He pushed the button for the seventy-third floor.

Suddenly he felt a great tearing pain in his right arm. The pain spread up through his shoulder and began to throb. Willie stifled a cry. He raised his arm slightly to look, and the movement sent a blaze of agony through his body. The arm had a long, jagged wound and was bleeding swiftly, soaking his sleeve. Even though the pain was growing, becoming unbearable, Willie refused to cry out. The wound looked familiar. He only casually wondered how it came to be there; he was mildly startled when he began speaking, almost without his conscious knowledge. "I see that you have leaped to a somewhat unfortunate conclusion," he said.

The man standing behind Willie was the devious Prince Collante of Gaedre, cruel pretender to the throne of Breulandy and reputed intimate of the Suprina Without a Name. Willie only smiled coldly. Collante had attempted to take advantage of Willie's confidence and trust, by weakening what the prince thought was Willie's sword arm. The prince had made a fatal error.

The two men fought then, across the gaudily appointed apartment of the prince. They overturned furniture and decorations whose price could have purchased any throne in Europe. Willie

said little as they struggled, listening to the prince's desperate pleadings, enjoying the man's panting and wheezing as he tired. Soon, Willie knew, soon Collante would spring his final trap. Willie was ready, whatever that gambit might prove to be. Willie was always ready.

"Look," cried Prince Collante exultantly, "behind you!"

"No," said Sam, "it won't work." She knew only that the dark man stood before her, unarmed.

"I think he's right, this time," said Mac. "I think he means it."

"Of course I do," said Prince Collante.

"Of course he does," said Willie. "Look."

The three friends turned, and five men dressed in the uniforms of the Suprina's guard were running toward them, swords raised threateningly. Collante laughed scornfully, and walked slowly from the apartment.

"Another time, my prince," called Sam, Mac, and Willie in unison. The prince stopped on the threshold and saluted them gallantly, laughed again, then went through the door and closed it behind him. The three friends could hear the click of the lock.

There was little time for words. Sam faced to the right, Mac to the left, and Willie faced forward. Protecting each other's sides, they waited for the charge of the guardsmen.

"Simple," said Mac. "It's very obvious, I think. It was all part of the reinforcement. Something new."

"Wonderful," said Willie sullenly. His arm had actually been badly wounded, and it was now carefully dressed and bandaged.

"I wonder how much was real," said Sam. "I wonder if we could have gotten away."

"Away?" asked Willie. He really didn't seem to have much interest in the discussion.

"Sure," said Mac. "If we knew what to do, we could have gone out right through the front gate. I'll bet there was nobody around. Maybe Jennings was testing us. Maybe he was giving us a chance."

"I think it was all a mistake," said Willie.

"It couldn't have been real," said Sam. "But maybe."

"Maybe," said Mac, with a thoughtful expression.

"Oh, hell," said Willie. It was still Sevenday evening. He wondered how he was supposed to take notes the next morning, at the Oneday lecture.

It was the fifth week of Quintember; the weather was hotter each day, more humid, so that the air conditioning made the plastic-slab windows steam up. The world outside was invisible through the wet haze, or else, when someone rubbed the stuff away, the yard below looked blurred and unreal. The high gray walls around the yard were close. They looked like death.

BOOK SIX: THE ELEGANCE OF USELESS ACTIVITY

The old year ended, the pageantry of Jennings Day passed, the mild weather of December changed into the windy coldness of Unuary, Diuary, Tertuary. Quatober brought spring. Like a hungry cat, greedy for prey, the hot weather attacked and took possession of the year. By the beginning of Quintember the temperature had climbed into the mid-nineties and remained there, day after day, night after sultry night. The humidity matched the thermometer's readings, and the air seemed heavy and almost unbreathable. Sam hated it, Willie abided it, Mac loved it. Jennings didn't seem to notice, and the white-uniformed trusties simply couldn't.

It was the fifth week of Quintember. Nearly half the year had gone by already, a year that had begun with the usual promise and illusion: a year of potential reinforcement, of minimal punishment. Willie had planned to record the number of Sevendays that were given to each, but dropped the scheme shortly after the first of Diuary. Sam had shown interest in his project, but when he quit she said nothing. In Quintember he couldn't even remember why he had begun. He learned nothing.

It was baseball season, of course. Because of their success on

the football field, Willie, Sam, and Mac had been allowed to play on the same baseball team. Willie was the catcher and batted fourth. Sam was the first baseman and batted eighth. Mac was the shortstop, even though he was left-handed, and batted second. Willie didn't enjoy being a catcher, any more than he enjoyed being a linebacker. He liked batting cleanup, though.

The pitcher, a woman named Sheila, looked toward Willie for his signal. He decided on the slider. Her fast ball didn't have much zip on it, but her breaking stuff was working. She nodded, went into her windup, and threw. The batter swung and topped a roller to Mac at shortstop. Because he was left-handed, and because Jennings had decided that Mac had to play that position, Mac had developed a unique method of fielding ground balls. If they were hit to his right, he would be out of position and off balance to throw the runner out at first. Consequently he had to stop the ball, take one more step with his left foot, plant it and pivot so that he faced toward the outfield, and snap the ball underhand to first. It cost him almost a full second more than a right-handed shortstop, and his throws were often low and in the dirt, but a lot of practice with Sam had made their infield as good as any. Jennings never said anything or showed that he was at all pleased whenever Mac made one of his odd fielding plays; still, Willie was aware that their team had the best record of reinforcement in the entire league.

Willie stood up behind the plate, waiting for the next batter to take her place. He looked out at Sam, who stood behind and to the left of first base. It seemed to Willie that the right fielder had been murmuring to her at the end of each inning, as the fielders ran off the field and into the dugout. He would make sure this time. He would keep his eye on the right fielder, on his lips; Willie didn't care how foolish he looked, standing still after the last out, staring apparently in a daze. If that man was making whispered suggestions to Sam, the team would soon need a new outfielder. Willie didn't care what Jennings would do—and Willie knew exactly what he would do.

Sometimes Willie wondered if Sam understood how much she

meant to him. Willie suffered a lot of punishment because of her. She always said that it was pointless, that Willie did things for silly reasons, that he imagined things. But Willie could see what those creeps were doing. Sam couldn't, for some reason. She always saw only the good in people.

The opposing batter struck out on four pitches. Willie fired the ball down to the third baseman; the ball traveled around the infield, until finally Sam tossed it back to him. She looked very tired. She hated the heat and the tropical air. The game still had a few more innings; Willie wished that Jennings would put in a replacement for her. He knew that Jennings wouldn't.

The third batter swung on the first pitch and hit a high pop foul. The female pitcher yelled, "Sam! Sam!" Willie stayed out of the way, and Sam ran over and caught the ball, which had blown back in front of the pitcher's mound. That was the third out. Sam smiled at Willie; he looked at his wife, then turned and watched the right fielder. His experiment would have to wait another inning. Willie walked with Sam back to the dugout. "Is that guy bothering you?" he asked.

"What guy?" she said.

"The right fielder. Dicky."

"No," said Sam, frowning. "Are you trying to get him in trouble, too?"

Willie watched one of his teammates walk to the plate as he removed his catcher's gear. "I just want to know if he's giving you a hard time. I'll bust him up, is all."

"He's not," said Sam. "Dicky just says, 'Way to go' or something like that. Like anybody else would say to anybody else on the team."

"Anybody else ain't my wife."

"You're up next," said Sam. "Stop worrying."

"I can't help worrying, when I see what those creeps try to do. You tell that Dicky that if he don't shut up, I'm going to bust him up."

Sam said nothing. She just went and sat by herself in the corner of the dugout. She looked like she was going to cry. Willie was

angry, and he couldn't understand what she was feeling bad about; she ought to be glad he was looking out for her. He let out a loud sigh, shrugged his shoulders, and went to the bat rack.

BOOK SEVEN: EVEN IN THIS DAY AND AGE WE MAY LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE

At the end of the Threeday lecture, Jennings had smiled and promised the audience a surprise on Fiveday. "I have a real treat in store for you," he said, clasping his hands behind his back and rocking on his heels. "I have something so unusual, you won't want to miss the lecture on Fiveday. I think you'll really enjoy it. I think it's something you'll remember for a long time, something you'll want to tell all your friends about. Don't be late on Fiveday. I don't want to say anything more about it now, but I'll give you just one hint. It's something that's really worth getting up to see. Even you, Paola," he said warmly, looking at a plain, somewhat simpleminded girl who sat about twenty ranks from the front, and who had a reputation for being consistently tardy, "even you might want to make a special effort to get here early. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and it's something you won't likely ever see again. I guarantee you all a fascinating lecture on Fiveday. Are there any questions?" The room was silent, as it was supposed to be. Jennings' smile had disappeared, and he looked slowly across the files, from left to right, searching hopefully for someone whispering, someone fidgeting to leave. He was disappointed. "All right," he said at last. "Get the hell out of here."

That had been on Threeday. After the lecture, and for the next two days, everyone had wondered what Jennings' surprise could be. Naturally, there were many guesses, but no one had any more information.

On Fiveday morning, Sam woke up at the bell. The sun was up, filling the cell with weak but already warm sunlight. The day was clear, as usual for that time of day in Quintember; later, after three o'clock, the sky would cloud over quickly and there would

be a brief but intense storm. Then the clouds would dissipate, and the sky would be clear through sunset, and the stars would shine down like bright specks of glass on a velvet cushion. The early-morning light made the walls seem vaguely unreal, not as formidable as usual, somehow like the sets used in movies or plays. The colors of the walls and the yard below were diluted, all mixed with grays and water. It was a pleasant feeling. Sam stretched and smiled. She remembered that Jennings had promised them a surprise at the lecture. She dressed quickly and dashed a few drops of water in her face—as a Lion, she had to limit her use of water severely—and walked to the elevators. The other women in the dorm greeted her, and they all spoke together in hushed, excited voices. Jennings' surprise had them all helpless with anticipation.

Sam walked across the yard to the lecture hall with some of her friends. She looked toward Willie's building, but she couldn't see her husband. She was hot and sweating by the time she arrived at the lecture building; the air conditioning inside felt good. Inside the lecture hall, Sam stood for a moment before going back to her seat. The podium that Jennings used had been removed. So had all the screens and maps and other equipment at the front of the hall. People came in and went to their seats. Sam looked at Willie's place; he was there, but he was not looking toward her. She tried to attract his attention, but finally she gave up and went to her own seat. Mac came in a few minutes later and waved. She waved back, then opened her notebook. She wrote *Lecture, Fiveday, Quintember 35, 0042* at the top of the page. Under that she wrote *Jennings' surprise.* Still Jennings had not arrived. Sam sighed. She twisted around to look back at Willie. She couldn't catch his eye. She thought about sending him a note; it would have to go sixteen ranks back and twenty-two files across. By the time it got to him it would be only a limp mass of pulp. Sam closed her notebook and waited. After a little while she opened the notebook again and underlined what she had written. Then she began to draw little designs in the left-hand margin, on the outside of the vertical red line.

"Good morning, good morning, my little wonders," cried Jennings. Sam looked up, startled. Jennings rarely spoke like that. "Ladies and gentlemen, today is the day you've all been waiting for. Today is the day I promised that I'd show you something spectacular. Well, I hope you've rubbed the sleep from your eyes, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you're ready to take adequate notes. Ladies and gentlemen, I want to remind you that, as unique as today's presentation may be, it will still be material for your examination. I'm sure that you do not want to fail your examination, ladies and gentlemen. Though your eyes may be amazed, I hope your note-taking faculties will remain unimpaired. Let us begin." The audience waited in utter silence, thousands of ballpoint pens poised expectantly.

"Fine," said Jennings. "All right, Sigurd. Tell the boys to roll in the first one." A helper went through the black drapes behind Jennings. A short time later he returned, pulling a rope. On the end of the rope was the tail wheel of a Messerschmitt Bf 109E single-engine fighter plane. Three other men helped push the aircraft into the open space at the front of the lecture hall. It filled most of the area, and with the low ceiling and dim lights, the plane looked grotesquely out of place, like a beached whale in the cloisters of an Austrian monastery.

The helpers disappeared through the drapes, and Jennings walked slowly in front of the airplane. "Fine, fine," he said. "Ladies and gentlemen, what we have here is your what you call regular Messerschmitt Bravo Foxtrot One Zero Niner Echo. Good old plane. German. Used in World War Two. Good old plane." Jennings patted the low, swept-up wing of the aircraft. His voice had become strangely emotional. He stared at the propeller, gave it a little push with one hand, dragged the hand back along the plane's fuselage, ducked under the wing. He turned again and spoke to the audience. "You have to love this baby. For a while, there wasn't anything that could knock it out of the clouds. It was a good old plane. Now look. Here it is. A relic, if you please, ladies and gentlemen. A relic from the past. We're studying. We're not hiding from it. You can sit there, ladies and

gentlemen, take your notes calmly, coldly, without the least trace of passion. I don't give a damn." He was near hysteria. Sam was frightened. No one made a sound.

Jennings raised his head, shook it. "Ah, hell," he said. "Jorge, open the drapes. I'm not going to drag these babies out one at a time. That's stupid. Open the drapes." The helpers opened the drapes, and there were three other airplanes in a row. Sam stared; the planes were beautiful, in an odd way. Their smooth lines, their look of efficient design impressed her, even though she didn't understand what she was seeing. The bombs and the rifles that Jennings introduced on regular lecture days held little fascination. Sam noted their names and numbers, tried to learn their individual characteristics, only because not to was an invitation to punishment. But the planes were beautiful.

"What we have here, first, behind and to the left of the Messerschmitt, is another German World War Two bird. You have your regular Junkers Juliet Uniform Eight Seven dive bomber, the Stuka. An early model, a little ungainly perhaps, but unstoppable until somebody tried. I had a lot of trouble getting one of these. I just hope you appreciate it." Sam was curious; this wasn't like Jennings' usual lectures at all. Surely there was more to learn about the history and characteristics of these planes than their names. Perhaps Jennings was waiting for someone to show initiative. Maybe he was waiting for someone to ask a sincere and interested question. Sam wondered if anyone would.

"And this," said Jennings, pointing to the plane directly behind the Bf 109E, "is your regular North American Papa Five One Mustang fighter-bomber. A good old plane. Looks great, doesn't it? They don't make them like that anymore. The last one is the justly famous Royal Air Force Hawker Hurricane, what you call your fighter-interceptor. They used these babies with Spitfires. The Hurricanes tackled the German bombers while the Spitfires took out the German fighters, often those very same Bravo Foxtrot One, and so on. You don't care, do you? I mean, none of this means anything to you, does it? These could all be made out of flour and water, and you'd react the same way. As long as you don't get punishment on Sevenday, right? Well, look.

Nobody will be punished Sevenday. Nobody. No matter what you do between now and then. I don't care. Get the hell out of here."

Sam felt an unpleasant chill run through her. Everyone sat still for a few moments. There was no talking. Jennings hurried from the lecture hall; the helpers struggled to get the airplanes through the doors of the freight elevator. At last Sam stood up. She waited for Willie to meet her. "What's going on?" asked her husband.

"I don't know," said Sam. For some reason she was crying.

"Well, don't cry," said Willie. "I don't like it when you cry. I don't know what to do."

"I'm sorry," said Sam. "I'm not doing it on purpose."

"Then why are you crying?"

"I don't know."

"Look," said Willie. He held out his notebook. "I took notes, like I always do. And they're gone already. Just like always."

"Of course," said Sam. "Mine too."

"I wonder why he bothers," said Willie, looking at the door through which Jennings had left. Hundreds of others were leaving now, hurrying back to their dorms.

Sam was very unhappy. She wondered why Jennings had behaved the way he did; she felt that in some way the audience had let Jennings down. She didn't know what to do. "I feel sorry for him," she said.

"Sorry?" said Willie, snorting contemptuously. "For Jennings? Well, I don't. Just so long as we don't get punishment this week. I'm glad about that."

"Want to look at the planes?"

"No," said Willie, looking around, noticing the other men who were taking furtive looks at Sam. "Let's go to lunch."

BOOK EIGHT: EVEN THE GIFTS OF GOD COME WRAPPED

Mac stood with the rest of the Soldiers in the immense ritual chamber. Jennings had promised them all that there would be no punishment that week; even so, Mac had risen before the alarm

bell and hurried to the assembly hall. Delgado, the trustie in the white uniform, had shouted into Mac's cell, but Mac had already showered and shaved, and was walking back from the lavatory. "I'm not in there, Mr. Delgado," said Mac cheerfully.

"I see that, Mac," said Delgado sullenly. "And if I could think of a good reason for you to be awake so early, I might not put you on report."

"It's Sevenday, that's all. I just don't want to be late."

"I can see that you're very devout," said Delgado. "Just watch it, that's all."

"Sure, Mr. Delgado." Mac finished dressing and walked slowly to the assembly hall; he was one of the first to arrive, and he chatted in a low voice with some of the other Soldiers. They all wondered whether Jennings would act as oddly during the ritual as he had in the Fiveday lecture.

"I was sorely tempted not to come this morning," said one of the Soldiers.

"Me too," said another. "If we're not going to be punished, well, to tell you the truth, these rituals get to be a little thick after a while."

"I watch them like movies," said Mac. "It's kind of an interesting thing, if you approach it the right way."

"You're nuts," said the first Soldier. Mac only smiled.

Jennings arrived early. Not all the worshipers had assembled, but Jennings nevertheless ordered the great doors to be closed. "It's a good thing he said no punishment," thought Mac. Jennings greeted the various orders, and was saluted in return. The ritual continued in its prescribed formula. Mac looked toward the Lions, but couldn't make out Sam; he looked toward the Ravens and thought he saw Willie, but he wasn't sure.

"I want to say something," said Jennings, at the beginning of his sermon. His tone was conversational, a sudden contrast to the deep, stilted tone he had used during the rest of the ritual. "Be honest. How many of you would attend these rituals if they weren't mandatory? Just clap your hands." There was a loud roar of applause. "Now how many would stay in their cells, or visit with friends?" The applause was somewhat softer. "Now," said

Jennings, sitting on one of the steps leading to the altar, "we'll try again. How many of you would come here on Sevenday mornings voluntarily?" This time the applause was much quieter. "All right. That's good enough. We'll stop there. Nama, Nama Sebesio."

The congregation called back, "Nama, Nama Sebesio."

Jennings stood up, shaking one fist. "You damn fools! You just told me you damn well wouldn't come here if I didn't make you do it, yet you keep on muttering your responses. Don't you feel a little crazy, doing that?"

"No," thought Mac, "I don't feel dumb at all. You're making us come here. You're still making us give the responses."

Some of the people in the vast hall began to whisper. Near Mac, some people, men and women, began to weep. There was a sudden rustle of noise. Jennings looked around angrily. "Get out. Get the hell out of here," he said loudly. The assembly hall was so huge that Jennings could not possibly see the people lined against the walls; they could not hear him, but a wave of motion began from the center of the hall and moved toward the exits. Mac smiled sadly. He walked along, his head bowed in the dim light.

"It's a very interesting psychological experiment," thought Mac. "He's given us such a rigid life, and now he's removing the laws we've always used as props. It's pathetic, when you realize how simple he is. And these poor people! They're helpless. Their granite idol is wobbling on its legs. But you can't tell them anything. You can't prove that there's no danger, that Jennings won't fall and crush them. The only thing left is to sit back and enjoy it."

Mac looked back over his shoulder. Hordes of people followed him toward the doors. Thin beams of spotlights still outlined the crooked form of Jennings, who waited alone in the center of the assembly hall. Mac sighed. He seemed to be alone in understanding the power of Jennings, and the man's arbitrary cruelty. "Good-bye, Pater patratus," thought Mac. "Maybe really good-bye."

BOOK NINE: THE TINY IMPERFECTIONS MAKE IT VALUABLE

Willie went to Mac's dorm and rode up the elevator to Mac's eighty-fifth-floor cell. Mac stood by the transparent wall. Willie sat on the cot. "I don't like it," he said. "It made me feel nervous. I don't like it at all."

"You're not supposed to like it," said Mac, not turning around. "Jennings is doing it on purpose. He's trying to shake us up, for some reason. Don't pay any attention to his act. It's as phony as everything else he does. It's just that now he's being more obvious about it."

"Well, then, that's what I don't like," said Willie. "I'll go along with it all, as long as I know what's happening. But, God, if Jennings is going to change all of a sudden . . ."

Mac faced his friend. His expression was amused. Willie frowned; he didn't see anything to laugh about. "Jennings isn't changing, all of a sudden," said Mac. "That's what I just said. He's consistent with his plan, whatever that is. You're playing right into his hands."

Willie sighed. "We have to play right into his hands," he said.

"Then don't worry about it."

Sevenday afternoon was quieter and tenser than usual. People stood in small groups, talking in low, frightened voices. Jennings' behavior at the lecture and at the ritual chamber had disoriented them. Willie complained of an upset stomach and a persistent jittery feeling. Mac told him to relax, or Jennings would lead Willie and the rest of the crowd into a mass breakdown.

"So why would Jennings do that?" asked Willie. Mac could only smile and shrug.

The two men strolled over to Sam's dorm, about an hour before the usual time for punishment and reinforcement. Generally, everyone spent that particular time of the week alone in his cell, in the anticipation that he had been marked for punishment. This week, with Jennings' promise of no punishment for anyone,

people were out and visiting earlier. The movie for that week was *.38 Caliber,* with Dan Calvin as Sheeky Bordinaro. Willie didn't want to miss any of it.

Sam, Mac, and Willie sat in the rec room and waited. Mac went to the snack bar and got them soft drinks and potato chips. The time passed slowly, and the rec room began to fill up with people. Sam held their seats, and the two men went over to the pinball machines. Their favorite machine, a garishly colored model called Hi-Lo Express, was idle. Mac took his turn first. "Sam's good on this machine," he said, after the ball registered a meager five hundred points for him and then dropped out of play.

"I don't understand it," said Willie, laughing. "We play this thing every chance we get. We work at it. We take our pinball playing serious. Then Sam'll come over, hardly paying attention to which machine she's playing, and beat the pants off both of us."

"Natural talent," said Mac solemnly. He watched Willie score sixteen thousand points on his first ball. It was Mac's turn, his second ball. He pulled out the spring plunger. The warning bell on the wall rang. Mac let go of the plunger. The silver ball shot into play, hit a few bumpers, dropped down toward the flippers, then fell out of play.

"You really blew that one," said Willie. "You didn't even touch the flippers. What's the matter? Too fast for you?" Mac had a total score of twelve hundred and forty points after two balls. Mac said nothing. "Are you okay?" asked Willie. Mac's hands gripped the sides of the pinball machine. His knuckles were white. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a kind of animal snarl. Slowly, as Willie watched, Mac's legs seemed to collapse. He began to sink toward the floor. Willie caught his friend and supported him. Mac screamed. It was a crazy sound. It was punishment.

"Hey, Sam," cried Willie. "Sam, give me a hand. Come here and help me." Willie tried to hold Mac up while his wife hurried to them.

"What is it?" she asked, pale.

"Goddamned Jennings, is what is it," said Willie. "He said no

punishment, remember? What does this look like to you?"

"What should we do?" Sam remembered her own punishments well enough to know exactly what Mac was going through. She knew he ought to be in his cell. She knew that, in his agony and his insane terror, they would never be able to get him to his dorm.

"I don't know," said Willie. "Put him down here, I guess. We can watch him here. Poor sucker." There were shrieks all around the rec room as others were consumed by their punishments. Those who had not been marked looked around helplessly. Shortly afterward the movie started. Willie looked at Sam. She had been crying. She was staring at Mac, who lay contorted on the cold tiled floor of the rec room. "Come on," said Willie. "We can't do a thing for him until Jennings finishes."

"Can we just leave Mac here?"

"Nothing will happen to him. It's almost as good as being in his cell. He'll be out of it by the time the movie's over."

On Oneday morning Willie woke up. The dorm was strangely quiet. After the movie the previous evening, everyone had gone straight to their dorm; Jennings' apparent act of treachery had angered and bewildered them all. Willie was still too confused to know just how to react. What could they do? Nothing. It was very simple. They could do nothing.

There was a knock on Willie's door. "All right, Mr. Zepkin," shouted Willie. "I'm up. I'm getting up." The knock sounded again. Willie swore softly, swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and went to the door. It wasn't the uniformed trusty who had knocked. It was a woman.

"Good God," said Willie, realizing that he was still naked. "What are you doing in this building now?"

"I had to see you, Mr. Bordinaro," said the woman breathlessly. "I got your name from the D.A.'s office. You don't know who I am. Nobody does, not in this town. I have to trust you, Mr. Bordinaro. I'm in trouble."

Willie stood quietly for a moment, shifting from one foot to the

other. He looked out into the corridor; no one else was in sight. There were no other sounds. He stared at the young woman. It was, of course, Diane Hogarth in the role of Gussie Demoyne, from *.38 Caliber.* Willie recalled how he, Sam, and Mac had been drawn into *Slaves of Blood* some months before. A slow grin lit his face, just as it had Dan Calvin's in the movie. "Step into my office," he said. "Don't mind the bed. In a little while it will seem perfectly natural to you." He leered at her; she swept by, ignoring his remarks. She went to the window and looked out in silence. Then she turned suddenly, surprising him, and began to cry. Willie immediately regretted his words. He felt helpless. "Sit down," he said. "Stop the tears. I can't start helping you until you stop crying." He tried to get dressed unobtrusively. She looked past him, into a camera that wasn't there, and smiled weakly.

Sam paced back and forth the length of her small cell. Gussie Demoyne sat on her cot and watched her. "Wait a minute," murmured Sam. "Let me think. Wait a minute."

"I don't have much time," said the strange woman.

"None of us ever do," said Sam, reading the lines of Sheeky Bordinaro. "We all manage to forget that. Sometimes somebody remembers. He gets panicked. That's what pays my rent." Still, all the time she said those words, she thought other things. "What did we decide, the last time?" she wondered. "What should I do? Is Jennings really leaving it all open? Could I really walk out the gate?"

"I don't have the time to play wise old man with you," said Gussie Demoyne. "If you won't help me, I'll get another name from the D.A." She rose and started toward the door.

"Hold on," said Sam. "Yeah," she thought, "hold on. I can't think. I don't have time to plan. It isn't Oneday morning. It's still Sevenday night. Willie's going through this same scene, right now. Mac's still being punished. Oh, my God."

The other woman stopped and turned. She looked pleadingly at Sam. "Okay, sweetheart," said Sam. "You've convinced me. At least for the next hour. After that, the convincing gets harder and

more expensive. I'll have to see the color of your dough. Even those baby blues of yours won't get you around that. Otherwise, I'll be happy to give you another name. No sense in bothering the D.A.'s office. They're screwed up enough over there."

Gussie Demoyne smiled, sniffed, then ran over and threw her arms around Sam's neck. "Thanks, oh, thanks, Mr. Bordinaro!" she cried.

"Call me Sheeky," said Sam. "What am I supposed to do?" she thought. "Should I just try to leave? Should I wait for Willie to come here?"

"All right," said the other woman. "All right, Sheeky."

"It's simple," said Willie the next day. "It's really simple. Jennings is just messing up. That's all. And we got to figure out, right now, how to take advantage of it next time."

"Sure," said Sam.

"No," said Mac. "It can't be that easy. Do you think it was a coincidence that I was punished? I had him pegged the last time. I'm sure of it. If I hadn't been punished, I would have led the three of us out of here. Right out under his nose. He's giving us the chance. I think he's doing it on purpose, to make us think we can beat him."

"We can beat him," said Willie. "Next time."

"We'll just need some plans," said Sam. "In case one of us is punished, the other two will know what to do. Or if two of us are punished."

"We can't beat him," said Mac insistently. "He only wants us to think we can. To make us docile. I don't know. I don't really know his reasons. But it can't be that easy."

"Why not?" asked Willie. "Why couldn't it be that easy?"

"I don't know," said Mac. "It just never is, that's all."

It was the fourth week in Sextuary; the weather was dry and pleasant, with the sky so blue and bright that beneath it people's faces looked washed-out gray. The ground in the yard was moist and rich; the air had an exciting edge to it, not cold, like the winter, but just—exciting. Still, the high gray walls around the yard were solemn and perfect.

BOOK TEN: TAKING THEM AS THEY COME

About an hour before the first game of the football season, Sam sat in front of her locker, having her wrists and hands taped. Willie's locker was next to hers, but they rarely spoke before a game. She was generally too nervous and tense, and Willie hated having to coddle her feelings. Instead, they just pretended to concentrate on their game plans; once they got out onto the field and started their warmup exercises, everything was all right. Sam's anxiety disappeared as soon as she ran through the tunnel and saw the coffee-colored field and the vivid, frosty-white yard-lines. She kept up a chatty stream of conversation from then until the end of the game, with Willie, with Mac, with the assistant coaches on the sidelines, with the other players. She liked to taunt the people on the other team.

A woman named Kath stopped by Sam's locker. She was a new member of the team, a large woman, a defensive end replacing a man named Sherman who had not been seen since the middle of baseball season. "What you think?" asked Kath.

"That depends," said Sam, her voice hoarse and croaking. She would feel the jitteriness and sour stomach until they left the locker room. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean Jennings," said Kath.

"Jennings is all right," said Sam warily. The assistant coaches were Jennings' men, the uniformed trusties were Jennings' men, probably most of the other people were, too. Sometimes Willie hinted that he thought Sam was spying for Jennings. Sam never bothered to reply to that. She knew that Willie was serious.

"Sure," said Kath, staring at her cleated shoes. "You know what I mean. I mean, well, he's been acting so damn crazy lately. And I don't know what he expects. In the game. If it was only like it used to be, I could understand. Mac was telling me—"

Sam held up one hand, unwrapped yet by the clubhouse man. "You don't have to pay strict attention to Mac. You'll learn that, if you stay with the team. Mac will repeat everything for you

anyway, sooner or later. And he gets these theories of his. You'll see."

"Still, he said that Jennings was just using us," said Kath. "The crazy act is just another way of getting what he wants out of us, and that we shouldn't fall for it."

"Can you suggest something else we can do in the meantime?" asked Willie, in a sullen voice.

"I want to finish getting taped," said Sam. "And you better be damn sure you got your assignments straight," she said to Kath, "because I'm in no mood to save your skin all afternoon if you get trapped to the outside."

"Don't worry about me," said Kath, with a forced laugh. There was silence, an uncomfortable amount of it; finally Kath shook her head and went back to her own locker. Willie had never looked at her, and he said nothing more. Sam had never looked up at Kath, either. She watched the man winding tape around her wrist and palm.

One of the men on the punting team stood up and spoke. "Before we get on with the usual pre-game prayer and stuff," he said, "I want to welcome the new members of the team and wish them luck. I don't mean I wish them luck in the game. We don't need luck. We need teamwork. I mean I wish them luck *after* the game if they mess up." There were a few meager laughs. "Now I'm going to ask Danielle to lead us in our—" The man was interrupted by the rodentlike squeak of the door to the coach's office. Everyone fell silent, looking in that direction. Jennings entered the room.

He wore gray trousers and a maroon sport coat, a dark blue shirt, and a black tie. He had a gray snap-brim hat on his head, and he carried a clipboard. He handed this to one of his assistants who followed him from the office. "I want to say something," said Jennings. He needed nothing to gather the attention of the team members. Jennings paused for a tiny instant. "None of you ever met a young man who used to be on this team. His name was Bo. That's what we all called him. Bo. But you've heard of him, you know what a reputation he had and what he meant to this team.

Some of the other people, on other teams, called him 'the Trog.' He was big, and he was fierce. But he was a gentle person, and that was why I and his teammates called him Bo, instead of the nickname he had earned. Still, he was proud of 'the Trog.' One day he said to me, 'Coach,' he said, 'if ever the team is in a close one, and the breaks are beating our boys, tell them to give it all they've got, and go out and win just one for "the Trog." I don't know where I'll be then, Coach, but I'll know, and I'll be happy.' Those were about the last words he ever spoke to me. That's something I've never told anyone before. Well, this is the beginning of a new season. We had a damn good season last year. But this is a new season. Last year's scores are in the record books, not on the scoreboard outside. But if you can find just a particle of the devotion, just a minute scrap of the love and determination of that kid Bo, well, all I can say is, I know he'd be happy. Well. That's all I have to say." Jennings' voice had begun clear and forceful, but as he recounted his story, it changed. It grew slower and thicker, choked with emotions that he had never shown until recently. Under other circumstances, his audience might have been moved. Instead, they were seized with fear. Jennings' words and tortured expressions left them feeling helpless, leaderless. Their great source of constancy and security faltered before their eyes. He turned, one hand raised to his eyes. His shoulders shook as though he were sobbing.

"Goddamn it," said Sam softly. "What the hell are we going to do?"

"We're going to make them eat the ball, that's what," said Willie. "And not because of some damn good old boy named Bo, neither. Because if we don't, we'll spend Sevenday evening twisting on our bunks trying to keep from swallowing our tongues."

"But what about Jennings?"

"Are you all right, Coach?" asked one of the other players. Jennings didn't answer.

One of the assistant coaches leaned close to Jennings' ear. Sam watched carefully, hearing some of the man's words, lip-reading the rest. "Where we going now, sir?" he asked.

Jennings' reply was low but audible, his voice steady. "Gotta give the speech to the other team," he said. Sam was sure that she was the only one of the players who heard. The others were too involved in shouting promises of dedication and valor.

"The trouble with real life," said Sam to herself, "is you never really have the option to punt."

BOOK ELEVEN: STRATEGY IS THE SHELL, TACTICS IS THE RIFLE

Mac sat in his seat in the lecture hall, waiting for Jennings to arrive, wondering how the man was going to act. Jennings' performances seemed too theatrical to Mac, too transparent. Now that Mac believed that he had a secret insight into Jennings' manipulative practices, other details that he had previously taken for granted acquired new significance. The lecture hall itself was no longer unsettling; it had evidently been designed to make the audience feel vulnerable, the low, oppressive ceiling having that psychological effect. Mac leaned back in his chair and smiled. He no longer felt vulnerable. He was only amused by Jennings and his rather juvenile tricks.

The muttering voices in the audience quieted when Jennings walked into the lecture hall. Mac studied the man, as well as he could from the distance of nearly fifty ranks. Jennings did not seem particularly distracted, as he had been on several recent occasions. He walked quickly to his podium, shuffled a few papers, then stared briefly across the vast, ordered collection of faces. His voice, when he spoke, was steady, deep, and as full of authority as ever. Mac smiled again; he was delighted that Jennings was in such control, that the intellectual puzzle which Jennings seemed determined to develop was of the most complex variety.

"Good day, ladies and gentlemen," said Jennings. "Good day to you all. I hope you have taken appropriate notes during the course of the last several lectures. The more observant among you will have noticed the trend I have been taking. That is, for

the sake of the least observant among you, away from the cruder and more unsophisticated of weapons, through the armaments of intrinsic poetry and beauty, and finally to those implements of war which succeed through their apparent lack of menace. I have chosen this method of discourse for definite reasons. If you cannot understand these reasons, you will have some difficulty with the examination. If you find yourself unable to fathom my purpose, I highly suggest that you seek out the advice of someone among you who does understand. I do not want you to do badly on the examination, and I am sure, very, *very* sure, that you agree."

Mac laughed quietly and opened his notebook. On the first page, as blank as all the others in the notebook, he wrote *Fiveday Lecture, First Week in September.* He clicked his ballpoint pen shut, closed the cover of the notebook and clipped the pen to it, and put the notebook in his lap. Then he yawned and slouched down further in his seat.

"Let us begin," said Jennings. "I would first like to say that what we have today is obstacles. Obstacles, my ladies and gentlemen. We encounter various kinds of obstacles in life, do we not? Who will say that we do not? Of course we do. We find obstacles in our paths, no matter where those paths may lead. Even if the goal is something as trivial as emptying one's bladder, sometimes there are obstacles." Jennings paused, in the event that the audience might want to laugh. There was no laughter. Mac frowned; it was one of Jennings' rare lapses in taste. Perhaps, though, Mac thought, perhaps the lapse in taste had been intentional, not a lapse at all. Perhaps—

"—imparting knowledge," Jennings was saying. "A bomb is as good a weapon as any. But it takes no delicacy, no refinement at all to turn a city into scraps and shards. Or an army, for that matter. An airplane is gorgeous, sometimes. Who will deny, who among you, my ladies and my own gentlemen, will deny the utter loveliness of your regular Lockheed Foxtrot slash Niner Four Starfire tactical fighter? You will recall the movies we saw several months ago. You will recall the beauty. If you pause to reflect, it

will all come back to you. Still, there are greater attainments within the panoplic field. There is yet the music of genuine cultivated skill."

Jennings had that, all right, thought Mac. Genuine skill. It was becoming more and more obvious. Jennings' own behavior had been carefully planned to parallel the development of his lectures on weaponry. When Jennings had discussed bombs, grenades, rifles, and armored vehicles, his manner had been heavy, contemptuous, and authoritarian. When he had lectured on aircraft, submarines, guided missiles, and small arms, he had been almost sensitive and emotional, like the connoisseur of food or art might act toward the absolute idealization of his dreams. Lately, while the topics had changed gradually to gas warfare, guerrilla tactics, and methods of obfuscation and misdirection, Jennings had seemed crafty, sure of himself once more, but more mysterious than he had ever been. Mac understood at last. He wondered if anyone else did. He wondered if the knowledge would be practical.

The discussion of obstacles had begun. Jennings was pointing to a screen on which a slide of old German antitank obstacles was projected. "These are dragon's teeth, ladies and gentlemen," said Jennings. "Note them well." Mac unclipped his pen, opened the cover of his notebook, and wrote *Obstacles.* "These are, as you see, truncated pyramids of, oh, I would guess reinforced concrete. Does that sound reasonable? Concrete pyramids? What do you think they might be used for? You, there. Chico." Jennings pointed to a young man in the seventeenth rank.

"They are antitank obstacles, sir," said Chico.

"Very good," said Jennings. "Excellent. No punishment this Sevenday for Chico." Mac shook his head, smiling. He knew that Jennings was only pretending that he had forgotten that he had just finished instructing the audience on the purpose of the obstacles. Jennings' actions were easier to predict, and that helped ease the constant boredom.

"They put these in rows," said Jennings. "The teeth in the front are lower than the teeth in the back. That way, a tank

running over them is made to tip up. Clever, eh? And subtle, eh? And beautiful in its own way, eh? What do you think, Maureen?"

A woman only a few seats away from Mac stood up. "I quite agree," she said, and sat down again.

Jennings laughed. "No punishment this Sevenday for Maureen," he said. Mac knew that, despite those words, Maureen had just as good a chance of being punished as anyone else. Another slide was shown, of double-apron barbed wire. Mac wrote *Obstacles* again, beneath the previous entry. He stopped listening to Jennings, believing that he had learned all that he could from the man. He spent the rest of the lecture period writing the word *Obstacles* in single columns down the pages of his notebook.

BOOK TWELVE: FINDING TIME IN A BUSY SCHEDULE

The warning bell rang. Willie sat up in bed, startled, bleary with sleep. He yawned and stretched; he smiled when he remembered how Jamison Hawke, in the role of Gror the Wild Man, explained his survival in the African jungles: "When I wake up," said Gror, "I wake up all at once. I don't lounge comfortably, I don't rub my eyes. I don't raise my arms above my head and wonder about how cold the bathroom floor may be. I am awake, and I am deadly, for the jungle is always deadly. If I indulged in the luxury of a slow awakening, it would be my last." Willie loved the old Gror movies, as foolish as they seemed in the years since their initial popularity. Willie tried to be as much like Gror as he could; the difficulty was that he only remembered about waking up "all at once" after he was already awake. For the thousandth time, Willie realized that were he in Gror's place, he would have been jungle food a long time ago. He licked the odd, unpleasant taste from his lips and swung his feet over the edge of the bed.

A loud bang sounded on the cell door. "All right, Willie," came the trusty's voice. "No time for no little Raven to be all tucked in tight. Get your ass out of that bed."

"Ass is out," called Willie, frowning. "Mr. Zepkin, sir."

"You ain't kidding." The man's high-pitched laugh faded as he went along the hall, checking on the others. Willie stared at the cell door and held his hand out at arm's length, the fingers spread. Then, slowly, he closed the hand in a fist. It was a very obscene gesture that he had learned from one of Gatelin's first pictures, *The Silver Sergeant.*

It was Sevenday morning, clear, dark, the stars cut off abruptly by the top of the gigantic walls, the lights on the rim of those walls already turned off. It would be light soon.

"Here's the famous Raven, getting dressed for Sevenday rituals, one of his favorite times of the entire week," murmured Willie. "Here's the Raven, almost unable to control his excitement, as he skips washing, brushing his teeth, and combing his hair in the nervousness and sincere religious passion that grips him every week at this time." He spat on his floor, pulled on the special, drab vestment of his rank, and left his cell. The halls were crowded with others on their way to the assembly hall; Willie nodded to some, spoke to few, ignored most. He was already thinking about reinforcement. And about punishment.

The assembly hall itself never failed to annoy him. It was so obviously one of Jennings' great schemes to impress his audience. Willie was irritated by that; he refused to be intimidated into respecting Jennings. If the man couldn't do it with his own personality or his own actions, owning a big room sure wasn't going to do it for him. The great doors with the murals of the tauroctonous Mithra had been flung open, and slowly moving streams of people were passing through. Willie tried to push his way through. "No need to hurry," he thought. "This is dumb. Just slow down. Everybody'll get in. Slow down." But he still pushed, unable to stand the stupid way people ahead of him were walking, staring blankly, wasting his time.

Willie took his place in the ranks of the Ravens. The lower levels of initiates took their places against the walls of the tremendous assembly hall. The Ravens, the very lowest rank, were so far from Jennings' speaking platform that none of them could hear the man's words, and some of the weaker-eyed among the Ravens

couldn't even see him. Only the other Patres, the Runners of the Sun, and the Persians could hear Jennings easily. The Lions and the Soldiers could hear him often. The Occults and the Ravens were kept informed of Jennings' pronouncements by means of messengers who made whispered reports at frequent intervals. Willie never listened very closely to the messengers, either.

After quite a while, the rest of the initiates arrived and took their places. Willie sat, nervously fidgeting, wishing the entire ritual were over, wishing the business of the week's punishment and reinforcement were over. He thought of Sam, and tried to look toward the group of Lions. Most of the Lions sat against the same wall as Willie's particular cult of Ravens, about half the distance to Jennings' platform. It was much too far to make out Sam's form among the others. Willie recalled that their friend Mac had been elevated from the rank of Soldier to that of Lion. Mac would be in the same temple as Sam, although probably not in the same cult. Just as well, thought Willie. Sometimes Willie was suspicious even of Mac's attentions to Sam.

Jennings arrived and took his place. He greeted each group of worshipers. A messenger hurried to the Ravens and reported that Jennings had mounted the platform. Willie made an impatient face. Another messenger came and said that Jennings had ritually greeted each rank. Willie stopped listening. The morning passed slowly. The only motion came from the shuffling of the messengers, who reported each step in the ritual as though it had never happened before.

Some minutes after the sermon, Willie was aroused from a shallow doze by an irregular noise in the ritual hall. A low buzzing was originating from the ranks between the Ravens and Jennings' platform. It sounded like clamor. There was never any clamor during the ritual. Risking punishment, Willie whispered to the Raven next to him. "What's happening?" he asked.

"I don't know," said the woman. "I can't see. People are standing up. I thought I saw Jennings bend over up there. Maybe he had to get sick."

Willie laughed, but his humor faded. If anything, it meant that

the ritual would take longer than usual. If anything, it meant punishment.

"It was really scary," said the messenger, his voice hoarse and shaken. He had no ritual words to rely on. He was speaking as one person to a group of curious listeners, without the benefit or protection of his position. "I never saw anything like that. It was a Runner of the Sun, I think. I only saw the guy for a second or two. It had to be, or else another Pater. They're the only ones close enough, right? He jumped up on the platform, and then he said something. I couldn't make it out. One of my friends said it sounded like 'Get the hell out of here.' That's crazy. I don't know. Then he just put a knife in Jennings' throat. Jennings went down. That's all. I got to go." People were screaming, frightened, trying to be heard. Others, more thoughtful, were trying to question the messenger; it was no use. He pulled away from the crowd and moved on.

BOOK THIRTEEN: THE ELECTION OF A FITTING CLIMAX

Mac sat at the head of his cot, his back against the gray wall, his knees drawn up. Sam sat at the foot of the cot, her hands folded in her lap. Her face had a sad expression. Willie stood by the cold plastic slab of a window, staring out at the walls across the yard. After a few seconds of silence, he turned around and looked at Mac. "You know what your trouble is?" he said.

Mac sighed. "No. Tell me. What is my trouble?"

"You think you know everything about everything, that's what," said Willie. "You thought you had Jennings figured out. You kept telling us how you had Jennings figured out. You were very proud of that, if I remember correctly. You were the one who was going to lead us out of here, as soon as you had Jennings all figured out, even though you already told us you had him all figured out. Well, it looks like you didn't. And it's a damn good thing you didn't convince us, either."

"He's dead," said Sam, in a dull voice.

"You think he's dead," said Mac, smiling at Willie. "You were told that he's dead. You think that you've seen him dead. He may not be dead."

"He's dead," said Sam. Tears began to slide down her cheeks.

"We're going to leave," said Willie.

"He's testing us," said Mac.

"He's dead," said Willie, "and we're going to leave. We're going to walk right out the front gate."

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Mac. "He knows that we've figured him out. He let us figure him out, just like I said before. He let us think we've figured him out. But he's planning on a different level. Only I'm still ahead. I've got to where I know that he knows, and Jennings isn't aware that I'm ahead of the rest of you."

"We're still leaving," said Willie.

"It's not a good idea," said Mac. "Even if he really is dead."

"It may not be a good idea to you," said Willie, his voice angry, "but goddamn it, I'm leaving. And if you or Sam want to come with me—" Willie stalked from the room, raging, and slammed the cell door behind him. Sam looked at Mac helplessly. She got up.

"He may be right," she said. "Jennings is dead."

"I hope so," said Mac. He sighed. Sam hurried after Willie. Mac went to the window, then sat on the edge of his cot so that he could still look out and down to the yard, several dozen stories below. He watched for a long time. He saw many people from many dorms cross the plain-colored yard, toward the front gate. He thought he saw two people that might have been Willie and Sam. Then he saw two more people that looked like Willie and Sam, and then another couple. After a while, Mac gave up. He stretched out on the cot and tried to take a nap.

He was awakened from a light sleep by a knock on the door. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Jennings," came the answer from the hall. The door opened, and Jennings came into the cell. Mac sat up, startled and afraid.

He said nothing. "Mind if I sit down?" asked Jennings. Mac couldn't answer. Jennings sat on the foot of the cot and began talking. "I want to make some things clear to you, Mac," he said. "It's best to rule people with their freely given devotion. But that's not necessary. If you can't have their devotion, you can govern them with their respect and a neutral manner. If you can't have that, then you can govern them with their fear and a strong executive branch. And if you can't even manage that, why, maybe you ought to get out of the government business altogether." Jennings paused and gave a little laugh. "I find that sometimes I don't even have the fear to work with. Like in your case. You're not afraid of me, are you? Or, I mean, you weren't. Before. You know."

Mac just stared.

"Anyway," said Jennings, not particularly noticing Mac's reaction, "in the case of a person like you, I have to rule by other methods. Bribes and threats are out. You wouldn't fall for either. You like to think that you like to think. That's your bait on my hook. So, what the hell. That kind of thing costs me less than a strong army would." Jennings laughed again. The warning bell on the wall rang. Mac looked up at it; he remembered that it was still Sevenday, that it was time for punishment and reinforcement. Jennings just smiled and shrugged.

"I used to think you were all power and affection," said Mac. "Like a father. Power and affection make a strange mixture, but you never lose either completely. I was wrong. You're a demon."

"You had me figured out," said Jennings. "You thought so, anyway. I let you think so. But you knew I let you. And I let you know that, too. You can't catch up. You can't really understand. That's why I give the lectures and you take the notes."

"You're a demon," said Mac.

Jennings laughed. "Everybody has what he wants. Except me. I'm dead."

"What about them?" Mac waved a hand toward the window.

"Sam and Willie? They have what they want. They're walking out the front gate, just about now. They have each other. They have what they want."

"You're not going to stop them?" asked Mac.

"Stop them from doing what? They don't mean anything. They could have gone anytime."

"What about me?"

"What about you, Mac? Do you mean, are you worth anything? I won't answer that. You figure it out. You're good at that. You have what you want, don't you?"

"Do I?"

"Do you want to leave?"

"No," said Mac.

"And you're not. What do you feel like doing?"

"Sleeping," said Mac. He stretched out again, yawned, and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Jennings was gone. Mac was sure that he had not dreamed the conversation. "It was another Sevenday illusion, like the movies," he thought. "I can figure it out. And I have all night to do it. Jennings' murder might have been a Sevenday illusion. This entire week might have been . . ." Mac took a deep breath and smiled. Jennings was right. Everyone had received what he wanted.

Without getting undressed, Mac slid beneath the blankets on his cot. The gray winter light was failing, and the room was dim. Mac felt warm and comfortable. "Nama, Nama Sebesio," he murmured, not knowing what the words meant. He was soon asleep.

It was the second week in December; the weather was actually fairly mild, bright, clear, temperature in the high fifties. The yard was brown and grassless. Where rain had made mud a few days before, there were hard, dry ridges of a lighter buff color. The high gray walls around the yard were close and cold.

Arcs & Secants

R. A. LAFFERTY ("Flaming Ducks and Giant Bread") was born in Neola, Iowa, fifty-eight years ago but has lived most of his life in Oklahoma, with time out for World War II, which he spent in Texas, North Carolina, Florida, California, Australia, New Guinea, Morotai Island (then Dutch East Indies, now part of Indonesia), and the Philippines. "I am forever a Catholic, a bachelor, a political independent, a lone badger (lone wolves are a legend, they are always in groups, but even the bachelor badger digs himself a hole and spends most of his time in it)."

DORIS PISERCHIA ("Pale Hands") rides horses, takes care of a large noisy household, and writes. "I sold two books and ten stories this year [1973] so I guess I can call myself a writer. I'm a little reluctant to, though. Other writers' comments sound so darned confident, as if they really have it made, and I know damned well I haven't got anything made, so I wonder. Ginn & Co., Mass., bought one from Fred [Pohl]'s *Best SF for 1972;* it's the third time I've sold it and each time I get more money. That makes no sense, but then I take all this business too seriously and would be better off if I ignored a lot of it." "Pale Hands" was written on commission for another editor, who asked Mrs. Piserchia for a story about mass masturbation, then rejected the finished manuscript because it was "just too much of a sex story."

To a new writer who asked if he thought it was all right for him to use the title "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" we

wrote: "No problem about the title unless there is a possibility of confusion, and Gibbon's was in 12 volumes, so don't worry."

KATE WILHELM ("Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang") takes her own warnings seriously—she grows a vegetable garden, bakes bread, brews beer, and makes wine. Her stories are sometimes prophetic, but with such a short lag that by the time they are published, they look as if they had been inspired by last month's headlines. "Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang" is the fourth in a series of connected stories that began with "The Red Canary" *(Orbit 12)* and continued with "The Scream" *(Orbit 13)* and "A Brother to Dragons, a Companion of Owls" *(Orbit 14).*

We received a submission from a literary agency in Searcy, Arkansas, which calls itself Infinity Ltd.

GENE WOLFE ("Melting") recently wrote, "I have been considering joining the Procrastinators' Association, but I keep putting it off."

In October we wrote to the St. Petersburg *Times:* "The members of the Citizens' Commission on Education, who profess to believe that children learn their profanity from dictionaries, are *leery busnacks* (suspicious busybodies), *grumpish old busters* (sour-faced oldsters), *sticky-beaks* (inquisitive persons) and *noodles* (simpletons). Here's a *ripe Richard* (raspberry) for them." The Commission later gave up its attack on the school libraries where it had found copies of Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional Language* (Librarians 1, Wowsers 0).

MICHAEL BISHOP ("In the Lilliputian Asylum") was in college when he first thought of writing a story from the viewpoint of a Lilliputian after Gulliver's departure. He tried writing it as a novel in 1969 but didn't like the result and put it aside until 1973, when it began to re-emerge as a series of poems. Ballantine has accepted his first novel: it is called *A Funeral for the Eyes of Fire.*

We heard from W. T. March, Cdr. USN (Ret.), that he has been reading science fiction since 1926 and that "this so-called SF that you and Ellison are anthologizing is enough to make John W. Campbell, Wells, etc., turn over in their graves. There isn't 99 out of 100 of this Clarion bunch that are fit to empty Isaac Asimov's chamber pot."

LOWELL KENT SMITH ("Ernie") is an assistant professor of biology at the University of Redlands, Redlands, California, where he specializes in biomedical computing and biological modeling; he is a consultant on these subjects and on water pollution. Earlier in his career, as a first lieutenant in the artillery, he taught the employment of nuclear weapons as a member of the teaching staff of the Tactics and Combined Arms Department of the U.S. Army Artillery and Missile School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. This is his first story.

BRIAN W. ALDISS ("Live? Our Computers Will Do That for Us") was guest of honor at Beneluxcon 1 in Ghent, Belgium, in the spring of 1973. In the summer he and his wife, with another couple, rented a villa at Rovinj, Yugoslavia. Then they came home and he wrote this story, which is one of a projected series about the Zodiacal Planets.

To a talented young writer we wrote: "Am probably not qualified to say anything about the topic (because it does not turn me on much) but I could not figure out why if your guy digs corpses he would not wait until the woman was dead. (That's how I'd do if I was a necrophile.) And my advice to him would be to give up kidnaping anybody & just get a job in a funeral parlor."

ELEANOR ARNASON ("Ace 167") lives in Detroit, and likes it because it has no culture and a lot of energy. "The poets here talk about their jobs in factories instead of about literature." She lives in a hillbilly/black/Slavic neighborhood with a lot of Arabs mov-

ing in. "I ate breakfast at the local greasy spoon this morning. The Greeks there were talking about how the bar down the street, that used to have such good hamburgers, had been bought by camel jockeys."

GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER ("Biting Down Hard on Truth"), a Clarion alumnus, now lives in New Orleans, where he is working hard to acquire Southern decadence. The first step, he says, is to distinguish between decadence and "mere depravity."

Sonya Dorman ("The Living End," *Orbit 7*) wrote a long time ago, "I have a hideous radical suggestion for Orbit, which no doubt you have thought of and discarded. You know, I am your book review fan from way back. . . . What if: for each Orbit, you were to do one in-depth review of a book which interested you? Or two or three shorter reviews? And not necessarily fiction, but perhaps some things reasonably relative to s.f.?" And Wally Macfarlane ("Gardening Notes from All Over," *Orbit 13*) also wrote: "Got a suggestion: Orbit theme. With the whole number in small numerals somewhere. Orbit Around Mars, Orbit into Worlds that Never Were, Orbit in the Head, Orbit for Good, Orbit for Bad, Orbit around and about Nekkid Women, How to Robot Orbit, In the Literary Orbit, you know like that." We followed Ms. Dorman's suggestion in *Orbit 14* and may do it again; and as it happens, the stories in this volume are all about love, "all the different kinds there are or could be." That was an accident, but we may do it again on purpose with another topic. Your comments are invited. Letters, and manuscripts for publication, should be sent to Damon Knight, Editor, Box 8216, Madeira Beach, FL 33738.