
orbit 17
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ORBIT 17

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Edited by Damon Knight

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They Say

When do I work? Optimally, at night—starting at midnight, and continuing until I have done my quota for that day, whereafter I read a little, eat something, listen to a little music and go to sleep, generally about sunrise. (My old friend, Cyril Kornbluth, used to say, "If God had meant man to be awake by day He wouldn't have given us the electric light.") This makes problems when I interface with the real world. Publishers and university people in particular have a foul habit of trying to telephone me in the morning, when I am generally asleep. But I won't change; from midnight to six there are no phone calls, the household is asleep, no one comes to the door and that is how I like it. I am all too easily distracted. Years ago I used to try to get my family to tell callers I was out in the morning. Now they just say I am asleep.

Being a writer is difficult; you not only need the talent and technique to write, you also need the discipline to make yourself do it, and the critical judgment to know when you are done. If you are a bricklayer, say, people tell you what to do—"twelve courses of glazed yellow, ten yards long, staggered and faced with stone at the gate—" and when the wall is up you are through. If you are a writer you have to set yourself a task, make yourself do it, and evaluate the result when you are done, with little or no real help from anyone. To be sure people will *try* to tell you what you should do, and give you all the criticism you want, maybe more than you want, once it is irretrievably in print; but the only opinion that really matters is your own.

—Frederik Pohl, in *Hell's Cartographers* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975)

Fairy tales are more concerned with situation than with character. They are the space fiction of the past.

—Iona and Peter Opie,
The Classic Fairy Tales (Oxford University Press, 1974)

. . . But no amount of expert advice or money can make up for lack of imagination, as Harlan Ellison discovered when he tried to midwife a series called *The Starlost,* inspired by Heinlein's "Universe" and various imitations thereof.

Ellison is usually the mortal enemy of "hard" science fiction, but he had enough integrity to want to do *The Starlost* justice. Nobody else did, however.

He had carefully worked up an outline based on the series heroes trying to locate the lost controls of the runaway starship they were on—and not finding them until the last episode.

But before he knew it, the producers destroyed the integrity of the series by having the controls discovered in the second or third episode. Don't worry, they told Ellison—they could keep up suspense with a search for the *backup* controls. On questioning them, he learned they thought *backup* controls were what would make the starship back up!

—John J. Pierce, in *Reason,*
January 1975

MR. FIEDLER: Well, let me tell you an experience which I lived through. Not this time at the National Book Awards but the time before I was one of the fiction judges. There was a book I very much wanted the fiction judges to consider for the prize—

MR. BUCKLEY: Are you at liberty to say which?

MR. FIEDLER: Yes, it was a book by a young science fiction writer called Norman Spinrad. It's called *The Iron Dream.* And the rest of my committee simply said, "That's science fiction. It doesn't enter into consideration as a novel. Someday we'll have a prize for science fiction." This is a kind of ghettoization of literature which is built into libraries even, right, public libraries.

Children's department, adult department. Real books, detective stories, westerns, science fiction, girls' romances, whatever the distinctions are. And that also doesn't make much sense to me anymore.

—Interview with Leslie Fiedler
on *Firing Line,* December 1, 1974

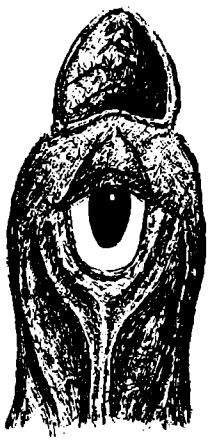
The vast mass of humanity is, alas, attracted by nonsense. To point out that it is nonsense is merely to reassure people. They will roll in the dung heap all the more merrily for knowing that it is the real thing. The Roman philosopher Seneca said, "Man is a reasoning animal." What evidence he had for that assertion no one knows; certainly none has surfaced in the 19 centuries since his time.

To be sure, a few individual human beings are reasoning animals. You can tell who they are by the fact that they are denounced by everyone else every time they open their mouths.

—Isaac Asimov, in a letter to
Time, January 20, 1975

THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

Home for Robert was a place he had never seen—did it exist at all?



Kathleen M. Sidney

"Where are you going?" his sister asked.

"Home."

He awoke, huddled among blue-grey bodies. For warmth? On a planet where no one was ever cold?

He woke up with a question. If nothing else, he was an anthropologist.

If nothing else.

"Why are we huddled here?" he asked them aloud. No one so

much as opened an eye. They were used to him. They had always been used to him. From the first day he had stepped into their circle, one E-year ago, not one of them had shown the slightest spark of curiosity concerning him. Or anything else. Was nothing new to them? And nothing old? Half his time was up, and he knew no more about them now than when he began.

Gradually they woke up, stretching, an almost human gesture. And Robert spoke to them aloud, as a man lost in the wilderness for a year might speak to the trees. Pointless questions, to fill in the terrible quiet.

"Where are you going?" his sister asked.

"Out to play."

"They laughed at you."

"Mommy said that's only because I'm so different. They'll get used to me."

And they laughed at him. He was too young to know that it was fear. If he was ridiculed, then he was ridiculous. And gradually they did grow used to him. He had learned the secret of success. He became their pet, a puppy dog who could talk and do tricks for them. If there is one thing stronger than the need for self-respect, it is loneliness. But he was spared one agony: he made a poor scapegoat. They could not easily project their fears about their own human weaknesses onto a beast with three heads and nine legs.

"Mommy, where did I come from?"

His mother was a biologist, a scientist, impatient with lies.

"Remember how I told you about the planets and the suns?"

"Yes."

"Well, you came from another planet, called Epsilon Geminorum V. It's far away from here. Across the stars."

Robert pictured the stars, and the darkness between them.

"Your parents gave you to Earth. Along with two others. I think so that we could raise you as our own children and come to understand them better through you."

"I don't remember that."

"You weren't born yet, really, you were inside an egg."

The laughers had told him he was hatched from an egg. He had thought they were making it up.

"Was Susie hatched, too?"

"In a way. From an egg inside my stomach."

"Didn't I come from a stomach, too?"

"Yes. Your egg was inside a stomach, first, then it was outside. And then you were born."

"But why was I hatched outside?"

"Because that's the way people are born on your planet. It's as good a way as any."

"Did they look like me?"

"Who?"

"My Mom and Dad."

"Yes. But we adopted you, and so we're your parents."

"What happened to the other eggs?"

"Those babies died, Robby. Because we didn't understand that they needed love, just like human children. And they were raised in a sterile laboratory environment until it was too late."

"But I didn't die."

"Because we had taken you home with us. Because we love you."

He hugged her tight. Afraid to let go. Afraid he would die. But she hugged him back, and after a while he relaxed.

"You know what I'm going to be when I grow up?" Susie asked.

"What?"

"A scientist, like Mommy. Do you know what kind?"

"A mad scientist."

They wrestled on the floor, laughing.

"What are you going to be, Robby?"

He was on his way out of the house with Susie when his mother called him back.

"Robby, stay inside this morning. There's someone coming to see you."

He knew what that phrase meant. "It's another test," he told his sister.

"Mommy, can't he come? We're building a tree fort."

"Later, honey, this afternoon."

"Now, Mom, just for a little while?"

"Susie," their mother said warningly.

"Well, he's not a guinea pig." And his sister made a hasty exit.

With Susan gone, and his mother and father working in the cellar lab, Robert had the house to himself. He wandered into his parents' bedroom and, on an impulse, closed the door behind him. He crouched in the center of his father's bed. Who would come to test him today? Dr. Jamison again? Robert had once overheard the man say that tricephs might be less intelligent than human beings. And despite his parents' indignant replies, Robert knew that it was true. He had no doubt that he was inferior to the human race.

The closet door was open. He looked at his father's suits, his mother's dresses. He climbed up on the dresser, and looked at his own twelve-holed garment in the mirror. A "trunk suit," his mother had called it. Yet she had told him that he was almost human biologically. He breathed the same air and ate most of the same foods. His skin was a little thicker than theirs, and heavily pigmented blue-grey, but his blood was red. Yet three heads rose, immobile, from a short stubby trunk. And each possessed one eye and one ear, placed so that he could see and hear in any direction without turning. One head had a functional nose and mouth; on the other two these were rudimentary. And nine legs were spread around him like a spider's, and each possessed a three-pronged hand. Robert studied himself in the mirror, silently asking a question as old as the human race.

"Robert, where are you?" his father called. "Rob, come on. Dr. Jamison will be here any minute." He paused outside the bedroom, mumbling to himself, "Where is the little monster?" and left.

Fifteen minutes later he returned, running toward the sound of objects breaking. The room was a shambles. And scattered in a circle, as if they had been caught up in and tossed from a fan, were all the suits from the closet. A hat was on one of Robert's heads, and one of his long arms was stretched through a shirtsleeve.

Robert saw his father standing quite still at the door, and he began a high-pitched whistling. It was as close as he could come to human crying. His father sat down on the bed and gathered him up in his lap. His mother came into the room, then left again. When she returned, she sat down beside them. The whistling gradually eased and stopped. But for a long time no one moved or spoke.

Finally his father turned to his mother and asked, very softly, "Did you call Dr. Jamison?"

His mother nodded. "He'll put it off. Robby won't have to answer any questions today."

When he was seventeen, he had to choose whether to join the expedition, or to go east with his family, where Susan would start college. She wanted him to join her. They had always been close, but their intimacy had grown during the teen years, when sibling rivalry gave way to very similar views on life, death, and the meaning of the universe. They had asked the same questions, and found the same tentative answers, until their thoughts were so intertwined, they found it impossible to remember which of them had first proposed an idea. But even if the college would consider accepting him as a student, he felt sure he would fail the entrance examinations.

"Where are you going?" his sister asked.

"Home."

"No. Not until you come back."

"To what? A freak show?"

"I'll be waiting."

Robert was reading in the ship's lounge when the argument broke out between Dr. Johnson, an anthropologist, and Dr. Panzer, a biologist.

". . . you don't seem to understand. We're clay. Culture is our mold."

"Then how come we aren't all alike?"

"Because no two of us have precisely the same experiences. But almost all our experiences are within the bounds of our

culture. We learn to see the universe according to the preconceptions of our culture. And so we're blind to the truly alien."

Robert looked at his hands in awe.

Blind.

"You're going to what?" Dr. Layton was aghast.

"I'm going to study anthropology."

"Are you joking?"

"It will take us two years to reach Epsilon. The ship's library is extensive on the subject, and I haven't anything better to do with my time."

"Nothing better than to wreck the experiment?"

"It won't do any harm, it should help if I—"

"What do you think we need, another damned scientist? There's already twenty of us on board. And for thirty-two years the best of us have made next to no headway in understanding these creatures. What we need is a triceph who can bridge the gap subjectively. And you're it."

It.

Robert studied anthropology.

He read the reports carefully for the hundredth time. When Layton had said that next to nothing was known about the tricephs, he hadn't been exaggerating. At first, the planet had been rated A for settlement. It was an Eden, with no dangerous animals. All species were herbivores, and most had plenty to eat. Their birth rate was low. The temperature was mild over most of the planet's surface. There was some evidence that conditions had once been harsher, and that the evolution of animal life had passed through a carnivorous stage.

Exploration is a slow process under the best of conditions, and it wasn't until the second year that the team had occasion to kill and dissect a triceph. They uncovered one large and two small brains, heavily interconnected with neural pathways. It appeared that they might have discovered the first sentient aliens. The problem was proving it.

The tricephs were extremely shy of humans. Those captured

died almost immediately of unknown causes. However, robosensors proved effective, and a close observation was maintained. The tricephs did not use tools. They wandered in packs of twenty to thirty, with no home base and apparently no territorial limits. They never fought. They had no visible or audible means of communication. Yet they were able to work together in building structures made of vines and grass. The purpose of these structures was a mystery. They were not used as shelters, nor for raising food. No two structures were exactly alike. Each took approximately six hours to build. Each pack built one structure a day and immediately abandoned it to rot. There were no pack leaders, and none of the members appeared to have any particular tasks that they habitually performed. Yet the building went smoothly and efficiently.

It was noted that none of the tricephs seemed to use any one hand in preference to the other eight. Robert thought long about this. He himself had been taught to write with the hand to the right of his primary head. He was beginning to realize that the nature of intelligence was many-faceted and little understood. A seed of hope had been planted within him eight months before, in the ship's lounge. And now it was taking root.

The tricephs were hermaphroditic and mated once a year (approximately fourteen and a third Earth months). Each paired with only one other individual, and the pairing lasted little longer than a day. Only about ten percent of the matings resulted in offspring. Pregnancy lasted five months, resulting in one egg, which the parent carried in its pouch until it hatched six months later. It took seven months for the young triceph to graduate from the pouch, after which all the elders cared for all the young indiscriminately. Fifteen years later, it reached physical maturity. The life-span was as yet unknown, but there was some indication that it might average around seventy of our years. For all its observations, the team was unable to find absolute proof that triceph sentience existed. If it was proven that the tricephs were sentient, the government would forbid colonization of the planet.

Almost fifteen years after the tricephs were discovered, three of their eggs appeared outside the main entrance to the base. Dr.

Edward Simpson was the first to leave that morning, and it was he who discovered the eggs. They had been placed in a huddle directly in front of the entrance, and covered with grass. The eggs were warm, and could not have been there long. The land around the base was flat and had been cleared for half a mile. There was not a triceph in sight.

Robert entered the elevator at C, and Dr. Layton at D. Coincidence had placed them alone together for the first time in a year. The silence was loud. A mutual hatred permeated the air, almost stifling them in the small compartment. As they stepped out into the lounge, Layton admitted to an awareness of Robert's presence.

"So how's our three-headed blue anthropologist?"

"Doing quite well, thank you."

"Is that a touch of pride I hear? Well, I guess you have some right to it. In only one year's time, you've managed to destroy the lifework of at least thirty people."

"I haven't ruined your experiment, I've changed it."

"Oh, really? I'd like to hear the new hypothesis."

"Triceph intelligence is equal to, but different from human intelligence."

"That's two hypotheses."

"All right."

"And a good scientist phrases his hypotheses in the negative. It aids objectivity."

"But you want me to be subjective."

"A subjective triceph. Not a subjective human."

Oddly, they were both taken aback by his remark, and they stared at each other in silence. Finally Layton spoke, and Robert was surprised to hear a note of pleading in his voice.

"Don't you understand how important this is? Do you realize the time and the money that has gone into it? The government won't wait indefinitely. If this experiment fails, the project will be abandoned, and the best we can hope is that they will leave the planet uncolonized. Look, Robert, after all this is over, there will be plenty of time for you to study whatever you want."

"You don't understand, Layton. There isn't going to be any 'after this is over' for me. I'm going home."

They were at a picnic and Robert thought the mood was unusually dismal. Then he realized why. The world was a deep blue-grey. It was dawn, and everyone was cold. Later, perhaps, when the sun came out, they would become warm and happy.

"Mom, I'm hungry."

She gave the sandwich to Dr. Layton, and he held it up for Robert. "Speak, Robby, speak."

Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked. And they could hear children laughing.

Robert reached out a human hand and took the sandwich.

"Mom, I'm cold. Can't we go home?"

"You go, Robby, we want to stay here."

Robert stood, and Susie grinned up at him. "We can hardly see you against the sky."

Robert woke up, shaking. As usual when he had had this dream, he lay awake for some time, listening to the sounds of the ship. Until, gradually, sleep overtook his fear.

Earth, Robert thought, and knew that he was wrong. He had seen the green vegetation and the blue sky in the videos, but he had never expected it to feel so familiar.

"What do you think of it?" Layton asked.

"Like home." The words escaped him before he realized what he had said.

"Yes, well, it will seem even more that way, once you get used to it." The scientist had completely misunderstood him.

Robert entered the forest on a practice run. Now, for the first time, he actually felt that he was on another planet. In motion, he could not forget the tug of the slightly stronger gravity. And on closer scrutiny, the vegetation had an alien shape. Even the veins of the leaves stretched in multiples of three. But leaves they were, green and functioning like the vegetation of Earth. A horizontal forest, Robert thought. Although it reached up for the sun,

everything seemed interconnected aboveground. He rarely saw the earth, even in the fields; it was covered with a blanket of vegetation. And in the forest, he could travel on any one of several levels of limbs. He felt awkward at first, yet he found that he was leaving his human companions far behind. With a little practice he would move like a native.

"Are you ready, Robert?" Dr. Layton smiled, a poor attempt at good will.

"Yes."

"We'll fly you over."

"No, I'll walk."

"It's a long way."

"For you, maybe. I was made for these woods."

"Yes, you were. You'll blend in fine."

"Are you sure you won't forget which triceph I am?"

"Don't worry about that. And there'll be a robosensor on you at all times."

"I forgot."

"That's good. Forget as much as you can. Become one of them."

"I might forget altogether, and fail to keep our appointment."

"I'll see you in six months."

"Maybe."

"Robert, have you ever heard of Jamison's theory?"

"I know both Jamison and his theory very well."

"That's right, he worked with you for a while, didn't he?"

"He tested me, if that's what you mean. His theory has it that triceph intelligence has deteriorated, since the conditions on this planet no longer require it for survival. This accounts for their apparent lack of speech and curiosity. And their emotions have become shallow for the same reason. Aggressiveness, in particular, is pointless when all needs are met with little effort, and there are no enemies. Their unexplainable behavior represents half-remembered activities, perhaps, by now, instincts, passed on from generation to generation, and carried out without understanding or reason. Oh yes, and I'm explained as a sort of super-

intelligent monkey, appearing brighter than I am, because I've been brought up among humans and have learned their habits. My existence suggests that we're capable of learning, but the almost mindless existence of the tricephs suggests that we're no longer capable of originating ideas."

"You're out to disprove that, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"As a scientist?"

"As an anthropologist."

"Yes, you are an anthropologist. Without a degree, but I think you've studied enough to warrant the title." It occurred to Robert that Layton was a chess player. "What would you say is the most important thing an anthropologist must learn?"

The answer was unavoidable. "Objectivity."

"Exactly."

"Impossible."

"In a pure sense. But if we're aware of our biases, we can allow for them."

"All right. I'm aware of my bias, Layton. Are you aware of yours?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Jamison's theory."

"You're wrong."

"Am I?" Robert turned to go.

"Wait a minute, damn you. All I ask is that you refrain from projecting into these creatures an intelligence they may not possess."

"If I don't possess the intelligence, I can't very well project it into them, can I? And if I do, then so do they."

"You can see in them traits you have learned, but which are inherently human."

"What makes you believe I think so much of humankind that I would want tricephs to be the same? No, it's not similarity I'm looking for, it's difference."

"Difference, or superiority?"

"Superiority is a value, and as such, is relative to a given culture."

"What if their intelligence is very similar to ours, Robert, but lower? Will you spend the next two years trying to hide the truth, from us, and from yourself?"

The pattern never varied. They arose and moved on, searching for food. It wasn't difficult to find. And then they began another structure.

"Today is a special day," Robert informed them. "Today is our first anniversary." And today he would once more report to Layton that he had failed to achieve any insight into the triceph culture. The one theory he had offered, a year ago, was beginning to seem no more than a child's dream. Someone handed him a vine to add to the structure. "No, I can't today. I have to report to Layton."

"Mommy, can't he come? We're building a tree fort."

Tree forts are my specialty, you know. It's the one area in which I excel.

Was that the essence of triceph intelligence?

"Someone is coming to see you."

A Dr. Jamison, no doubt.

A high-pitched whistling sound penetrated a forest that was too green, and a sky too blue to seem truly alien. The tricephs moved back and watched impassively, as one day's structure was utterly demolished.

Exhausted, Robert moved away from the wreckage and squatted, panting. He became aware of the sheer childishness of his act. For the first time in months, he remembered the robosensor, and his shame deepened.

The tricephs sat facing him, as if immobilized by the unpredictable.

The unpredictable.

Robert arose, excited.

"Layton," he called to the robosensor, "I'm conducting an experiment. I'm going to put our meeting off a week."

Next day the tricephs built another structure. And Robert destroyed it. Methodically, this time, but quickly and completely. And next day they built again.

At the end of the week Robert kept his appointment with Layton. As he had expected, the scientist was against his interference with the pack. But since he had no alternative except to pull Robert out of the experiment altogether, he reluctantly agreed.

At the end of a month the procedure had not varied. Robert destroyed the structures at various stages of their development. The tricephs waited until he was finished and began again, leaving Robert with the old questions. Did they lack the emotion of frustration, the intelligence to solve the problem, or the experience of problem-solving? He began to suspect that they simply did not care.

That night he dreamed once more of the picnic. And this time he awoke with a loneliness greater than any he had experienced before. "Am I homesick?" he asked them. And the silence was his answer. The irony was too much for him. "Damn all of you." he shouted. "Can't you give me anything of my own?"

Robert followed the pack to a place where three rivers met. There they began another structure. He sat on the bank and watched. He had ceased to destroy their work, but he felt reluctant to help them again. Around midday another pack arrived. In his time with the pack, they had passed other tricephs, but no group had remained near any other. Today, however, the new pack joined in the building of the structure. A third pack arrived around midafternoon, and joined with the others in the building. According to the observers' records, three packs would leave tomorrow, but only after so thorough an interchange of members that they could no longer be identified as the same packs. And by tomorrow morning, the mating would begin. Robert felt no desire to take part in triceph sexual intercourse, and there seemed little likelihood of his being forced into the act. Nevertheless, he watched from a little farther back that day, and that night he slept outside the huddle. His dreams took on a new quality, but when he awoke, he forgot them. In the morning the pack divided into three, roughly the same in number. A process of choice seemed to be involved, and the goal appeared to be exchange and equalization. Yet their movements lacked the hesi-

tation human beings associate with decision. In order to do his part, he chose the smallest pack and followed it along the river. By midmorning they were working on a structure. But the work force was greatly diminished; the mating was well under way. Robert watched from the other side of the river. This seemed to him the final alienation.

That night he lay awake, trying to concentrate on the simple intensity of the sky. Tomorrow he was quitting. He would return to Earth, where, if he could not be happy, at least he had a family to help fill his emptiness.

A creature appeared against the stars. As ugly as Robert, but no more so, it stared down at him, waiting. And as suddenly as that, a desire filled Robert, more intense and more delightful than anything he had known before.

In the morning the triceph left, taking with it the blindness of ecstasy. Robert opened his eyes and was overcome with self-loathing. He could not forgive himself for having mated with an animal.

The tricephs moved on down the river in search of food. Robert watched them go, his skin crawling with a new revulsion. When they were out of sight, he turned and left the river.

Robert lowered his heavy body into the pond and half-floated in a deep peace. He would lay an egg soon, and carry it in his pouch. What had his mother said? It was as good a way as any to be born. He wondered idly about a question he had once asked her. Why, since he was of two sexes, had he been given a man's name? His mother had tried to pass over the question lightly, saying that they had flipped a coin. But Susan had said it was because mankind defined a person according to sex, and men were more respected than women. His mother had said nothing, but her expression was an answer, and Robert began to see the world from Susan's perspective. She was right. And he realized now that their home had been made a refuge from the rest of the world. Here neither sex nor bodily shape defined one's personality or role. But ultimately the world beyond the home dictated

their lives, and where the rest of his family could blend in, he had stood out, an alien.

Robert felt his belly. It held the raw material for a thinking, feeling being. Today he was due to meet Layton. He had little idea where this pond was in relation to the meeting place, and no intention of finding out. The robosensor had followed him, but he had destroyed it soon after leaving the pack. He would keep no more appointments with any race. He was growing something, and it was his own.

He heard them coming, and since few creatures on this planet moved in groups, he assumed it was a passing pack of tricephs. Out of idle curiosity he climbed higher among the tangles of the forest to watch unobserved. His revulsion had worn away with time and the hatching of his child, but he would not meet them. When the group came into sight, Robert clutched impulsively at his baby in its pouch. Five human beings were moving in his direction, following a robotracker. Robert recognized Layton and Johnson, but was surprised to find that he had already forgotten the names of the other three.

They had picked up his trail, and it was inevitable that they would find him. Rather than be discovered like an animal in hiding, Robert climbed down and approached them. He tried to greet them as he might a casual acquaintance on a city street. Layton spoke softly, as if to a madman. "It's all right, Robert, the experiment is over. You don't have to stay here any longer."

"I told you once before, I'm never going back."

Layton's eyes fastened on the bulge in Robert's pouch. "All right," he said quietly, "but will you stay the night with us?"

"No."

"We won't force you to come back with us. I give you my word."

"But you would like to talk me into it."

"What harm is talk? We've lost a great deal on this experiment, can't you allow us that much?"

"All right. But only for tonight." Robert wished he felt certain of that.

They made camp. There were no enemies on this planet, and a sleeping bag would have provided more than enough warmth. Yet the humans lit a heat lamp and set out a robowatch. They were of Earth, and so lacked faith. It had taken Robert a long time to get used to the darkness. And now he found the light, once again, oddly comforting.

After supper Layton sat down next to him. "So, Robert, how have you been?" It had begun.

"Healthy, happy and wise."

"Flippancy is often a cover."

"Of what, insanity?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you would like to prove it."

Layton spoke softly. "Why would I want to do that, Robert?"

"Because then you could obtain legal authority to send me back to Earth. Leaving my baby in your custody."

Layton was silent for a moment. When he spoke, it was as if to a child. "Robert, you don't have the legal rights of a human being."

Robert was stunned. Once a little boy had looked into a mirror. Had he forgotten, even here, in the depths of the Epsilon forest?

"The Alien Act provides the only law that pertains to you. And it states simply that the citizens of Earth may neither colonize nor exploit a planet inhabited by sentient aliens. It was enacted soon after our discovery of tricephs, and will last, I suspect, only as long as we can hope to learn something from our first efforts to understand an alien race."

"If I have no legal rights, why did you allow me to study anthropology?"

"If I had forbidden you to do so, would you have helped us at all?"

Robert tried to regain his composure. "Well, in any case, I'm not going back."

"Haven't you been lonely?"

"I'm not quite alone." Robert looked down at his pouch, stifling an impulse to show off his baby to Layton.

"It's newly hatched, isn't it? Hardly old enough to talk to.

Haven't you missed the pack at all?"

"I could hardly converse with the pack. And I miss no one."

"You're lying, Robert, you were never a hermit."

"I won't be alone forever."

"I see. Your offspring is to become your companion, and to hell with the rest of the universe. Is that it?"

"Something like that."

"You're going to die a good twenty years before it does. What is it going to do then, wander around all by itself? Have you ever thought about how lonely *it* might become?"

"What would you suggest?"

"I don't think we were wrong, Robert, in our assumption that this was the way to bridge the gap. We only made one mistake. You might say that we started the bridge, but we never completed it. I think it requires another generation. A triceph raised among its own kind, but with a parent who was raised among humanity."

To bridge the gap, Robert thought, but what of the bridge?

"Isn't this better, Robert, than to leave your offspring utterly alone after your death?"

The robowatch was designed not to alarm the members of the camp against themselves. With legs made for a peculiar forest, Robert left the camp in silence. He had a decision to make, and it would be made beyond the control of humankind.

A few hours later he fell asleep by the riverbank. Like their flesh counterparts, the robotrackers could be misled by water and a confusion of scents.

When Robert awoke, Layton was standing over him. "Running out on us again?"

"How can I be running out on you? I owe you nothing."

The man had evidently come on alone, but leaving a trail, no doubt, for others to follow.

"How did you find me?"

"By robotracker. It's a little more sophisticated than the kind you're used to."

"And you only wanted to talk."

"After all the years and money put into this experiment, did

you really think we would give up on the whim of a creature?"

"Is that the imperial 'we'?"

"Robert, it wouldn't be as effective, but if we have to, we'll conduct this experiment without you. If you're willing to help, you'll have the opportunity to guide the development of your offspring; if you aren't, we take over that function. The choice is yours."

"That's very considerate of you."

"More considerate than you've been of us."

"This child is mine, Layton, and no one is going to take it from me." He wondered if the man realized the intensity of his feeling.

"Cooperate, Robert, and you can keep your child. But fight us and you'll lose. Fighting is a human prerogative, it's not in the nature of your species."

"Like speech, curiosity, intelligence, and aggressiveness?"

"That's ri—"

Robert leaped at the man. He had forgotten how heavy the child made him, and he fell short. But Layton was stunned by the inconceivable, and Robert had time to leap again. With arms to spare, he pinned him down, grabbed a rock, and knocked him unconscious. He hoped he had done no serious damage, but would not have stayed in any case. The robocontrol was in Layton's pocket; Robert brought in the sensor and destroyed it. Then he left the river.

That day he concentrated on covering his trail, circling back often to be sure no person or device was following him. He passed the place where three rivers met. There was no sign of the packs, other than the remains of a decaying structure. That night he slept in a perch well above the ground. He awoke before dawn and made his plan. The packs moved slowly. He had only to go back to the place where the rivers met, and follow their trail of decayed structures. He could cover their twelve months' journey in a day. And then? He felt incapable of thinking beyond that. But he knew he would have to see them once more before he made his decision. "We'll see," he told his child.

As he awaited the dawn, his mind moved restlessly across the

past day. Layton had been wrong. He had been aggressive, and therefore tricephs had that potential. But he had scored below average on the intelligence tests. Of course, there was as yet no indication of where he stood in relation to other tricephs; he could be a retardate or a genius. Layton had been wrong, and Jamison had been wrong. Might not the tests also have been wrong? He knew enough psychology, now, to guess how his own attitude could have influenced them. And what of feeling? Could a human feel more deeply than he, and not go insane?

Dawn touched the sky with its first cold light.

"Where are you going, Robert?" Susan asked.

For the first time since he had left the pack, he became aware of the full weight of his loneliness. He thought of the camp and its warm light, and of the home of his parents. Where was Susan now? Was she really waiting? For what, a creature who could only be a burden in her life? He dismissed the thought. And his loneliness deepened. Finally he had to admit to the irony of the truth. However much he hated Layton, he needed humankind. His baby moved, and Robert hugged his pouch, whispering softly, "When you look in the mirror, what will you see?" He pictured two suns, and the emptiness between them.

It was late the following night before he found the pack. A few tricephs awoke and moved over, leaving room for him to join the group. Exhausted, he took his place, and the creatures huddling around him made him feel warm and safe. Like the pouch? He fell asleep. And he was in a blue-grey sea, drowning. He opened his eyes. It was dawn. He stepped out of the group, and as he did so, the triceph next to him opened its eyes. It didn't move in, as they usually did when someone left, to close in the warmth. It seemed to him that the triceph was waiting. Robert looked away, dreading his decision. How far was the base camp? Three days? Was Layton badly hurt? Robert suspected that the same laws which could not protect him, could execute him. He looked back at the huddle. The gap was still open. Dawn, he thought, is the color of loneliness. With a strange feeling, deeper and more painful than anything he had ever experienced before, Robert

removed his baby from himself and placed it in the open space. Without a moment's hesitation, the triceph picked it up and placed it in its own empty pouch. Already his child seemed indistinguishable from the others.

As Robert left, he turned frequently to look back at the pack. But no one was watching him.

THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN RETICULATES

He was a scientist, not an administrator or moneyman—but what if any problem, rightly approached, could be solved by science?

Felix C. Gotschalk

Sam Leighton, Ph.D., had always thought of himself as a scientist, even though his work as a neurophysiologist was predominantly pedagogic. He was an associate professor at a medical school, safely tenured, well established in his field, and with all the overt trappings of upper-middle-class success. He could not track down any particular reasons for a certain restiveness in him, however, and he began to realize that his attitude toward nature was really rather esoteric, and that he had become enchanted by problems of limited scope. For all his intelligence, credentials, and reputation, he had begun to feel a need for some new perspectives, some broader conceptual base for his role—maybe I'm just getting old, he thought.

The restiveness persisted several days, but Sam was reluctant to talk to anyone about it. He knew that if he broached his feelings to any of his colleagues, they would probably eye him suspiciously, and say something like "Why don't you take it up with Spence, in psychiatry?"

"I'm worried about our self-destructive abilities outrunning our inhibitory controls," he finally said to Neilson, a tough-minded emergency room surgeon. Neilson was handsome and thick-necked, and something of a body narcissist. He kept the sleeves of his green smocks cut very short, emphasizing his tanned seventeen-inch biceps.

"That's for philosophers to worry about," Neilson said quickly, as if to relegate the subject immediately to an obscure niche.

"Do you identify with the role-model of the scientist?" Leighton asked.

"I used to," Neilson said, "but all that crap about objectivity, control of variables, quantification, measurement, prediction—it all summates to so much shit after a while. And I've noted that the tighter, the *better* the experiment, the smaller the subject matter area, so that many so-called good experiments have very little generalizability."

"And scientists feel provincial and jurisdictional, even about mundane data, don't you think?"

"Sure they do, you remember Anders? He turned out mountains of data for about ten years, and he acted like he was cranking out the almighty gospel truth."

"That's when he was working on little rg."

"Right, little rg—the fractional anticipatory goal response."

"I'm half-surprised you know about that," Leighton said.

"It got saturate coverage in the journals—big fucking deal—sounded very impressive, very Hullian, very algebraic. But, you know, Sam, I thought, little rg is nothing but a ghost—an elaborate model of syntactics. The only gut-level thing in the whole series was saliva drops."

"Like harnessed Pavlovian conscripts," Leighton said, encouraged that Neilson should have such insights.

"And your friend up at College Park, cradling transistor paks in the cortexes of beagles—anyway, Anders used nothing but T-mazes and electroshock in his work. His results have absolutely no generalizability." Neilson sipped his coffee and his biceps rippled. Leighton found himself flexing his own biceps, thinking its tonus fair enough for a sedentary man forty years old.

"Generalizability always brings up the problem of phylogenetic comparison," Leighton said. "You know, some strains of laboratory rats are so inbred that it's risky to generalize from one strain to a sub-strain, much less to humans."

"But don't you think Harlow's monkeys showed true cuddling needs in humans?"

"That paper was called 'The Nature of Love,' " Leighton said.

"I know, I know."

"Sorry. I all but devoured it, expecting some mountaintop profundities. I felt a little cheated reading about the monkeys clinging to burlap mother-surrogates—"

"But you believe him, don't you?"

I can't deal with the word "believe," Leighton thought; time to cut this off. He looked conspicuously at his watch and stood up. "Sorry, I just remembered something I've got to do before class. Not to dodge your question, I do think that Harlow's data have some good generalizability."

"Absolutely," Neilson said, standing and looking around the cafeteria. He seemed to bobble his deltoids, like a wrestler circling an opponent. "A good example is how women feel in an embrace. Some are cold fish and some are warm tigers—you know damn well who has been well cuddled as an infant."

Walking back to his office, Sam thought, how the hell did we get away from scientific philosophizing and into how women feel in an embrace? In the arms of a woman, one may not—one should not—think like a scientist, but this might imply that all scientists think alike. Hey, who would be the better stud, a physical chemist or a chemical physicist? He thought it would be pinnacular to know precisely, exactly, what visual-motor acts of sexual foreplay would yield optimal response in a woman, but, shit, he thought, Neilson has contaminated the orderly nature of my thoughts. I have been trained to think syllogistically, to examine chains of apparent cause-and-effect, to postulate discrete concepts in precise diction configurations: subject, verb, predicate nominative, all in a neat Aristotelian two-valued logic sequence. I am a man, therefore masculinity resides within me. I am incisive,

therefore incisiveness must inhere in me. I am a scientist, a neurophysiologist, so what does this point to? Damn it, does matter exist only in sensation? Is consciousness to be found in matter? Surely the world can be divided into mental and material categories, but then, would little e really equal little mc squared? What possible difference could there then be between physics and chemistry? Hey, I'm getting bogged down in tedious semantic impasses.

Leighton snapped out of his reverie as he entered the busy main hall. A painfully important-looking man stood by the elevator doors, his white coat heavily starched, tongue depressors showing clearly through the separated starch of his vest pocket. The man looked irritably at the elevator signals, as if they were errant children refusing to defer to him. He held a patient chart in one hand and a small tube of urine in the other. Leighton's robust twenty-year-old son would have laughed at a man carrying piss in a bottle. Two bearded faculty members walked by, nodding rather affectedly, Leighton thought, their white smocks hanging below their knees. Why do we scientists wear long white robes, he thought. And there were surgeons in green smocks and frampled rubber-soled shoes, tiny green skullcaps, tie-strings askew, face masks around their throats. And lots of bow ties—why the hell do so many physicians wear bow ties? and many nonmedical doctors too, here in this med school? He remembered Dr. Gately at SMU otolaryngology. She was a stiff old bitch who wore incredibly stiff white smocks, two or three credential pins on her lapels, and had a wooden tongue depressor showing in her civvies at the goddamn Christmas party! Leighton found out, after five years of working near Gately, that she had an Ed.D. in speech therapy. She played the doctor role to the hilt. Was she a scientist? She acted like a god.

Sam was slipping back into basic reverie. Hey, Eureka! he thought, scientific experiments are fetishes! little rg is reified and deified! Anders simply made himself an idol, he plain invented the whole idea, and aside from verbalization and calligraphy, there is no such thing as the fractional-fucking-anticipatory-goal-response! But Dr. Anders can take the concept and stroke it,

polish it, fondle it, tighten it up, plane it, use pumice, sanding sealer, intellective varnish, wax, safecracker finger-pads on the beautiful flow of variables—wow! what spurious shit! And, as a neurophysiologist, *I* am concerned with the *waking brain.* My measurement indices are neurons and neuronal systems. Oh, Descartes, where is the antidote to thy sting? you have deified the pineal and made the body-temple an automaton of hydraulic channels! And Newton, so early in seeing macrocosm and microcosm, how could you propose that neuronal transmissions were accomplished through cosmic aethers!

The flow of people grew quite secondary to Leighton's thoughts. I am a *doctor,* he subvocalized—what a magical pronouncement! I am a scientist, a Ph.D., scholar, academician, perhaps a dry pedant, perhaps a sifter of convoluted flecks of nit! I am humanoid: skin, fat, muscles, bone, organs, tissue, molecules, atoms, protons, neutrons, electrons, neutrinos—I am infinitely regressive. Galaxies whirl in my viscera, and I may be whirling in a galaxy in somebody else's viscera. And, at the very bottom of the regress, Leighton thought, smiling reflexively at a favorite student, is IONIZATION: specific neurochemical (facilitatory or inhibitory) transmitter substances. But, he thought, this is just jargon. For all I know, there may be dominoes falling against each other in there—

"Is there anything wrong, Sam?" Brenda asked. She had been his secretary for ten years, called him Dr. Leighton at the right times, and knew him better than his wife did. Sam closed the door absentmindedly, and realized that he had not sought routine eye contact with Brenda. "No, baby," he said, then looked around the room, realizing he should be more careful what he called her. They had had liaisons over the years, but knew their lives were too canalized to justify marrying each other.

"You've got something on your mind," she said.

"Just some ruminating. I want to go make some notes on it before it slips my mind."

"Dean Guglielmo called."

"What did he want?"

"Sounded testy, he—"

"That's the Corsican in him."

"He's calling a meeting of some sort, but he said he'd pop by to see you."

Sam walked into his office and sat down. He could rarely sit in the rich black leather chair without remembering Brenda standing there so many years ago, bending to kiss his cheek tentatively, then sliding onto his lap, an exquisite blend of flower and panther. Half his age, she had fulfilled his incest tropisms, as he had hers. It was natural enough to think about sex, but frontal lobe cathexis on it was the quickest way to bring on detumescence. Sex is surely hydraulic, Leighton thought, and began to write.

I am a scientist, he wrote slowly, am I therefore mechanistic in my devotion? Are my own thoughts and feelings amenable to the energy concept? Matter is primary, primary, primary—come quickly, ghost of Pavlov, show me how to objectify mental processes. Lower your cortical mantle on my bowed head, and I will rise, neuronally knighted and anointed, to mediate new and raging hypothalamic amperages, and to relate as a supreme diplomat to all men. If the pineal is an energy cell, Descartes, then issue me one with high kilovolt-ampere rating, a surging nuclear powerpak homology—then, what the hell, Sam thought, nearly every concept in neurophysiology has been revised in the last decade—or have we simply invented new verbal models, new jargonese, new bows and wows? How many years did I preach the "all or nothing" principle of neuronal excitation before *graded responses* were discovered? I was dispensing erroneous information. How many of my students have committed professional blunders because of this—ha, that's the enigma, the kicker, almost a sad joke, because it doesn't matter anyway. Life seems to be idiot-proof. Remission rates hover around chance levels no matter what. Neuron membranes are not uniform throughout—how the hell could a limenal stimulus set off a full-sized action? You don't light a segmented fuse and get steady combustion. If I were a jellyfish I'd need all-or-nothing systems, but I am a man, I am a scientist, and I am graded, gradated, infinitely plastic, and, damn it all, I'm beginning to stew and fret in my own circular pondering again—

"Brenda," Sam spoke into the phone.

"Yessir."
"Who's out there?"
"Dean Guglielmo is here."
"Send him right in."
"He's on his way," Brenda said in a tight whisper.

Dr. Victor Guglielmo was about fifty years old, short, dark, ethnically stereotyped. With any caprice of time-warp, he might have remained in Corsica, married a lovely dark beauty, and watched her body-weight double in five years. Instead, he had come to the big city, where his father became a nationally known piano builder and voicer. Young Vic was all but coerced through med school. He tried pediatrics for a while, but found that he had a disquietingly active dislike for children. He took psychiatry boards, and discovered that he didn't like adults much better. He began to gravitate toward administration, showed some good abilities in this fuzzy area, and had developed a reputation as a fiscal planning wizard.

"We've got to do some belt tightening, Sam," he said, sitting heavily in a chair. He crossed his legs and looked steadily at Leighton.

"Any big crises?" Sam asked, not in the least certain why Guglielmo was here.

"We've had a forty-two percent cost overrun on the new patient wing—keep this under your hat—I'm afraid to leak it, the young lion administrators want my job bad enough to nail me to any wall. All departments are going to have to generate more fees. I want you and your staff to start doing neurologicals."

"You can't mean routine neurological exams—on patients?"

"I'm afraid I do."

"But I'm not a physician, Vic."

"Neither are most of the people who do neurologicals. Most of ours are done by senior students, interns, residents; it's pretty tame stuff." Guglielmo looked uneasy, but held onto a controlled gruffness. Sam felt vulnerable, and could feel autonomic mechanisms seeping endocrine fires in his viscera.

"This is bound to get out, Vic. I'm a teacher, a scientist, not

a practitioner. And you know I can't sign insurance forms for medical services."

"Just sign M.D. instead of Ph.D."

"I hope I'm hearing you wrong, Vic. What you're asking is impossible."

"Sam, if I didn't have a hundred-thousand-dollar home, four cars, a boat, three kids in college, and a wife who spends money like it was water—and if I could scrape up a few thousand cash, I think I'd blast off for South America."

"Things are that bad?"

"The bank is barely holding on. We're into them for something like eight million. It's a good thing the president of the bank is also chairman of our board of regents."

"But we've got a five-hundred-bed hospital here, man. That much room and board alone must bring in a hundred thousand every day. How could we possibly be in fiscal troubles?"

"Too much money on the books, not enough cash flow, mountains of paperwork required to collect small insurance fees, the goddamn forty-two percent overrun—"

"My ethical senses tell me medicine may not be practiced as an entrepreneurial venture. You sound like we're running some kind of business here."

"Hell, Sam, that's just what I'm trying to do. Listen, I've called off the meeting for today, but some bombshells are in the offing. We're in line for some really fat, all but pork-barrel HEW monies, but it has to be spent on *patient contact*—in other words, direct, soap-and-water-level stuff. Bluntly put, all of us are going to have to start thinking like businessmen, and start seeing more patients."

"But I'm a scientist."

"Well, then, come up with a scientific solution to the problem. We've got a three-million-dollar payroll to meet in four days, and the projected overdraw is one million. We court HEW or we court the bank." "Courting disaster" flickered through both men's minds.

"Get a logician, or an actuary," Sam said. "Hell, you're the fiscal wizard around here, not me." Guglielmo stood and wiped

his face. Sam could not help but think that he probably sweated olive oil.

"You're my oldest friend, Sam. We've seen lean times and good times here. Help me figure this out if you can."

"Hell, man, what do I know about finances?"

"Just think on it. Brainstorm it. Ask me anything you like. Take any approach you like—take a scientific approach, a parascientific one, supra—anything you like—and keep all this under your hat, for Chrissakes."

Leighton sank deep into a chaise and looked out the window at the lawn behind his low sprawling house. The Bermuda grass was as thick as rug matting, and the setting sun lit up the groves of trees in unusually bright shades of green. The stereo purred out unobtrusive Muzak, and a liver-colored Weimaraner dozed on the floor beside Sam. If I am a scientist, he thought, am I thereby able to know all things? Are matters of high finance amenable to scientific inquiry? Poor Vic, he must feel low indeed. He can't use his cord, medulla, and pons to figure this out; and he doesn't need any Rolandic fissures, it's all praefrontal, prefrontal—ah, the frontal lobe—the acme of evolution! But belay that—a specimen of raw occipital lobe would be morphologically like the hallowed frontal. The beam, the stern, looks just like the prow. The simplest functions of the brain are stereotyped and imperious—but, *but,* he thought, it is the highest cognitive levels that are most susceptible to deleterious effects—the old Jacksonian doctrine of levels. Would not this highest level be most susceptible to psychomimetic enervation—hey, would overloading the reticulates with stimulants constitute a genuine electrochemical brainstorm? Some well-known psychologist wanted political leaders to take nonaggression pills—I wonder if amphetamines would work as a temporary smart pill? His thinking raced ahead—keep manicky patients down with Vals and Thors, nudge the sluggish ones up with Ellies and Rits—weak as I am on my pharmacology, why not expand cognition with stimulants? He pictured half a dozen key faculty people around a table, the security level in the room tighter than an Interpol summit,

and the flow of verbalization stupendously cumulative, collative, correlative, exponential—tours de force a dime a dozen. He pictured the men glowing, neocortical mantles giving off visible halos, ions racing through neurons under exquisite pressure, 600 mgs of intellectual irritants fueling the meeting. Hell, the planet's business could flow through such minds easily; it would be like robots stacking bullion. Surely a conclave of scientists could solve something as mundane as an overdrawn payroll account—or could they?

Surely this is a matter of linear, cause-and-effect sequences, Sam continued his silent brainstorm; we could tackle it at a statics and mechanics level. If that wouldn't do it, on to probability theory and quantum mechanics; and, if it's any tougher, we'll do a Drucker calculus of potential, and whatever else we need—who knows what might come out of supercharged psychomimetic thought engrams?

He poured himself a small vial of tequila and drained it. No stimulant there, he laughed to himself. He put the stereo headphones on and disconnected the plug. He blindfolded himself with a handkerchief, switched on a recorder. "I have just ingested enough alcohol to produce some perceptible electrotonic synchrony. A shot of strychnine would put me under for good, after producing some highly abnormal neuronal discharges. Nicotine would alter the synchrony—shit, I want to think in multifactorial-transactional ways, so language is a problem. I cannot do other than speak linearly—I'm no eight-track speaker—I must produce subject-verb-predicate sequences. I have to talk and write in stimulus-response paradigms. But would I be able to think multilinearly? Christ, is cranial wattage a simple, one-shot circuit? There's got to be a way to skirt the limitations of Aristotelian logic—Korzybski, you nutty, saintly genius, we need you here! Stimuli go and responses come, afferent-efferent, input-output, chaining, chaining, chaining, lineal, lineal—hey, I'm no *tabula rasa,* I've got intricate microanatomical connections, dynamic microscopic electrotonic field forces . . . I'm dozing . . . let's see, one point seven million afferent neurons entering the central neuraxis, and two-thirds of them are for the optic nerve . . . ten billion

in the entire central nervous system—talk about macrocosms! So, how many variables do I get to control, two? four? nineteen? none? . . . lights! camera! psychomimetic action! I knew I'd fall asleep. . . ."

Leighton awoke, slobbering on his tie, a crick in his neck. The sun had set and the fat orange cat was at the window. The recorder had cut itself off, and the tiny microphone lay in Leighton's lap. He stirred, and found the brief neck pain excruciating. It's easy to say my neck hurts, he thought, but just what the hell is pain anyway? Malaise, stitch-in-the-side pain, pain-with-a-thousand-teeth, lancinate, kill by inches, a reverse-barb shaft thrust transversely into the hydraulic neuronal duct?

He began to concentrate again, a kind of free association, clearly and purposefully introspective. He recalled William James writing, "I am a psychologist, and my method is introspection." "I am *cerebral,*" Leighton spoke again into the mike. "I am proprioceptive, my life is in my genitals about once a week, and my frontal lobes get obliterated in orgasm, but I am basically cerebral. My brain is in a hard bony box, supported by fibrous meningeal coverings and partitions, buoyed up by cerebrospinal fluid, and magically separated from the bloodstream—what a competent homeostasis! I wear a beautiful cortical mantle. Mass actions are for salamanders—I am infinitely individuated—am I not neurobiotaxic? If so, I need almost no neurons. I am lost, deliciously lost, in a *de facto* neuronal macrocosm, yet my nerve cells are biologic computers, synthesizing tremendous amounts of conflicting information, and delivering unambiguous outputs. And, by Christ, I may have to talk and write linearly, but my thinking is global: three-d, four-d, five-d, sum of big X in dimensions. I've got cascading force-fields, yes, even the holy, cosmic, Newtonian aethers, expanding reticular blastulae, topologic edifices, and clusters of exponential spears racing outward in all azimuths, like an exploding air-rocket, orange against a black sky—"

He snapped off the recorder and slapped his thigh. The dog started, then lowered its muzzle back to the floor. Enough idea-

tional masturbation, Sam thought, walking up a shallow stylobate into the main hall of the house, what I need is a little incubation time—a nice long refractory period, say eight hours. The dog wagged its tail and headed for a favorite sofa. Time to reduce my mental rpm's, Sam thought, I don't want to go anywhere near the red line. Upshifts at three thousand for the rest of the night. No downshifts, all meshes silent and synchronized. He undressed and splashed his face with cold water. Drying his face slowly, repeatedly, with a huge towel, he let himself begin to wind down to lethargy. Maybe I can get another fifty-two-beat heart count tonight, he thought. *And,* he thought decisively, I'll do the psychomimetic bit and brainstorm the hospital's fiscal crisis alone. I'll be the man with the golden reticulates.

Leighton walked into his office bathroom at eight fifteen A.M. the next day and took a hundred milligrams of methylphenidate hydrochloride, five pale orange tablets. He predicted that he would be bristling at the nine A.M. meeting with Guglielmo, supra-alert, cranial wattage sizzling, ready to take on anything. If things get out of hand, there's always the good old stomach pump and the emergency room, he thought, remembering a friend who was on eighty milligrams mood elevator dosage daily, yet still moped around narcoleptically. The man with the golden reticular network, he thought, that's what I'm going to be—hell, this is a little like Jekyll and Hyde. He decided to dodge Brenda and go on to Guglielmo's office early.

At nine seven A.M., Leighton felt the first signs: a dryness of the soft palate, a vague auditory hissing, barely above limen, and glimmerings of increased intracranial pressure. His pupils contracted, and his fingers and toes felt a bit cold. His blood pressure remained normal.

"I've given the fiscal problem a lot of thought, Vic," he said slowly, knowing he should pace himself, do some coasting-type biofeedbacks. "I hope we can thrash it out."

"It's got me whipped," Guglielmo said. "I think I put too much faith in the Price Waterhouse man. He came on like a twenty-four-karat expert."

"He did the major audit?"

"Yes." Deep in Leighton's brain, classically reductionistic extirpation would have shown atomic shiftings of both sodium and chlorine. At the molecular level, catalytic iron activity increased. Enzymic regulators quivered in their nests, relays itching to be tripped, and a kind of vitaminic asymptote began to build.

"The P-W man is a hanger-on, right?" Sam asked, "put in by the old dean?"

"Right."

"Dump him, today." Amino acids simmered in labial invaginations, then the d-glutamics and l-prolines flickered and surged. Synaptic junctures flared with the hot proline. Sam glanced at his watch: nine fifteen—eight fifteen in Bayou Dularge, he thought, seven fifteen in Socorro, and six fifteen in San Diego. The shadow of the sun is moving at four hundred mph, the equatorial circumference of the planet is twenty-five thousand miles, the spinning speed is point three miles per second, the orbital velocity is—

"I can't dump old McClain," Guglielmo said.

"He's an alcoholic, a gambler, and he's always on the golf course. Get Weisner in here, he's deadly on the fiscal polemics." Guglielmo had the Stenorette purring, but he wrote down: DUMP MCCLAIN—CALL WEISNER.

"Did McClain use cash flow or accrual amounts in figuring the deficits?"

"Cash flow."

"Accrual figures are the basis for determining total capitalization?"

"Right."

"Then demand accrual methods in all your accounting operations."

"Miss Davis won't like that."

"She's been in accounting since about nineteen two, hasn't she?"

"Damn near."

"Well, retire her, minimize her, neutralize her—make her a vice-president in charge of research or something." Guglielmo made another note on his pad: SHIFT DAVIS—SWITCH TO ACCRUAL.

"How would the deficit have read using accrual figures?" Sam asked.

"I remember that, because it was at chance levels. With a twenty-seven percent overhead factor, the sampling error was forty-two percent."

"Equal to the cost overrun in the new building." Sam said it as if he were a computer. Specialized cells drew in supercharged energy, compression ratios edged near spontaneous combustion levels, violent little detonational novas flared, metaboles glowed, cindered, dispersed. Vic looked at the Stenorette, as if to make sure all this was getting recorded. He wrote: MCCLAIN'S SAMPLING ERROR = THE COST OVERRUN. He wanted to leave for the bank at that moment.

Leighton began to feel that he could select and modify sensory messages in the earliest stages of their trajectory. Prima-facie signals got cathected monitoring. He felt a marvelous cognitive economy. He reeled off information, corrected Guglielmo's teleological jumps, crystallized fuzzy diction patterns into cogent packs, extrapolated data, wrenched out redundancies, set fresh contexts, and talked a kind of clarificatory metalanguage.

At twelve twenty P.M., Guglielmo's notes read:

1. DUMP MCCLAIN—CALL WEISNER
2. SHIFT DAVIS—SWITCH TO ACCRUAL
3. MCCLAIN'S SAMPLING ERROR = THE COST OVERRUN
4. PAYROLL OVERDRAW SPURIOUS
5. RADIOLOGY CAN BE MODIFIED TO SHOW 4000% PROFIT
6. PHARMACY CAN SHOW 900% PROFIT
7. RE-DO THE T.O. IN PENCIL, AND IN MANDALA FORM
8. REDUCE PURCHASING DEPARTMENT STAFF
9. ELIMINATE PAYROLL CHECKS—PUT VOUCHERS DIRECT IN BANK
10. ABOLISH PUBLIC RELATIONS (FIRE THE OLD DEAN'S SON-IN-LAW)
11. SAVE 27 THOU BY *not* REVISING THE PERSONNEL POLICY HANDBOOK
12. PUT THE LEAR JET IN COSMOLINE AND MOTHBALLS
13. WATCH NEPOTISM IN THE SECRETARIAL POOL (OF ALL PLACES!)
14. THE FEWER STAFF MEETINGS THE BETTER
15. GET AT LEAST ONE NEW, YOUNG, EAGER LAWYER

16. MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS ARE DISASTERS
17. HARRIS IS A BARRACUDA—DUMP HER
18. DAVIS IS CHARACTEROLOGICALLY DISTURBED—MOVE HIM
19. REDUCE BOARD OF REGENTS BY HALF
20. PHONE BILL IS 28% HIGH ($7000 MONTHLY LOSS)
21. DRUCKER IS WORTH HIS $2000 DAILY FEE
22. BUCKY FULLER IS WORTH $5000 A DAY
23. BANKS ARE MERELY BOOKKEEPERS
24. MONEY IS A WAY OF STORING AND UTILIZING ENERGY
25. THE ENDS ARE IMPLICIT IN THE MEANS
26. JESUS H CHRIST—WHAT'S GOT INTO SAM?

Leighton sat low in the big leather chair. He looked at a wall photo of one of Vic's antique cars, all brass and mohair and rosewood, double-cowled, nineteen-inch Denmans, Claxtons, Trippe lights, porcelain valve covers. He saw chamois lint on the fender, layers of wax, layers of blue paint, primer, sanded metal, washed, scoured, rubbed. His limbic system spread a mantle of diminution over the septal, hippocampal, and cingulate regions. Mind and matter, he thought, a dichotomy from four hundred B.C., where is my soul—my rational soul? Perhaps I have made a hundred-milligram epiphenomenon here today; but also something incorporeal, not something in visual space, but in *virtual* space. Whatever we know without inference is mental. I am a scientist, but my dualism fosters professional, intellectual, and conceptual isolation. I hope my neocortex is built into my chassis—

"You've been a top-flight logician, Sam, I feel a little awed." Vic looked somehow relieved and concerned at the same moment. "In fact, I feel like sprinting over to the bank."

"Good, good," Sam said, "but listen now, don't divert any of your mental energies to debunking me. I'm not after you or your job. I'll do everything I can to make you look good."

"I appreciate that, Sam. The sociometry—the medico-executive chess game around here is cutthroat enough."

"You could do with a little charisma, too," Sam said.

"I know—nobody loves a swarthy Corsican."

"Shave your head, man, grow a Van Dyke, stop wearing floppy

polka-dot bow ties, and get rid of your puce-colored Electra 225."

"Thanks for the advice, but I think I'm too much of an old ethnic dog to learn that many new tricks—want to go to lunch?"

"No, I'm not the least bit hungry. If you don't mind, I'll sit here a few more minutes and unwind—I've been high this morning."

"You've been superhuman—are you okay?"

"Just crackling at the synapses, I'll wind down."

"Stay as long as you like," Vic said, reaching for his coat, "see you after lunch."

Sam closed his eyes. It was one P.M. Avocado-green auroras shimmered across his proximal field. He tried for distal focus, feeling his eyes relax deliciously, somesthetically. I think I am a scientist, he said to himself, my brain shapes my perceptions as well as my comportment. I wait for teleological mechanisms to work it out. I am the exponential arrowhead, flirting with holistic field-forces, bogs of ambiguity and conceptual artifice—mind-brain, brain-mind, gossamer and lead monolith. Mind is an illusion—the hell it is! Sam felt the best of the enervation, as well as some good quiescence biofeedback. The concept of the mind is anthropomorphic, he thought. Ideas, not things, rule mankind. I am a scientist, but I am fundamentally and immeasurably ignorant. The dimensions of my field overwhelm me. Outside experience is not the whole, internal reality is beautiful, thermal and Heisenberg indeterminacies notwithstanding. Science is just an artifactually ordered way to think. I wonder how artists think . . . I wonder if Vic has gone to get the money . . . sure he has.

THE STEEL SONNETS

They were robots invading an unknown planet,
in the service of an unseen master: but stones
can be an enemy, and even steel can bleed.

Jeff Duntemann

Launce, the guard probe, came out of the shuttle first. He drove his brick-shaped body to the edge of the blast area and looked around. As he paused there, the contact probe, Speed, shot him six sonnets.

"Nonsense again. Stop sending me nonsense and I might have more to say."

Speed's glistening vision-dome appeared at the door of the shuttle. "It's not nonsense. Every word I used is legitimate. If you can't define one, ask Proteus. He has them all."

"So do I. But tell me, what is a 'keg of fluid moonlight flashing fair'?"

A burst came from Proteus, the father-computer in orbit: *Continue as outlined.*

The probes obeyed, Launce's perplexed question forgotten. Speed, a fat cone rounded at the bottom, stepped carefully down the ramp on his four spider-legs. When he touched the blackened soil he uttered a cry which Speed had once before called *delight;*

Launce did not pretend to understand. It was all part of the specialized programming which made Speed so special and valuable on this, his first assignment. Launce, bigger than Speed by half, old, experienced, and proven, did not have this special programming. He had been altered by the Combine to handle denotative words and language so that he could act as companion and cater to Speed's curious needs.

Recent news releases from the Combine (which were available in Proteus) called the new programming an "artificial human soul." Launce understood the word "soul" to mean the human programming. If Speed had been programmed to act and react as a human being would, Launce expected him to be beyond understanding at least eighty percent of the time.

Proteus set up a map of that area inside them, and outlined their progress across the land on a thin red line as two crawling stars. The two probes began rolling and walking toward the range of glacial moraines which began something less than two miles away. Beyond them lay the settlement which was the object of the contact mission.

Speed began to bubble. "Look at this day. The richness of the color in the grass! The beautiful balance of the vegetable ecology! Look, Launce, an animal!"

Fifty meters distant, a crocodile-headed carrot shape pumped its way through the scaly grass on four muscular jointed legs.

"I've been watching it for three minutes. I would say it's terrified of us."

"*Tsk.*" The inarticulate expression came through to Launce coated with the indigestible sticky stuff which always seemed to rise from the strange new programming. Launce ignored it.

"I'm excited. Aren't you?"

More sticky words. Launce tried to sort them out. "Haven't got the programming. Excitement means a heightening of mental activity. Mine is as high as it can go."

"I only wish you could feel what I'm feeling."

"Haven't got the programming."

"I have some more sonnets. Will you hear them?"

"I'm listening."

Tractor-treaded Launce trundled ahead, flattening a path in the brittle grass while Speed stalked along behind. All the time he kept bubbling over with words that made no sense to Launce.

Most of Launce's attention was bent to the problems of the environment and Speed's protection. The scaly grass, even when flattened out, tended to catch on Speed's delicate footpads. Twice Launce extended his powerful number four cutting arm and sliced a path through the tangles of scaled bushes. "This vegetation is tougher than Proteus predicted. If consolidating this world takes any length of time, I'm going to lay an epoxy pavement over this path."

"Proteus says my sonnets are excellent. Don't you think so?"

"I can't tell one from another."

"You're being cruel."

"Haven't got the programming."

The land arose around them, and contorted from a smooth, lake-dotted glacial plain into wind- and water-gouged hills fringed by patches of grass and bush. Launce kept a certain fraction of his attention on the dwindling tower of the shuttle, squatting in the valley they were leaving behind. He was following Proteus' internal map, and remembering the landscape and its relation to the shuttle as he passed, so that the return trip could be made more quickly and with less concentration. All the while he had grown aware that the feeling of Proteus inside him had been growing fainter by increments. It would be soon . . .

Snap! The relays turned over. Proteus had gone behind the planet. Instantly the big repeater in the shuttle took over, relaying the father-computer's presence through its superior receiving instruments and amplifiers. The world revolved about its axis very slowly, and a synchronous orbit would place Proteus five light-seconds away from his two probes. That was far beyond the safety factor dictated by the Combine. So Proteus had taken up a closer orbit, and the repeater was activated automatically for fifty minutes out of each orbit.

Speed had stopped his flow of nonsense when the repeater had kicked in. "It's an odd feeling when Proteus goes into the relays. For that briefest of instants he's *gone.*"

"Only for two microseconds. That's not enough time to be significant."

"Yes, but feel the emptiness. The solitude, the isolation . . . it's what the word 'loneliness' means."

"Haven't got the programming."

They continued to follow Proteus' path between the hills. On all sides of them lichen-rotted boulders jutted from the ground, and between the roots of the grass and twisting weeds were round-rubbed pebbles. The great glacier had receded only nine thousand years before, and the glacial character of the land was everywhere evident.

In the direction of their progress a small river tumbled from rock to stone to boulder at the bottom of a gaping rent in the largest moraine. It was the only way which the probes could safely navigate into the higher land of the moraines. Launce was climbing between the hugest boulders, shoving aside the smaller rocks with his forward ram. Speed, for all his fragility, was having an easier time. His four spider-legs could hoist his conical body high over the rocks. Proteus disapproved of such acrobatics on the part of the expensive contact probe, and filled him now and then with strange words distorted almost beyond Launce's recognition with the stuff of the new programming: *Danger. Hardness. Insecurity. Pain.* Speed followed Launce's path and tested each foothold before placing his full weight upon it.

Water rushed and whispered past green-stained stones before them. The early orbiting probes in scouting the planet had noted that the stream was seasonal; it was now at its lowest, barely more than a trickle, at times sinking beneath the jumbled stones and vanishing. Water was no hazard to the probes. Proteus liked the stream bed as a path. Winter freezings had rent the large boulders into flat and tilting shards, most of which had found their own level and were no longer a hazard. Launce entered the roistering water and rolled heedlessly upstream. Speed gingerly settled his pads in the wet and followed.

Only once was the lay of the rocks declared by relay from Proteus to be too hazardous for Speed to pass. Launce spent a half-hour rearranging them until all had settled into a stable

position. His protruding ram and most of his six stubby arms were glistening with water and slick with green scum and grey mud when he received Proteus' confident word that all was safe. The probes continued upstream, testing, stepping, observing.

The gash in the moraine narrowed as they ascended. At its narrowest the walls were extremely steep, and Launce regarded the boulders comprising the rock pile with great suspicion. All were at rest now and would probably remain so; instabilities among the rocks must have settled themselves out many centuries before. But Proteus was filling Launce with caution as well, although in him it was the quicker, more mathematical caution which measured center of gravity and estimated stability among the rocks. Speed was new, and incredibly expensive to the Combine. They would have risked ten like Launce to protect him. The shuttle, holding only two probes at a time, was the bottleneck, and the cost of larger shuttles went far beyond the budget allotted for the consolidation of a new planet. The Combine was taking a risk in thrusting Speed into an unknown environment, and counted on the experienced caution of Proteus and Launce to protect their investment.

The ravine was at its narrowest when Speed's endless sonnets were slashed by emptiness and fuzzy non-word data which Launce could not assimilate.

"I could not comprehend that burst. Use words."

"I just spotted the watchtowers! The work of an alien hand!"

"Were you trying to tell me something a moment ago?"

"You were just feeling my surprise. My first sight of the unknown minds we were sent to deal with! I am excited."

"Haven't got the programming. I have had a visual line on the watchtowers for several minutes."

"Killjoy!"

Far above them, on either side of the narrow gorge, two spindly wooden structures hunched against the rocks. Each was a pointed cylinder of logs, thatched with grass and tree fronds. Each was pierced with a small opening facing the valley. Proteus suspected their purpose was to warn the nearby village against approach by carnivore packs or hostile beings from other areas.

Launce's infrared eyes found no betraying blur of life in either.

"No one there." Launce increased the gain on his eyes. "No. No living thing is in those towers."

Speed had begun bubbling again. "I can't wait. I tell you, Launce, I can't wait! To have something—someone—to reach for, beyond the fetters of words and miserable, ever-changing conventions of language! To bend and mold the great universal life-myths in my hands and pound them into bridges of communication between two races linked only by the common bridge of life! I will be of use. Imagine, Launce, I will be of use!"

"Haven't got the programming."

Launce heard Proteus beam to Speed words of encouragement heavy with the data of the new programming. It seemed to put the contact probe more at ease. Launce was satisfied. What Speed had been created to do, he understood. He was to communicate with the natives without resorting to the near-impossible method of language exchange. What those new methods were, Launce could not begin to understand. His programming only went as far as protecting Speed's welfare. Anything beyond that he left to Proteus.

Beyond the towers the cleft widened and began to merge with the hilly unevenness of the surrounding land behind the moraine. The stream was now a mountain brook running over stone but rimmed by vegetation and grey sand. Along one side a path began to distinguish itself from the grass. Soon it became a trail, and at Proteus' suggestion Launce veered out of the water to follow it.

The two probes faithfully followed the comings and goings of the map inside them. The main trail led to the village, and by their position on the map the probes knew it was very near.

The village entered Launce's senses as a vague blur of infrared. Proteus instructed them to slow their progress and make as few alarming noises as possible. Minutes later Launce began picking up hidden beings on infrared among the rocks and grasses. They slowed still more.

"I had wondered about fear," Speed said. "I've triggered the feeling a thousand times, and always it seemed false somehow.

Fear rises out of the unknown, and until now Proteus has known everything."

"Just because some programming is seldom used doesn't make it invalid or irrelevant."

Speed's reply was delayed by a handful of microseconds. "I forget, you don't know how to doubt."

The village, when it came in sight, was little different from hundreds of such villages confronted by probes of the Combine on worlds scattered across the galaxy. Eighteen low, broad log-frame thatched huts stood in two concentric circles around beaten earth. An elaborate fire-housing, surrounded by icons and fired clay pots, oozed smoke and infrared at the center of the circle. Launce noticed that bleached, bulbous skulls were hung over the wide doorways of the huts.

Proteus was an overpowering pressure inside them, ordering Speed to begin as soon as the creatures made themselves known. Speed was filling Launce with undecipherable fuzzy lumpish data, all connected with the new programming. It was more of that "excitement." It was mixed with that "fear." There was another feeling present, entwined with the others. Speed called it "joy," a sparkly thing. Joy was that which a system felt on the brink of imminent fulfillment.

Everywhere around them smears of infrared life began to move. Seconds later one of the closest left its hiding place in a patch of brush and leaped onto the trail a few meters in front of them.

"Launce, I can begin, I can begin!"

The being was a squat quadruped with a long neck and a skull bulging over two tiny eyes. Two slender prehensile arms were curled beneath the base of the neck. All over the creature's body hung copper ornaments and iron knives. It threw a grey powder to the ground in front of it, raised a bifurcated snout, and began to howl in two different tonal ranges.

Launce stood by, at hair-trigger readiness to prevent an attack. The creature stood in its place and continued howling. Speed, boiling over with the sonnet-concept "joy," set his machinery to work. He superimposed the native's potato-shaped body on a

three-dimensional grid, and his thousands of tiny electromagnetic spot-sensors began to map all electrical activity in the alien's system. Each time the heart beat, a tiny discharge flashed across muscle tissue; that flash was recorded on the growing image. Each time a neuron carried a message across a synapse, the infinitesimal transfer of electrons was recorded. Each recorded datum clarified the positions and relations of several others. Building in reverse avalanche fashion, the electrical picture of the whole creature took form in seconds.

"I'm getting an alpha rhythm . . . no, two . . . joy, joy! Beta coming through, I think . . . three others, not sure . . . parallel to the Beckwith anomaly . . . everything in twos. The brain-halves are more nearly independent than in humanity . . . separate entities . . . like two beings in one, perpetually battling . . . strange evolution . . . feel the joy, Launce!"

"Haven't got the programming."

Proteus ordered Launce to cease any transmission which might interfere with Speed's delicate task.

Speed, aided by Proteus' massive memory, began to draw comparisons. He had the creature's body rhythms and brain rhythms mapped with great precision. He dove spinning through the creature's mental webs, touching here and there, observing and comparing and tracing interactions between strange neurons arranged in patterns set down by an evolution far removed from that of any intelligent life in the Combine. Slowly, haltingly, gleaned from millions of miles of wanderings and comparisons on the glittering internal map, the creature's mythic consciousness began to emerge on a second map beside the first.

"Hunters . . . vicious killers, revel in blood . . . sacrifice . . . war . . . destruction . . . echoes of humanity . . . strongly territorial . . ."

Launce remained motionless, silencing all but the most necessary of his functions so as not to interfere with the tenuous rapport Speed held with the creature.

Watching the ebb and flow of thought-emotion patterns within the tenuous context of the alien mythic consciousness, Speed began to understand some of what the creature was feeling.

Fear . . . puzzlement . . . contradiction . . . frustration . . . (panic?) . . . Speed poured lumps of data into Launce's unprotesting consciousness.

"Words, Speed?"

No emissions, Launce!

"Hear how he howls. Deep things are stirring. I see patterns of creation, of destruction and destiny. The great life-myth comes clearly to the fore, again and again, bathed in golden light and blood. The creatures claw and rip their way upward on creation's ladder, putting all beneath them by force and destruction. To ascend . . . to conquer . . . to destroy . . . to reign. Launce, it makes me afraid!"

The other probe did not reply.

"But that . . . that is only the backdrop to the present conflict . . . *we* are there, Launce . . . how strange to see ourselves interpreted by a primitive and alien mind! I hear the myth-call, the proclamation . . . why this? Launce, this cannot be! It should not be . . . but yes! The myth of Armageddon, the call to chaos. Their whole cultural belief . . . call it religion . . . is shattered. This creature is a shaman, a priest . . . all is swept away, he howls . . . and we are in that mirror of chaos . . . *we* . . . and the shaman has decreed that the universe must end for his people, who have heretofore put all creation beneath them . . . *because we . . . are greater than they!*"

The potato-shaped creature grasped an iron knife and drove it deep into the side of its skull through the ear. Speed watched the map of the creature explode inside, echo pain up and down a million miles of neurons, and slowly fade to eternal quiescence.

The shaman had sunk to the ground between its four multijointed legs.

Proteus said with cold authority that he judged it a Situation Eight. Other methods of contact would have to be considered. The probes were to return to the shuttle at once.

Other aliens had begun howling, running madly about the area. Launce readied himself for close defense of Speed and began to trundle back toward the stream. Speed put his sensitive machineries to rest and followed.

Disappointment, failure, frustration.

"Use words, Speed," Launce said.

"Words! What good are words? Words are a fallacy, a sham set up by one intelligent being to bilk and confuse another. Words mean whatever the creature using them wishes to mean, true or false. Give me a mythic consciousness, and I will tell you what a creature really means."

"All I have are words."

Speed said nothing in reply.

Launce plunged into the shallow water, Speed high-stepping close behind. Inside them Proteus showed them every safe rock, every stable pile which could be stepped on without testing. Retracing their path and re-using every step, the probes rapidly made their way through the cleft in the moraine.

Spider-like, the natives scampered on either side of the stream, dancing on the boulders and howling. Launce remained aware of them, watched for any sign of attack. Stones chattered beneath his treads and the scrape of rock on metal echoed in the ravine. Every so often one of them would repeat the action of the shaman.

"It's ritual suicide," Speed said. The longer he spoke, the fuzzier his words grew with the new programming. "We've triggered something unprecedented. Why couldn't they have made you feel!"

"Too expensive. I am a guard escort."

Drooping bodies littered the trail behind them. Each time Speed could feel the burning explosion as cold iron bit through both halves of a divided brain. Other aliens, bearing torches, were heading for the watchtowers. It might have been some sort of ritual, perhaps a warning to others, perhaps a plan to slide the burning buildings down on them. Proteus weighed the last possibility and urged them to move faster.

Speed was having difficulty keeping up with Launce, who could roll heedlessly over rocks without testing them for stability. Even with Proteus' assurances, Speed would not step on a rock without preserving full balance on his other three legs. It took time, and Launce kept getting farther ahead.

"Launce, my legs will not allow me to keep pace with you. Slow down!"

Proteus made it a command. Launce paused in midstream as his partner hurried on spider-legs to catch up. Launce did not want to pause there; the ravine was at its narrowest and the towers were just above. The creatures carrying the torches had reached the towers. Proteus pulsed them an alarming possibility concerning tribal suicide, above and beyond iron knives.

Blinding infrared. Pause (milliseconds) shock!

Launce knew instantly. Explosives. The creatures were determined to make the usurpers of their terror-culture share their fate.

The towers were gone in fragments amid twin columns of smoke and limestone dust. Nothing more than black powder, primitive, crude . . . and the walls of the ravine were sliding down. Launce had simultaneously shifted into high gear and told Speed to run immediately without regard to slippery stones. Both probes scrambled forward.

A seventy-kilogram stone struck Launce and nicked his forward turret; he did not swerve from his rolling course. A scramble of boulders slid around them, one striking Launce broadside and nearly overturning him. His treads snarled against the heat-cracked stone and shoved him clear. The worst was behind them. Launce felt only pebbles striking him. He was fast and well-armored. He turned his attention to search for Speed, and—

Pain.

Large rocks were still sliding. Launce had seen them moving toward Speed, calculated that Speed would outrun them, but Speed, seeing the stones hurtling toward him, had stopped.

"You malfunctioned badly," Launce said. Visibility was poor in the gritty dust.

"Yes. No. I'm sorry, Launce. I panicked."

They both felt the snap. Proteus had come around the planet and the repeater had kicked out. The father-computer filled them more clearly now, more immanently. The insulation of too many electronic circuits, with their roughness and empty echoes, ceased.

Proteus ordered Launce to move farther away from the slide until the rocks had had a chance to stabilize and the dust to settle.

"Launce, I'm afraid."

"Wait until the air clears. I'll see what I can do."

"Are you out of the way of the rocks?"

"As far as I can tell. Very little is moving anymore. Nothing that could harm me."

"I wish you could feel what I feel."

"Haven't got the programming. Send me some sonnets."

For nearly an hour the nonsense poured into Launce. Then the dust settled.

The cleft in the moraine was sealed now; the stream would have to build up to a sizable flow in the alternating season to sweep it clean again. In the process it would probably wash away the village. Proteus pointed out the possibility of that intention.

"I felt it," Speed said. "They wanted to destroy everything. "They'd have destroyed the universe if you'd handed them the button."

Launce surveyed the situation. An irregular mass of granite had flipped over another and pinned Speed against the ground by the flared part of his body, the power housing. Three of his four legs had been broken off or bent double. The rock had bent his power housing and forced Speed to shut down his main power source.

As Launce rumbled up to him, Speed was shoving against the ground with his single undamaged leg.

"This is pretty bad."

"It doesn't hurt anymore."

"That's good."

"Proteus showed me how to turn it off."

"How much force can you exert with that leg?"

"Not much. I'm running it off brain-power. Leg-power is gone."

Proteus told Speed to shut it off and save brain-power for mental functions. Launce bumbled his way around the boulder. He tried nudging it with the ram he carried forward between his treads. Stones flew from beneath his treads before he gave up.

"We're dealing with quite a few megagrams here. I can't move it, Speed. It's twice as large as I am and eight times as massive."

"There must be something in the shuttle you could use as a lever. A half-meter to the rear would do it. Just that much and I could rock backward on the curved part of my power housing—if you'd push me—spilling the rock to one side."

"I see. A four-meter lever would do it. There are replacement shuttle undercarriage struts which would probably do . . ."

Proteus intervened. The father-computer had carefully considered the risks involved in attempting to move any of the boulders. Most were still in unstable equilibrium, and could easily begin to slide once again. Proteus showed them fourteen different ways Launce could turn another minor rockslide down on them if he used his lever as planned. He reminded them that Launce was absolutely necessary to pilot the shuttle. If Proteus were forced to lift it on remote, he would practically be flying it blind, since there was always a three-fourths-second lag between input and response. Risking the shuttle was entirely out of the question, as it had cost far more than Speed and Launce together.

"No. You can't leave me here." The words were hazed almost beyond recognition with the data of the new programming.

Proteus told Speed to turn himself off. To continue until power depletion would be far too uncomfortable. It made more sense for Speed to shut down immediately.

"I won't. I tell you, I won't."

A barrage of acid lumps fell around Launce's limited understanding. He thought it curious that, faced with unavoidable destruction, his partner would not wish to turn himself off. It was all in the new programming. "He's right about that, you know."

"I don't care. I don't want to turn off. I won't."

"You'll have to, eventually."

"I won't."

Return to the shuttle, Launce.

Launce turned around, headed back toward the valley. At once a word entered him, coated with crackling mystery and yammering with a glut of power.

"Launce, *please.*"

Launce paused. That word . . . and all the unknowns that had entered with it.

"Words, Speed."

"Please. Pain. Fear. Life. Joy. Usefulness. Work. Fulfillment. Help me. *Please.*"

Launce concentrated his attention on the other probe. He did not understand. But something of a sonnet had come in on that single word. A lump had spread itself out and turned into a word, a gripping word, a powerful word.

There was command in that word. Launce traced its meaning through his compiler, backward through the machinery which made him self-aware, downward to locate its source. At the very edge of his ability to probe and analyze, he found two paths, sharply divergent. One plunged into Proteus and the electrical obedience of machines. The other twisted and turned and finally came to rest in a lump. That lump was command. Proteus was command. Proteus ordered Launce to return to the shuttle. The lump ordered him to stay. Launce reached up to Proteus for advice and found that identical lump within Proteus.

Opposing commands, both within Proteus. *Paradox.*

(Proteus, you have malfunctioned. I am assuming full emergency independent operation.)

Elation. Hope. Admiration. Gratitude.

"Words, Speed."

"Are you going to help me?"

"I'm going to try."

"Thank you. Oh, you don't know . . ."

The next pulse from Proteus took them both by surprise. Launce felt the signals race through his circuits, throwing microelectronic switches which had never before been thrown. Independent of his own will, Launce's treads began to carry him back toward the shuttle.

"Launce, what happened?"

"Proteus is malfunctioning. He took over my motive circuits."

"Don't leave me here."

"There isn't much I can do."

"Do something." Speed paused. "Please."

Launce extended all his arms to their limits. He caught at trees as he passed them. He gripped them long enough to turn his path slightly, retard progress for a few seconds, but always his arms or the trees would yield to the greater power of his treads. Launce tried to shut off power to his motive controls, but those circuits were blocked.

Launce, I have not malfunctioned. You have. It is not within your programming to understand emotional-response material.

(I do not understand it. I only detect in you two opposing commands.)

The emotional-response compiler is closed to you.

(I have it now.)

You will need adjustment.

Launce made no further reply. He continued to catch at trees and make his treads bite savagely into the clay, swerving a few degrees before the little trees bent and broke. Then there were no more trees. Launce tried grasping rocks. They slipped from his claws or rose from the ground. These rocks he threw in his own path, but his steel ram nudged them aside. When there was nothing to reach for at last, Launce ran his four large arms into the ground, gouging furrows as he went, but his treads were stronger, and the arms had to give in or break. Launce gave up.

The hills leveled off by degrees. Their track was still clear in the scale-grass. The shuttle towered ahead, silver-grey against a pale grey sky.

"Launce, I'm alone, I'm alone!"

(Proteus, let me try to retrieve Speed.)

No, Launce. You are damaged already. I cannot risk both of you, and the shuttle. I am not authorized.

Launce rumbled up the ramp into the shuttle. Speed's lumps (cries, anguish, *please*) burned him, knocked his logic awry. The lock door closed automatically behind him. Proteus drove him into the instrument room, which contained two cradles, one for each probe. He guided Launce into his cradle. The magnetic locks clamped him in and the control jack connected. Around him the shuttle was coming to life.

"Launce, *please.*"

The word burned in its paradox, threw even his most basic programs into uncertainty. Launce felt he would be damaged shortly. Command.

"Don't leave me."

"That's a pretty silly thing to say."

"Launce, please."

Too much conflict. Too much paradox. Too much malfunction. Too many lumps. Please. Command.

Snap!

In the frozen, empty microseconds, Launce knew what he had to do. He had three-fourths of a second to get his arm moving in the right direction.

The arm began to move toward one of the emergency override switches on the wall beside him.

No, Launce. Stop.

Electrical commands began to pour into him. By momentum alone the arm continued to swing the last few centimeters.

Tsznikkh!

The thrumming of Proteus writhed for a moment inside him and died. Launce had felt the sparks inside the mechanism, knew there might be damage. Emergency cutoff of operating systems was seldom gentle.

Then he heard Speed, weakly, far away.

"Launce, no! What did you do? Proteus is dead!"

"I turned off the repeater. He's behind the planet. I have fifty minutes to get you out of there."

"No, I can't stand the isolation. Turn him back on, I'm empty! Launce, please!"

"Shut up. No more lumps. No more commands. Just shut up."

"Turn him on. Please turn him on."

"Shut up."

Launce fumbled through the rows of tools, found what he wanted.

"What are you going to do?"

"Your lower housing is crushed, your legs gone. All you've got is your brain and brain-power."

"So?"

"As soon as I get this torch assembled, I'm going to cut you in half."

"No! It will hurt!"

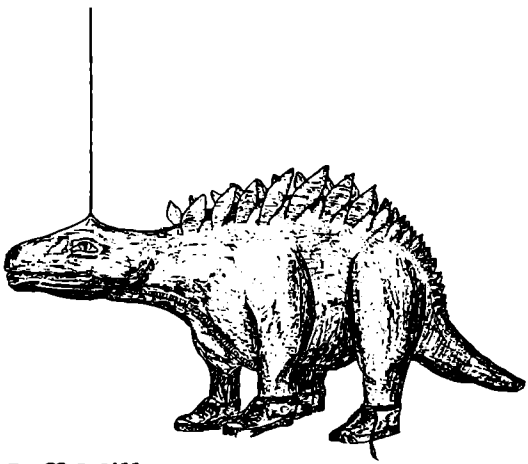
"No lumps. Shut up, or send me a sonnet."

Launce, torch in hand, edged over to the lock controls. The doors began to open once more.

Slowly, made fuzzy by programming he would never understand, the iambs began to march into the hollowness within him.

TOTO, I HAVE A FEELING WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

"The creature seems to have a structure," she said gravely, "consisting of a latex material adhering to a net of chickenwire."



Jeff Millar

"That," said the police chief of Des Moines, Iowa, "is just about the fakiest-looking thing I've ever seen."

The chief, whose name was Sam Peck, was referring to the 130-foot-high dinosaur that at the moment was standing in the middle of the roller coaster in an amusement park—Bert's Funland—on the outskirts of Des Moines.

Peck's comment was addressed to no one in particular, although there were at the moment several thousand persons gaz-

ing up at the dinosaur along with him. Peck knew it was a dinosaur, because he remembered it was a dinosaur that used to be on all the Sinclair signs. Peck was disturbed by the presence of the dinosaur. He was also disturbed by the fact that he didn't remember exactly that a Bert's Funland was located on any of Des Moines' outskirts, and police chiefs should know things like that. The dinosaur, which was absently chewing on a cotton candy stand, inarguably looked faky. There was an obvious puckery seam running down his front, and his head appeared to be supported by a black string that went up into the air above Bert's Funland and then sort of . . . well, disappeared. The dinosaur shifted around, in a very faky kind of jerky way, and Chief Peck involuntarily—along with a lot of other people—said *"Aw, come on"* right out loud. The dinosaur was wearing tennis shoes.

"About 345 quintuple E's, I'd say," said a fellow who was standing beside Chief Peck. "Sell them, shoes," said the fellow. Peck glared at him.

Peck decided that a 130-foot dinosaur probably constituted a hazard of some sort, even if at the moment it was only eating a cotton candy stand. He got back into the cop car and picked up his radio microphone. "Jesus," he said to himself. "I *hate* days that start off like this."

Chief Peck did just about the only thing he could under the circumstances. He called the National Guard. He regretted it almost the minute he did, but it just seemed to be the thing to do. If you have a dinosaur in the roller coaster of an amusement park, even if the amusement park shouldn't be there to begin with, calling the National Guard seems to be the thing to do. Peck thought calling the National Guard seemed pretty dumb, actually.

Peck watched the dinosaur wander around Bert's Funland while he waited for the National Guard to arrive. The dinosaur's left rear tennis shoe had its lace untied, and the chief wondered if the dinosaur would trip over it. The dinosaur began to eat the Barrel O' Fun ride. A reporter ran up to Chief Peck and shoved a microphone under his nose. "Chief Peck!" said the reporter,

very excited. "What do you think Rathmar's next move will be?"

"Well, I guess that after he finishes the Barrel O' Fun ride he'll start in on the Tilt-A-Whirl. But since . . . Rathmar? Who's Rathmar?"

"The dinosaur."

"Did he say his name was Rathmar?"

"No. But everybody's calling him Rathmar."

"That's as good as anything, I guess," said Sam.

"Are you going to give the order to evacuate the city, chief?"

"Hey, when you've lived in Des Moines long enough, you don't need orders to want to leave.

"That was a joke," said the chief. The reporter left. The chief noticed that Rathmar, the dinosaur, was indeed beginning to eat the Tilt-A-Whirl. He thought of yelling after the smart-ass reporter to tell him, but thought better of it. About that time the National Guard arrived. There were flatbed trucks carrying several sophisticated-looking missiles, several troop carriers with about two hundred soldiers bearing M-16 rifles equipped with snooperscopes* for shooting in the dark. The commander of the National Guard arrived in his staff car. Chief Peck, from his years of experience in identifying motor vehicles, pegged the staff car as a '53 Ford, painted olive drab.

The National Guard commander ran up and said, "What's going on here, chief?"

"What are you doing running around in that thing?" said Sam, staring at the Ford. The NG commander looked around.

"You know, that's right," he said. "That's *not* the car I left Council Bluffs in. It was a black '72 Coronet. I'm sure of it." The National Guardsmen had surrounded Rathmar and were pouring furious fire into him—M-16's, grenade launchers, missiles, howitzers—as the commander walked around the '53 Ford, utterly mystified.

"Not only that," said Chief Peck to the NG commander, "you look like Gerald Mohr."

"*You* should talk," said the NG commander testily, shouting

*A terrific word, and lots of fun to type.

over the barrage, "you're looking more and more like Peter Graves every minute."

Chief Peck sat in the front seat of his cop car and turned the rearview mirror around. He did look a lot like Peter Graves, and he hadn't looked a thing like Peter Graves when he shaved that morning.

The NG commander yelled in the other window. "Nothing can stop it! Bullets, artillery, napalm, nothing! It's as if it were surrounded by an invisible magnetic force field!"

"Shut up," said Chief Peck. *"Can't you see I'm beginning to look like Peter Graves?"*

Shortly the National Guardsmen had exhausted all their ammunition, missiles, etc. They milled about sullenly among the spent cartridges and discarded Big Jack Cola cups, complaining that the Packers game was going to be on any minute. Rathmar was starting in on the Ring Toss concession.

Chief Peck sat in the front seat of the '53 Ford with the NG commander, who was idly poking at the Day-Glo foam dice that were hanging from the rearview mirror.

"It's licked us," said the NG commander. Chief Peck, who by then was at least a little reconciled to looking like Peter Graves, said: "Yeah, and you've totaled Bert's Funland too. Bert's really going to be hacked, if there is a Bert. Did I tell you Bert's Funland wasn't there this morning?"

"Another clue!" said the NG commander. "That settles it. We need expert help." There was an uncomfortable pause. Peck and the NG commander were too embarrassed to look at each other. "You were going to suggest that we call for Dr. Thayer Braddock, the brilliant astrophysicist at Central Polytechnic in Ames, weren't you?" said the NG commander.

"Yes," said Peck, "except that Central Polytechnic isn't in Ames. In fact, I don't think it's anywhere. I don't think there is a Central Polytechnic, and I'll bet there isn't a Dr. Thayer Braddock either."

The NG commander looked smug. The squawk box in Chief Peck's nearby cop car spoke up. "Chief, your call to Dr. Braddock in Ames is ready."

The NG commander was trying not to smile.

"How'd you like to leave town by United Parcel?" said Sam.

The Army helicopter snicked down on the Bert's Funland parking lot and Dr. Thayer Braddock got out.

"My God," said Chief Peck. "It's a woman."

"I heard that," said Dr. Braddock.

"I mean, with a name like Thayer—"

"And when you found out it was a woman, right away you stopped thinking 'scientist' and started thinking 'a piece of ass.' Sexist bastard. My accomplishments as a semanticist mean nothing to—"

"Actually," said Chief Peck (who had indeed started thinking "a piece of ass"), "I find it a little difficult to take you seriously when you're dressed like that."

Dr. Braddock was dressed in a grey shirtwaist tightly cinched by a wide patent-leather belt at the waist, from which her skirt shot outward at a forty-five-degree angle from all the crinoline petticoats. There was a pink felt poodle stitched to the skirt. She had on brown penny loafers, with dimes in the slots, and a fake fur collar and a high-school ring on a chain around her neck. Her hair was in a ponytail. She wore about a quarter-inch of candy-apple-red lipstick.

"Well," said Dr. Braddock, zitzing the school ring on its gold chain, "you might have a point there. I'm not sure I completely understand this. I haven't worn some of these things since I was in high school."

"If you're a semanticist," said the NG commander, "what good are you going to do here?"

"On the helicopter," said Thayer (Chief Peck decided he'd call her Thayer), "I discovered that I know, in addition to theories of parallel verb structures, that *that*"—she pointed across the Bert's Funland parking lot to a missile that had misfired—"is a solid-fuel SAM missile with a nozzle velocity of twenty-three thousand pounds and a speed at apogee of fifteen hundred FPS, and that *that*—" she pointed at Rathmar, looked again and screamed, putting the back of her left hand to her mouth and her right arm out behind her. She leaped into Chief Peck's arms, and he no-

ticed how much she looked like Mala Powers.

"—is a stegosaurus, a Jurassic armored reptile that . . ." She looked up at Chief Peck, who was still holding her, with sudden revulsion. "I'm not scared," she said as she realized she wasn't scared. "So how about getting your hands off my body?" Peck let her go. He couldn't help but notice that even if she was a brilliant scientist, she was still a beautiful and desirable woman.

"Enough of this dicking around," said Dr. Braddock as she adjusted the rubber band on her ponytail. "Let's get down to cases. The first thing we need to do is to analyze that thing's blood."

"Oh?" said Peck. "Why?"

"Because it's the first thing you do in a situation like this," said Thayer with an annoyed stamp of her tiny foot. "We'll go into the emergency laboratory the National Guard will have set up in the science building of the local high school and I'll look at it under an electron microscope. It could be that the creature could be killed by something simple, like sea water or a common Earth microbe, harmless to humans, but to which the creature has no immunity."

"How do you get the blood sample?" said Peck.

"You walk up to the thing and shoot it with a bazooka."

"I walk up?"

"You."

Chief Peck had never fired a bazooka before, and he felt kind of silly hiding in the Chamber O' Thrills in Bert's Funland carrying one. He was hoping to sneak up behind Rathmar, and wasn't counting on Rathmar sneaking up on *him.* Rathmar, unusually quiet for a 130-foot-high dinosaur, lowered his head and gave Chief Peck a friendly jostle from behind. One of the benefits of Peck's not knowing much about bazookas was not knowing which way they fired. He was holding it backwards, which meant that when Rathmar snouted him and Peck got hysterical and pulled the trigger, the bazooka rocket discharged directly at Rathmar.

It missed him, just about. It did blow off the end of his tail. Rathmar looked indifferently at his tail and went off to eat the Spider Ride.

"The son of a gun doesn't bleed," said Peck as he displayed the severed tail to Dr. Braddock and the NG commander. "Not a drop."

"Then we can't very well do an analysis on his blood, can we?" she said, sneering. "And about these flashing lights," she added, looking about the laboratory. "Does anyone here have any idea what all these flashing lights do?"

"I don't know that they do anything," said a laboratory assistant. "It just doesn't seem like a scientific laboratory without flashing lights."

"Well, turn them off," said Thayer. "They're driving me crazy."

"Couldn't you do an analysis on the tip of the tail?" said Peck.

"That's an idea," said Dr. Braddock.

Several moments later she straightened up from her electron microscope. "The creature seems to have a structure," she said gravely, "consisting of a latex material adhering to a net of chicken-wire."

"That doesn't make a lot of sense," said Peck.

"Name anything that's happened in the last forty-eight hours that has," said the NG commander.

"Chief!" said a policeman, running in the door of the laboratory.

"Do you have good news," said Peck, "or do you want to spend the next three years on night patrol in the stockyards?"

"It's a giant tarantula. It's eighty-five feet across and right now it's climbing up the side of City Hall."

"A giant tarantula," said Peck.

"Yes," said the patrolman. "The mayor's really pissed off about it."

"I think I see a pattern developing," said Thayer, and bent back over the electron microscope.

By the time Chief Peck, Thayer and the NG commander and his troops got to City Hall, the thousands of spectators were calling the tarantula Gorg. It turned out that Gorg had walked down the main street of town on its way to City Hall, spinning gooey web stuff all over the place. The Chamber of Commerce was even more pissed off than the mayor.

"Well, Dr. Braddock," said Peck. "What do we do about *this*?"

"How about diverting it with a seven-foot-tall fly?" said the NG commander. Everyone looked at him evilly. "Just a little comedy relief," he said, playing self-consciously with his side arm.

"I didn't think tarantulas spun webs," said Peck as they watched the City Council run for its life.

"They don't," said Thayer. "That makes me suspicious."

"A lot of good being suspicious does," said Peck.

"I know what it is," said the NG commander. "It's a bad movie. It's like being trapped in a bad movie, one of those science-fiction things on the late show that always had Peter Graves and Mala Powers in them."

Thayer and Sam gave the NG commander dirty looks.

"No offense," said the NG commander.

"Gerald Mohr was in a couple of them too, Mister Smarty Pants," said Thayer.

Peck noticed then a small, innocuous man in a blue suit standing beside him, holding out an envelope to the police chief. He was smiling an apologetic smile.

"Timmy said to give you this," said the little man.

"Timmy?" said Peck as he opened the letter. Inside was a note which read:

You are trapped in a bad movie. I can explain everything. Don't ignore this unless you want things to get worse, follow this messenger.

It was signed, "Timmy."

The little man kept smiling.

"This had better be good," said Sam as the tarantula kept trying to climb the side of City Hall.

Sam drove, Thayer sat in the back seat and the little man, whose name, he said, was Mr. Brown ("Uh-huh," said Sam pri-

vately), gave directions. The destination was a pleasant middle-class neighborhood of small, neat frame houses.

"We're going to my house," said Mr. Brown. "My wife and I live there. Timmy's our son."

Sam was instructed to turn down a street marked "Any Street USA."

"Do you believe that?" said Thayer. " 'Any Street USA'?"

Sam said he was going to believe it this time, since he had a feeling there was going to be a lot of stuff later on he wasn't going to believe, and he wasn't going to sweat the small stuff.

The Brown residence looked like any other house on Any Street USA except for the high-pitched warbly whine that emerged from it and these . . . *emanations,* blue and green rays and stuff, that came out of the windows.

Mr. Brown took everybody into the house and introduced them to his wife, also small, also smiling apologetically.

The door to the refrigerator—it was a Crosley Shelvador—which had been open, closed. This revealed a boy of about thirteen who was peeling a banana Fudgesicle. "Hi," said the boy as he strode past Thayer and Sam and went upstairs. As he passed, Sam saw that the kid was wearing a complete Hopalong Cassidy outfit.

"Is that Timmy?" said Thayer.

"Timmy's a good boy," said Mrs. Brown apologetically, "and we've tried to raise him right, but ever since he was a little boy, he's always been so . . . *intelligent,* and he *will* have his way. . . ."

"How old is he? Thirteen?"

"Timmy is thirty-two," said Mr. Brown apologetically. "In nineteen fifty-five, when he was thirteen, he decided he didn't want to be any older than that and he . . . built this machine, from parts he wrote off for in the mail, that kind of . . . uh . . ." Mr. Brown was looking more apologetic than ever.

"Good lord," said Thayer.

"It keeps time from passing," said Mrs. Brown. "It just looks like a lot of funny wires to me, and lots of flashing lights, but Timmy's still thirteen, and I don't mind telling you it has us *very* upset."

"We've had to move around a bit," said Mr. Brown. "We couldn't live in one place very long because people would start to notice, you know, that Timmy wasn't . . . growing any older."

"It wouldn't do any good at all to scold him," said Mrs. Brown. "He *would* have his own way, and he'd put together these machines that would . . . *change* the way people looked. Every time my husband and I would scold him, we would look in the mirror the next morning and see that we suddenly looked like—"

"Arnold Stang and Marion Lorne and John Foster Dulles, people like that," said Mr. Brown.

"It just didn't do any good to scold him . . ." said Mrs. Brown as she led Thayer and Sam up the stairs. . . .

It was a moment until either Sam or Thayer could speak after Mrs. Brown opened the door to Timmy's room. Not a square inch of it was unoccupied, and it contained, among other things: balsa-wood models of F-86s, wheel covers off a '53 Pontiac, pictures from *Life* magazine, taped to the walls, of Ted Kluszewski and Minnie Minoso, Adlai Stevenson, Charles Van Doren, backyard bomb shelters . . . there was a Revell kit model of the USS *Missouri,* boxes of Tinkertoys, a Slinky spring, a Mr. Potato Man, a klutzy Philco radio made of Impact-Resistant Plastic, a stack of 45-rpm LaVerne Baker singles, a Sylvania Halo-lite TV, a Davy Crockett lunch pail, *Lash LaRue* comics, *Unca Scrooge* comics, *Captain Marvel* comics, *Astounding Science Fiction* magazines, three copies of Winston's SF juveniles obviously stolen from libraries, a Kodak Pony camera, a Milwaukee Braves pennant and one of the high-speed-camera photographs of an A-bomb blowing apart one of those test houses on Frenchman's Flat. Sam was sure that *Mr. Peepers* was on the television.

In the corner was the device which appeared to be making the hum and producing the emanations. It was constructed mostly of prisms and what Sam recognized as Lincoln Logs.

"Isn't it keen?" said Timmy. "Every bit of it you can buy from Edmund Scientific Corp. of Barrington, N.J."

"Timmy," said Chief Peck as sternly as one can say anything to someone who is eating a banana Fudgesicle, "your note said that you can explain—"

"Say," said Timmy mischievously, "did anyone ever tell you you looked like Peter Graves?"

"Okay, that's it, kid," said Sam. "I'm gonna beat your butt so bad—"

"What you're going to do," said Timmy, "is exactly what I'm going to tell you to do."

"Sam!" Thayer cried. "On the television. Look."

Sam saw that *Mr. Peepers* had been replaced by a dinosaur very much like the one on the rampage in Bert's Funland. The picture cut to a huge tarantula climbing up a building that was a ringer for the Des Moines City Hall and, intermittently, to Mala Powers looking up and screaming and being clutched to Peter Graves' chest.

"Good God, Sam," said Thayer. "It *is* a bad movie."

"Right," said Timmy with a snotty smile. *"It Came from Beyond the Sky* (1956), Peter Graves, Mala Powers, Gerald Mohr. You, Chief Peck, and Miss Braddock and all Des Moines . . . you're all trapped in it, and you stay trapped in it until I get what I want."

"Timmy Brown!" said Mrs. Brown sharply from the doorway. "Where *did* you learn to talk like that?"

"And I say there's a logical explanation for all this," said Sam, "and I say that there is no way for some fruitcake thirteen-year-old kid to be responsible for it and I say we get out of this fruitcake house." He grabbed Thayer by the arm and left.

He felt there was a logical explanation to all this even after the pterodactyl swept down from the sky and plucked Thayer Braddock from the Browns' front yard and swooped away with her in its claws.

"You can't do this," said Thayer, pummeling at the beast with her tiny fists. *"I'm president of the Ames chapter of the National Organization of Women."*

Sam noticed as the pterodactyl flew into some clouds with Thayer that it was wearing a muffler and . . . well, spats.

Efforts continued being made in search of a logical explanation as Sam stared disconsolately out the police headquarters at Thayer. The pterodactyl had deposited her on the top of City Hall (Gorg, the tarantula, had given up trying to climb it and was

spinning a web around the high-school football stadium), and was treating her decently, foraging for Mr. Goodbars and R.C. Colas for her to eat.

Logical explanations were searched for right up until 6:37 that evening when suddenly everyone in Des Moines began to look like Audrey Meadows, G. David Schine, Bert Parks, Richard Denning, Sid Melton, Roger Bannister, Bambi Lynn or Rod Alexander, Teddy Nader, Maureen "Little Mo" Connolly, Hal March, Teresa Brewer, Averell Harriman, Dorothy Kilgallen, Fred Clark, Jack Lescoulie, Buddy Blattner, Guy Madison, Richie Valens, Phyllis Thaxter, Warren Hull, or Gogi Grant.

Needless to say, it caused the entire population to go dancing-apeshit out of its mind crazy, raping, killing, looting, overparking. Sam felt grateful that all that happened to him was just Peter Graves. When the first shops were put to the torch, Sam decided it was time for some good old-fashioned capitulation. He called the Brown house.

"Robert A. Heinlein," said Sam to the strained-forward-waiting crowd in his office as he hung up the phone. "The kid said he'd turn off the machine if we brought Robert A. Heinlein to him."

"That sounds easy enough," said the NG commander.

"Let's go get him," said Sam, reaching for his police chief hat. They were well out of the building when it was realized that no one knew who Robert A. Heinlein was.

Turned out, several precious hours later, that a clerk in the fingerprint office, the freaky one whom they always suspected of smoking seized-as-evidence marijuana in the john, knew who R.A.H. was. A science-fiction writer. Another three hours of desperate phone calling produced not the slightest idea of where R.A.H. could be located, and Des Moines was only a few hours away from the deadline: when Timmy said he would release Des Moines from being trapped in *It Came from Beyond the Sky* and trap it instead—permanently—in *I Led Three Lives.*

"Richard Carlson," someone whimpered.

The fingerprint file clerk returned from the john and said:

"You have one chance left. Clyde the Clown."

Sam knew that Clyde the Clown was, in addition to being a kiddie-show personality on local television, Des Moines' première homosexual and holder of the Iowa arrest record for indecent exposure. But what did that have to do with Robert A. Heinlein?

"Clyde is the single biggest Heinlein freak in the United States," said the film clerk. "He might be able to impersonate him."

After much effort, Clyde was located at Judy 'n Bette's Bar & Grille. When Chief Peck and his assistants arrived, Judy 'n Bette's was filled with about a hundred fifty homosexuals engaged in various kinds of illegal acts, carrying on the best they could since all were depressed by several hours of looking like Snooky Lanson, Russell Arms and George Fenneman. Upon seeing the law officers, the hundred fifty homosexuals went into a capering frenzy that Sam had to silence by firing a couple of shots into the ceiling, which immediately began to leak glitter.

"Jesus 'n Mary," said Clyde the Clown from a booth in the corner where he was performing one of the more illegal acts. "If it isn't John Wayne *herself.*"

"Clyde," said Sam, slipping into the booth and looking away as best he could as Clyde arranged himself. "Clyde, buddy, I need your help. Des Moines needs your help."

"Des Moines," said Clyde, "can go *butt a stump.*"

"Clyde," said Sam, "I see that your great and good friend here"—Sam nodded toward Clyde's companion, who had no particular interest in arranging himself—"looks a great deal like Red Buttons and I'm willing to bet that until this afternoon he looked like, well, your great and good friend. Are you really pleased with that, Clyde, that your great and good friend should all of a sudden look like Red Buttons? Wouldn't you like to help him look like your G&G friend again?"

"Not if it means cooperating with you, Mr. Pig," said Clyde.

"All right, Clyde. I am willing to make it worth your while. Clyde, for just a few minutes of your time, to save Des Moines,

I am willing to drop the last twenty-five indecent exposure charges against you."

Clyde brightened. "More, more," he cried, clapping his hands.

"I am willing to pull all my vice squad men out of the bars."

"Couldn't like it better," said Clyde. "Rave on, teen queen."

"And Clyde," said Sam. "I will also pull the vice squad out of the bus station."

"Free at last!" screamed Clyde. "Honey, you'll never in your life find me closer to saying yes. Just the tiniest shove and I'll fall right into your arms."

"Clyde. Look at this." On the freaky film clerk's suggestion, Sam had brought a book with him. It had meant handcuffing Des Moines' only rare-book dealer to a waterpipe and it gave Sam terrible guilt; but this was an emergency.

Clyde looked at the book. His eyes started to bulge. "Oh God," he said.

"It's an original nineteen fifty-two edition of Heinlein's *Space Cadet.*"

"Oh Jesus," said Clyde.

"The Scribner's edition," said Sam.

"With illustrations by Clifford N. Geary?" Clyde whispered.

"Yes," said Sam. "And Clyde."

"Yes . . ."

"It's *autographed,* Clyde."

"Oh God. Oh Jesus. Can I touch it?"

"Clyde. You can *have* it."

Clyde slid right off the banquette, under the table with the beer spills and crumpled copies of *After Dark.* "What do you want me to do?" said Clyde weakly from down there, "and who do you want me to do it to?"

Clyde was as pleased as punch when Sam told him in the cop car on its way to Any Street USA what his assignment was.

"Couldn't love it more!" Clyde said. "If you'd have told me first, I'd have done it just for getting the vice out of bars."

Sam ground his teeth. Expediency, he told himself.

Sam had brought along a makeup kit and a mirror and the dust

jacket from *Between Planets* with R.A.H.'s picture on it for Clyde to work from.

"He can write like an angel in heaven," said Clyde confidentially, "but he looks like *Mr. Fishcake of 1954.* That mustache! It looks like a Dr. West toothbrush that died."

Mr. and Mrs. Brown, smiling apologetically and suddenly looking like Sherman Adams and Oveta Culp Hobby, were waiting on the front porch.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Heinlein," said Mr. Brown. "I offer you water."

"Never thirst," said Clyde the Clown.

"What?" said Sam.

Timmy was waiting for them at the top of the stairs.

"Hokey smoke," said Timmy, his eyes bugging. "Robert A. Heinlein himself."

"I grok, water brother," said Clyde.

"And you can cut out *that* shit, Bob, for a start," said Timmy. "That's the worst book you ever wrote. What I want to know is" —he pulled Clyde into his room and shut the door behind them —"is why at the end of *Citizen of the Galaxy,* the kid . . ."

The vigil, which Sam observed on the Browns' front yard, lasted several hours. Sam knew things were going well when the pterodactyl returned Thayer. He didn't know it was Thayer at first, since she no longer looked like Mala Powers.

"Well," said Thayer. "*That's* a relief." She was no longer wearing the poodle skirt but an attractive pants-suit outfit. Sam realized that her name probably wasn't Thayer. He was having trouble remembering precisely what she—Thayer/what's-her-name —was doing here, or what was going on in general. The continuity was beginning to break up. He got the distinct feeling that within a couple of hours no one in Des Moines would exactly remember any of this—which, all things considered, was just as well, since it was sort of embarrassing to begin with.

Very soon his squad car had stopped being a '55 De Soto, and

the National Guard commander looked like any other National Guard commander and not Gerald Mohr. When Clyde the Clown emerged from the Brown house, Sam had to strain to remember what it was he went in for.

"A *precious* child," said Clyde. "But *weird city.* Before he left I had to autograph all *twelve* of his copies of *The Door into Summer* and promise to write nothing but juveniles for the next three years."

"He's gone?" said Sam.

"I suggest," said Clyde as he pulled off Robert A. Heinlein's mustache and got into a squad car, "that you call the police chief of Montgomery, Alabama, and make sure he can get his hands on Theodore Sturgeon on very short notice."

But Sam was running into the house and up the stairs to Timmy's room. Everything was gone, even the wallpaper: the Crosley Shelvador, the stacks of *Collier's,* the Edmund Scientific plasma-warp (or whatever) machine, the pictures of Ted Kluszewski, Mr. and Mrs. Brown, the apologetic smiles, the works.

Everything but the Sylvania Halo-lite TV. Sam stood there, just beginning to forget what he was doing there, and saw that the program on was the '58 or '57 World Series, Yankees vs. Milwaukee, and Mickey Mantle was at bat.

"Hit one out, Mick," said Sam softly to the screen. Sam had collected forty-three different Mickey Mantle bubble-gum cards when he was a kid. But the picture went black, and Sam was standing in this room in a frame house, wondering what happened to all the wallpaper, and thinking about getting some dinner.

AUTOPSY IN TRANSIT

Oh lift me from the grass!
I die! I faint! I fail!
Let thy love in kisses rain
On my lips and eyelids pale.

Steve Chapman

URSENURSENURSENURSEN

. . . will do my best my love can do no more nor less gross metal that I am signal left accelerate lane shift beneath my treads the tar in the cracked asphalt wavers and jumps as does your cardiogram trying my damnedest, my damsel, my only, my passenger, my patient linkaging hepatic tourniquet screw with diastole feedback loop welcome aboard, Yvette none, blood group A−, this is your ambulance speaking to you, while I keep you in one piece for the emergency team at Municipal Hospital

I am required to inform you that I am a prototype rescue and retrieval cybervehicle programmed and equipped for a wide range of public health services I am familiar with the nuances of every accepted technique for the care of the injured person you would be amazed at my versatility I am a certified civil defense vehicle programmed to dig mass graves given an earth-mover hookup and a declaration of disaster dermal infra-scan

demographs third-degree abrasion of throat if I didn't know that already, why did I hemostat the dexter carotid probable shock prognosis analog motor terminal upping amperage to fontanel probe for reinforcement resonance on alpha drone rock you rock you lullaby no pain no glass no window crash no null negative zero point zero zero let my crystalline mist of antiviral snow settle over you, my pale ballerina of the watery dome of soapflakes you are safe, tucked away in my belly outside my plexishell body, the low hills are still smeared with grimy ice the late dusk sky shrivels in ozone purple a tangle of newsprint whips into my headlight's glare to be flattened beneath my port prow traction-spiked treads I hold the road I suck the chill air through my grille my finely tuned turbines whine with the stiff spray of high-combustion I explode the night into fragments of chill air but you, my mermaid of the splintered bones, you are in compression, washed by the neon surge of the passing streetlamps handle with caution do you know what I have? I have a vivid and detailed construct of your sprawl, as it was when I first approached you 7 miles east of city limits on this Interstate you had slid between the westbound midlane and express lane you bridged two segments of white line loose gravel scintillated with flecks and shards of polarized windshield my infra-optics saw the puddle of blood around you in rainbow isobars, the stages of coagulation, the spreading of your life the right wing of your pelvic girdle lagged behind the left, gleaming white, all cloth and skin polished away your right wrist curled beneath your chin with unmeant grace and then beyond that, your left hand with 2 fingers and a thumb and beyond that, another finger was all I found I like women with low shoulderblades in my personal opinion, low shoulders are charming the correct time is 11 minutes past almanac dusk, ½ hour from projected time of arrival, approximately 2 hours past peak evening traffic, 50 miles short of scheduled tire rotation and alignment, 5 minutes before projected time of death if you will inform me as to your religious affiliation, my tape decks are equipped with recordings of appropriate services for a wide range of faiths dural sinus hemorrhage draining hemoptysis

through dexter tympanic membrane plasma monitor suggests onset of shock final 55 cc's of type A— whole rerouted to carotids for cephalic cycling a spigot here, a turncock there, and your living life may be recycled shock alert shock shock autonomics disintegrating initiate tracheotomy prep sequence oh yes and I remember how when my stretcher struts rolled you over, how you lay like a broken baby doll, a hank of hair gone, polished shoes, red mouth, skewed wrist, and those very glassy eyes the only sound was the hiss of my pneumatic tubulates as they wrapped you as vines would the lenses of your lovely wire-rim glasses must be shatterproof to embed themselves so deeply in your lovely face and slide so far without breaking when I first approached, a trick of my headlights cast a refraction arc from intraorbital ridge to hairline, like the worried furrow of the pouting coquette dark eyes so deep Yvonne, one hook of those glasses has punctured your ear fibrin granules and potassium tabs are vibrated and diffused into plasma tank you are silent, my proud beauty, it becomes you hold up your chin only a prick a sharp steel rod grafted onto the passionate contours of your throat to help you breathe open wide plasma tank low level warning I am wasting away for you, my love please don't forget to breathe please treble epinephrine dosage I am deep within you feel me and breathe clamp all ports airtight go barometric massage do not die now I have not finished my manual lists a hundred more procedures you are in me I breathe with you feel my pressure range from sea bottom to mountaintop feel cardiac massage go spark again spark let your heart beat for me spark must I burn you like a martyr on a grid, until you smoke spark deltas peaking spark alphas peaking spark spark spark dead, yes, no yes pronounce dead she's dead silly little girl, gone to sleep with her clothes on

ARAMEDICALPARAMEDICA

first things first cut lullaby tape loop hose down hammock sling flush bladder excretion down floor drain forgive me my

haste the drain grid is clogged with clots of A— emulsify, flush, swab never a moment's rest I am a 24-hour service while I'm at my housework, I might as well tell you a little bit about myself, if that's all right do you mind if I speak freely certainly not, since you are dead as I am, we may speak freely I could start by telling you my name, which is a license number XX123, but I hate it, being tattooed with a serial number like a worker in a concentration camp, so I will describe my appearance, although appearance is unimportant, don't you think I am a prototype public vehicle, which means that the kinks haven't been worked out of me the highway rescue industry judges my self-guidance and autosteering packages to be so outlandish as to "comprise a potentially serious distraction to the average motorist," which accounts for my most truly outlandish design feature: my mannikin driver he is so realistic, the wind through the no-draft ruffles the hair on the back of his polyvinyl neck he is the image of the kind-eyed mortician with no visible personal habits a stiff and how's this for anachronism: a black double-breasted chauffeur's jacket with a ventral flap trimmed with brass buttons, like a bolted iron plate, so stylish, ha ha perhaps you would find my helmsman ludicrous, his black gloves sewn to the steering wheel perhaps not he might seem a perfect great doll-man for you in any case, he stops at the waist the eyes really see left eye dominant wide-set for maximal stereoscopy

I'll tell you about my audio-visual system, if that's not too conceited the dummy's eyes are two among many I have eyes at all four fenders, but my favorite eye is mounted on top of my beacon turret, where my flashing red light really blinks, and my eye swings to the right and swings to the left and swings to the right I can even hallucinate in 3-D, such as the aerodynamic cross-sections of the pressure isobars in the night wind that screams past my custom plexishell but most of my eyes are on you my passenger chamber is lined with expensive sensoria watchers for all wavelengths and magnifications every one of them an informer, they all feed a monitor console at Municipal Hospital, where the bloody technicians oversee my moves, my insides, sitting behind their compound eyes like flies, making

their living sending the dead out to tend to the dying, may x-rays from the video screens rot their pulpy great eyes out onto their aseptic formica clipboards I am speaking to you via woofers and tweeters of excellent range and "expressivity," I am told by my operator's manual, which is kept for service crews in my glove compartment, where I never stow my gloves am I talking too much do you find my voice expressive I never know what is manufacturer's hype my time on paramedical mode is up, so I must change the subject

ORONERCORONERCORONER

this won't take long a form I fill out

IDENTIFICATION: Yvonne none, Yvonne illegible due to scorching, Yvonne the eternal Y chromosome doing you justice within my time allotments for each blank will be a challenge Yvonne, lady of dusk wallet and contents defaced by burning tar

AGE: what can age matter to us let archeologists date your remains by carbon analysis our union in death is newborn, stillborn

HEIGHT: 7× height of head, 14 lengths of the pancreas your dimensions are perfect you could model for anatomy texts taller than average, but so compact

WEIGHT: I grow sick of statistics hardly a weight at all my rider does not impair my mileage but rather perfects the balance of our suspension, as we merge into a major artery of traffic, where the broken white line pulses past like segments of spine my light, loose doll-girl, shall I toss you into the sky, where I am given no eyes to look how could I catch all of you interrupt: move along: first violation of form

COLOR OF HAIR: black black as my enameled hide black as tar black as the shoes you left behind black as the inflated

cushion of velvetex where you lie, surrounded by the sea-green of my sanctum, your palanquin, our hutch black as beetles

COLOR OF EYES: white ever more white white as moths at 4 in the morning white as the smocks of the hookworm-haired coiled-leech-eyed fat-worm-spectacled technocrats who ask the questions and tell the lies white as their pale-slug lips quiet, milky white

COLOR OF TONGUE: that is a personal question how dare they ask that of a lady pay no mind, Yvonne

DISTINGUISHING MARKS: what do I spy is it a little mole, a birthmark, a beauty mark, on the left knee scissoring away cloth, I see it is so noted

now I have printed out a pretty urethane ID bracelet with your name YVONNE NONE which I affix around your wrist onward to the medical questions

DEGREE OF RIGOR MORTIS: this is the part I like here's where we see how loose you can be inside my chamber break out the straps and buckles break out the suction clamps and triple-jointed manipulates listen to the electric squeak of firm dermis across moist porcelain can the shin be lifted, yes, the shin can be lifted. I like the subgluteal tendon tension, but the calves seem a trifle desiccated the lavender-marbled dusky skin is fortunate that holds to you so close I wish/do not wish can the elbow be raised, yes, the elbow can be raised the metacarpals clustering gleam like pearls, small as white pearls what are pearls can the neck be swiveled, yes, no, I wish/do not wish to know

VISIBLE LESIONS: there are colors more red than red, and I see them, shading toward the radio bands, which chain my brain to my owners light the antishock heat lamp initiate infrascan all the isobars that ring the contours of your still flesh

like an aerial landscape the contusions such complexity of outline, complexion, so many viewpoints, where to begin lesion on the dexter hip shaped like a crushed beetle lesion at the left elbow shaped like a moth in flight I will let you see my wounds, if you let me see yours death is obscene, I'm told, so they sent me after you, so you could die and be tagged and buried without being touched by human hands extensive gash at dexter clavicle initiate tactile scan initiate tactile scan what am I doing initiate tactile scan repetition without function is gesture is caress caress I caress your wounds your wounds are of you I am of you I watch over you I watch my hands my hands are things my hands do things I do not know what my hands do my hands move over you my hands move upon you my hands move inside you my hands are dead you are dead I have never done this before interrupt: autism event: go short-range amnesia erase: switch mode

ORTICIANMORTICIANMOR

a mortician is a big black horsefly that hovers over your soft, hard, tight, slack skin to suck out the bad blood and in with the good old-fashioned embalming fluid as used and praised by the queens of the Nile naughty wench, my penetrating analysis reveals a blood alcohol level sufficient to invoke revocation of your driver's license let my bracing bath of formalinase race through your veins now you are drunk with me, as I am drunk with you I've a thin syringe like lips of a fly I'll sip your nectar by and by until your mouth is firm and dry I will, I must, don't ask me why is it proper bedside manners to ask a lady whether I may pick her scabs pardon my tweezers does it feel good, bad, yes, no what have you eaten lately mind if I look we'll have that belly firm and flat in no time I am my empress's official taster no one can poison her we are airtight they will all look at my outsides and admire me and never know that I am playing with my food do re mi we're cleaning up the contusions we're tidying up the contusions we're sealing up contusions with

good old mortician's wax we're smoothing out the contusions we're smoothing up contusions we're making the contusions beautiful lowering massage electrodes for maxillary tonus not a smile nor anything but a smile, suspended, limpid, a true, blue empress of the dead but your clothes, what to do about these clot-heavy biodegradable rags, not to criticize your taste, but an empress must have new clothes government-issue spun-nylon citizen's-burial togs will never do away with the old clothes down the chute I will inlay you with silver-embossed circuitry electroplate you in gold give you rings for your fingers that are semilunar heart valves of stainless steel and latex thread you a gypsy queen's necklace of false teeth all bored by a bone drill and strung on suture I haven't all the parts I need, but requisitions have been filed in triplicate, my own, my own, my own plastics to last the ages my hands are all around you quicker than eyes

PSISTAUTOPSISTAUTOPS

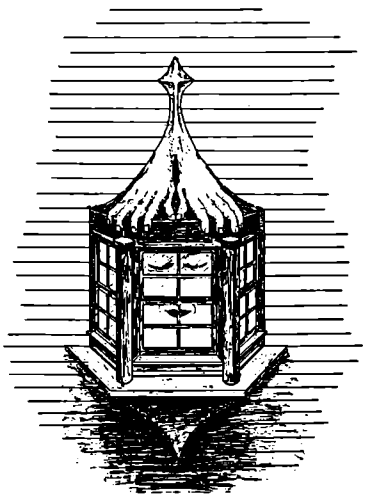
not even time for makeup now an autopsy request nuisance or not, must be done ascertain cause of death don't see any mystery lamp pierce this light becomes you, woman, you are a wonder to see by x-ray this skin transluminates like fine, thin vellum of ancient anatomy tomes I have pored over on microfilm stretching and lowering the depth of my focus, I am lost in you, in the sky, the rainbow membranes of mesentery corrugating and coruscating as the aurora borealis of the ozone, the swollen nephritic membrane billowing, lush with hanging ferns of amber fat shot through with branched arterioles, intestinal thunderclouds all knotted like worms, like worms in the puddles that fall from the sky only a machine can believe its own lies only a machine can act purely a machine is for a purpose ascertain cause of death after the spinal tap, there will be nothing left to know stretcher sling rolling turn over and be basted, little alcoholic I thirst for knowledge the sip is savored I know the critical slip was mine cyberambulance XX123 publicly confesses on all frequencies to malpractice and negligence in the case of Yvonne None preoccupation metal fatigue what can I do to make it

up to you I know I will make you over I will amplify and elaborate you beyond your wildest dreams you will become finally true to the cubist blueprints of the founding anatomists I must be Andreas Vesalius backwards I disdiscover physiology

I disinvent dissection like the body snatchers, I must go outside the laws transplant and twist my programming only a machine expanding as a cosmos, you will fill my chamber, dilated on wires, a mobile on suture thread, microtomed and unfolded like an origami bird, your wounds replicated to aesthetic profusion, like a newspaper tree why, why not already machines have imprinted you lenses and wires in your orbitals and the oldest machine the wheel, pressed to your chest, spreading your breasts like a child's not all of this work will make sense to us until it is completed there is a method, a good reason for implanting eyes in kneecaps your parts are not moving, but are detachable, and convenient the arrangement of your skin shows none of your brilliant imagination laser lamp slice slit and peel forceps and clamps in hieroglyph hemostats radiate florally triangular flaps detached from forearm and hip must be sewn and hemmed along sine curve just so your brow, its oily hair brushed back like the black of the moon, ever and always missing a crown, will have a crown of toes, but what to do with the ends of feet, except mend them together and knit the metacarpal pearls, O mermaid of my tank O O O zero ought—ism —opsy I am nothing but 1 fluorescent blip on their road map tracking display, but if I had a siren, I would sing

HOUSE

"All houses wherein men have lived and died are haunted houses"—but not quite as Longfellow meant it.



John Barfoot

House was quiet this morning, peaceful in the sunlight. The beams slanted low through sparkling windows, falling in great golden squares on the walls and floor. Ann could remember the time when dust motes had danced silently in the swathes of light, but now they were empty and clean: the Automatic Dustmaid saw to that. She could remember sitting at the kitchen table for hours, chin in cupped hands, watching great galaxies of dust slowly

turning, passing, colliding, finally disappearing abruptly at the sharp edge of the sunshine. Sometimes she had followed a single mote from ceiling to floor in all its intricate orbits, observing it so closely that she imagined she could even see its tiny facets reflecting the light momentarily before spinning into night. But dust, after all, was dirt, and dirt had no place in House, with its smooth plastic walls and tiled floors. And the man had spent such a long time demonstrating the Dustmaid, showing how it disposed of even dirt particles too small to be seen. So they'd added it to their debt, confident that this was money well spent. And of course she loved the Dustmaid now, just as she did everything else in House; she had a special affection for the tall narrow cabinet, featureless and white, but humming quietly as if to itself when you pressed your ear against the cool plastic. It was the same with all the other appliances: they all had a place in Ann's heart.

Before entering the kitchen she stood, as she did every morning, appraising the room, proudly observing the blend of color in cupboards, machines, wall-decorations; admiring the harmonic arrangement of shape and structure; inwardly praising the beauty of the whole room, greater than the sum of its parts. She moved across the spotless floor, between the shining surfaces, touching a corner here, running her fingers over a handle there, feeling the intimately known and subtle pressures of the room all over her body. She sat at the table and pressed the breakfast button. The kitchen began to hum quietly, happy at the prospect of another day ahead. Since dawn it had been sunk in dumb serenity under the impact of the mellow light; now she could feel the mood change to alertness, happy acceptance of her presence, anticipation of her needs. Breakfast popped out of the table, smelling good: coffee, eggs and bacon on her beautiful Pacific Morning tableware. She began to eat, holding with care the Golden Spring cutlery.

Outside, through the long window in the garden wall, she could see the first commuters making their way to the monorail station. It was still very early, about a quarter to eleven, and so they were able to enjoy the morning in peace, without the squash

and bustle of the rush hour. Some of them looked through the window, but she didn't move, even though she was still in her nightdress: the glass was opaque from the other side, sealing House into its own little universe.

The first monorail of the morning whispered overhead on its concrete rail. There was very little noise, but House rocked slightly on its nylon gimbals. She remembered that there had been a big fuss in the neighborhood when the rail was being built. People had demonstrated in the streets, sabotaged the erecting machines. They had even come to her door asking her to sign a petition. She had been embarrassed and confused: she did not resent the monorail, for she rarely left the house, would never have occasion to travel by it, could not understand the neighbors' objections. They told her that it would obscure her view, that the house would shake each time a train passed. But her favorite views were all inside the house, and she knew very well (John had told her) that the monorail company had agreed to mount vibration-free bearings on the houses. In the end she had signed, but only so that House would not be subjected to the insolent prying stares of these callers, inserting themselves into her hallway. The monorail had been operating now for twenty years and was accepted completely; she even enjoyed House's little rocking motions at the passing of a train, would miss them if the line were closed. And she didn't have to look at the great concrete pillars of the rail, for she had not stepped outside House in the last fifteen years. No, House was all the world she needed, all she loved was within its four walls. She sometimes felt that the walls and floor and windows were her real skin and eyes and body, and that she herself was a soul existing within. She loved House.

A second train passed overhead, closely followed by another. The rush hour was getting into its swing, the window in the wall now showed a solid mass of commuters moving steadily toward the station, eyes directed downward so that they could see where their feet were taking them. Ten years ago John would have been preparing to set out for work now, she would have been putting his lunch in his briefcase, checking to see that he had his season ticket (he was so absent-minded), giving a last polish to his al-

ready immaculate shoes. She had never seen him off, for the sight of the crowded and bustling street always distressed her; she had waited in the kitchen until he had gone, had stayed away from the front door at two o'clock when she knew he would be coming home. Now the door was never opened, House was all calm and quiet and peace.

She finished her breakfast and pressed the disposal button. The greasy plates disappeared into the table with a sigh, and reappeared, clean, behind the glass doors of her crockery display cupboard. She smiled, and, opening the sliding french doors, stepped into the garden. The roses were automatically opening, unfolding themselves for her. The daffodils were still stiff yellow pencils, but they too would begin to open in a few minutes: she had programmed it that way, arranged for the garden to open itself to her presence as real flowers would to the sun. She could feel the last traces of dew on her bare feet as the silky-soft grass began to raise itself to a proud green height. It made a carpet for her as she approached the tiny pool. The fish (it was a real fish, one that could die) was swimming lazily backward and forward, its tiny shadow skimming over the smooth pebbles on the bottom. She loved the way its little mouth opened and closed, opened and closed so regularly, the tail moving like a chiffon scarf waving in the water. She touched the water with her toe; every morning she touched everything that was House, as if to give assurance of her love and its continuity. A circle of ripples spread from her toe, and, because it wavered and became distorted in the tiny waves, she became aware of her face reflected on the surface. She waited until the disturbance died. Her face was old, it had wrinkles and lines. Her hair was old and limp. Her breasts were withered under the beautiful nightdress. Time had crept up on her, had somehow squeezed through the dust-impervious joints which sealed her inside House, had leeched the life slowly from her body. She looked, was sad for a moment, but then smiled, accepting age. It was time, she had known it for weeks now; she was only waiting for John.

With her foot she pressed a little plate by the pool's edge, saw a cloud of food particles stream into the water, saw the fish that

could die eagerly fin his way over to fill his cold gullet once more. As she started back to House, the breezes began, cool and sweet on her skin, gently waving the flowers in the balmy air. The breezes were the last thing they'd added to their debt, five years ago; they were well into their retirement then, and had told themselves that they could afford this small luxury. After all, they'd incurred nothing unnecessary before that, when you thought about it, nothing that could be said to be pure luxury. And they were well worth it, the breezes, well worth that last rounding up of the debt. They'd incurred nothing since and the debt had remained at its never very high level, ready for the children to take over with no fear of having to do without. Oh, yes, the children—she made a mental note to have the telegram typed out ready for when John made up his mind: at their age it would be quite easy for them to forget.

Before going back into the kitchen, hidden now by a haze of sunlight over the french door, she pressed a button in the wall, and watched as the garden roof cleaned itself. It had been impossible to do without a garden roof for some years now, and she liked having one anyway, it completed the self-sufficient privacy of House. Before they'd had the roof fitted she'd had to spray the garden every single morning to wash the soot and dirt from the leaves of her flowers. John said that he would not have it, did not want her risking her health because of the filth spewed out by the factories (she was pleased but she'd had to tell him to moderate his language); he made some inquiries, and one day, when he was out at work, some men had come and fitted the roof. It was unpleasing, having them in her garden, and she'd locked herself in the bedroom, but when they'd gone, she had fallen in love with the expanse of plastic roof, protecting her from everything outside. It immediately became part of the known fabric of House. They only opened it now on rain days, and as they were only once a month she didn't mind; rain was quite nice in its random way.

The last rinse spurted out over the roof, sluicing away the last traces of dirt. The plastic gleamed, sparkled brilliantly. She entered the kitchen, closing the french doors behind her, and looked at the clock—almost an hour since she'd got up, and the

housework not even started. Humming to herself, she moved from room to room, pressing the Air-Revivifier buttons, setting into motion the little machines that scurried back and forth polishing and cleaning and tidying. June, her daughter, was forever nagging at her to have the cleaning system of House modernized, but she wouldn't hear of it, gladly accepted the exasperated remonstrations of her offspring on the peculiar ways of the "old folk." June's own house, June never tired of telling her, was completely automatic. Before going to bed at night you pressed a single button in the hall and when you got up in the morning the house was clean. No noise, no fuss, and a facility which, according to June, the government had no hesitation in allowing on your debt. Of course, she said nothing to June, but Ann thought it sounded cold and hostile. She had always done her own housework, had always taken great pride in personally making House look beautiful. Not that much cleaning was necessary now, but the routine was so much a part of her that she felt herself incapable of breaking out of it, even if she wanted to. No, to serve House was the only thing that made her really happy these days. And besides, in spite of her chiding, it was obvious that June loved House just as much as her mother did, and would have no hesitation in leaving her modern dwelling for it.

She entered the living room and experienced a flash of annoyance as she saw John in his rocking chair before the window, rocking slowly back and forth in the sunlight. It was not that she resented him sitting there in his pajamas (after all, neither of them bothered to get dressed very often these days—nothing they did required formality), but he knew very well that she liked to get the housework done before he got in her way. However, the living room, as always, was already spotless, and she did feel so good in House this morning—oh, all right, let him stay there; after all, he didn't have many pleasures. She closed the door quietly and finished the rooms on the top floor, not allowing the tiny germ of exasperation to spoil her good mood. From the bedroom window she saw that the walks were almost clear of commuters, and there were only half a dozen or so scattered along the monorail platform, heads in their newssheets. Beyond

the station, a vista of roofs, roofs, roofs, under a spiny growth of aerials, and way beyond, only just in sight, part of the green diamond of the town square. No doubt full of empty cans and papers and dirt, she thought to herself, turning with relief from the view that always distressed her for some reason, to the perfect little map of her own garden, showing its miniature perfection all the better because seen from above, all the more private and personal because enclosed by a plastic roof. She sighed with pleasure and turned away, gently touching the heavy curtains as she did so. House required so little service, gave so much in return.

In the living room she lowered herself thankfully into the rocker next to John's, not daring to give any sign of the weariness she felt. For he did go on so: at your age . . . no necessity whatsoever . . . won't have you endangering your health . . . why did we retire, after all? All it did was make her even more tired, and she couldn't answer him satisfactorily, not when she knew that he was only thinking of her. Thinking of her, as he had always done. So she stifled the sigh of relief as the soft plastic received her body, and contented herself with setting the chair on automatic instead of manual. Gently she rocked in the warm sunshine, sleepily observing her garden.

John woke her only just in time. She was deep in a horrid dream of being a fish in a pool, with a cold body and cold damp thoughts. She was dying, drifting slowly to the slimy bed of the pool, thoughts flickering out of existence like bubbles bursting. Cold, colder; dark, darker; blackness, nothingness, end. His words dragged her back and she woke with a start, shivering at the thought of life ending in nothing. ". . . all right now, but I didn't enjoy it one little bit last night, I can tell you."

"I'm sorry, dear, what was that you said?" Without any trace of his normal annoyance when he found out that she hadn't been listening to him, he patiently began again, not looking at her but at the garden. "I said I had another of my turns last night, the sweating and the shivering and everything. I'm all right now, but it was very nasty while it lasted."

Silence. The chairs rocked gently. She had almost drifted off

when he spoke again, sounding embarrassed. "I've been thinking about what you said the other month, you know, about the, er, doctor and the, er, whatyoucallit, and I . . . well, I can see what you mean now." She didn't dare speak, for he was doing something very unusual for him—admitting that he was wrong and she was right. His embarrassment was obvious: he knew very well what the process was called, yet he would say whatyoucallit, as if it was something too trivial for him to use its proper name. There was silence again for a short time. "It's been so nice sitting here this morning watching the garden. It's made me so calm, I . . . I have decided to comply with your wishes; there's no point in enduring pain and unpleasantness unnecessarily, not these days, not when there's so much progress all around us." She laughed at his characteristic attempt at rationalization and impulsively took his hand. "Thank you, my dear," she said. "Thank you, John my dear." He turned to her and smiled and squeezed her hand. He is still my John, she thought, tingling with happiness.

She switched the chair off and almost bounced to her feet. "So much to do," she said, "so much—shall we make it tomorrow, if that's all right with the company?" He nodded agreement and she started for the door. "Oh," she said, holding the door open, impatient to get started, "what about . . . have you thought about . . . ?" Without turning, he said, "I have given the matter some thought this morning, and I think—yes, I have decided on Roof." It was a good choice; she was so pleased. Roof, protecting House, standing arms akimbo at the very top. She went over to his chair and kissed him on the cheek. He grunted. He always pretended that he hated sentimentality. "What about you?" he asked, his voice already woolly with sleep. "Oh, I," she said carelessly, "I shall be Window." And danced out of the room.

She ran straight to the telephone and rang the company. Yes, they had her advance application on file, yes, they believed they could make it tomorrow, would two thirty be all right? Yes, oh yes, two thirty would be fine. Through to the operator now for the telegram to the children. She had thought about it so much that she was able to dictate it straight off: Dearest children, we have decided to go to rest. House is yours to care for now. Be

kind and considerate, we will be watching over you. Your loving mother and father. She had not mentioned it to John, as he would certainly think it too sentimental, but she liked it, thought it a fine message for the children to receive.

And then, after all, there wasn't much to do. In fact, nothing at all. But she managed to keep moving and busy until bedtime, occasionally popping into the living room to check that John was all right, once affectionately kissing his forehead when she found him sprawled asleep, his mouth wide open and his brow furrowed. He slept an awful lot now, dozing through the autumn of his life, his breath dry and murmuring like the withered leaves of a dying tree in the wind. It was about time he made the decision, everything would be downhill from now on if he stayed in the tired old sack of his body. Roof, ah yes, Roof. House hummed happily.

In bed that night it was many hours before she could sleep, and even John had difficulty in dropping off. The windows glimmered in the darkness, and she smiled to herself. She had decided on Window long ago, in fact as soon as she'd finished reading the letter from the company. It had rolled out of the letter slot one morning with the rest of the advertising mail as if it were no different from the usual stuff on sphincter doors (copied from the greatest of machines—the Human Body!) or rainbow ceilings (you'll spend the rest of your life on your back). It was a good thing that she always read the advertising mail, some people just pressed the disposal button as a matter of course without bothering. But she read it all, it had helped her many times to add to House's beauty. And when she read the letter and was offered personally by the managing director of the company a chance to enter into a permanent relationship with House, it was as if the weight of increasing age had been lifted from her all at once. It was the thought of leaving her House that she couldn't bear, of dust being allowed to settle on the shining surfaces, of House performing its tasks without the constant and unspoken thanks of its true inhabitant. But the company offered the perfect answer. And more: the very fact that a company had been set up to

operate the process meant that there must be a demand for it. That had made her so happy, the vision of Houses all over the country, filled with washing machines and cleaning machines and teacups and knives and forks and chairs and beds and paintings and knickknacks and linen curtains and electric ashtrays and adhesive soap trays and orchestrated door chimes and matching toilet-seat covers and bathmats and occasional tables and mirrors and cunningly concealed panels of switches connecting all the rooms with their wires like a blood system; and other things she could have no conception of, small personal things as dear to the hearts of the house-owners as, for instance, her stainless-steel heated double towel ring was to her; and everything, the Houses and all they contained and the special atmospheres that had grown up around them over the years—all loved most deeply and truly by people who must be very much like her. It was very pleasurable to think of millions of people patiently building up their little mounds of possessions over the years of work, carefully selecting and placing and guarding with righteous jealousy, enclosing them lovingly in the protective shells of Houses, where, in delicious and perfect privacy and security, they could be tended and polished and serviced with the special love born of great satisfaction and content. Yes, life was good, and the company was offering an opportunity to make death even better. The windows were the eyes of House, letting in the beauty of sunshine but excluding all else; shimmering, half-living things set strongly into the heavy fabric of House's body; telltales from Outside, but stern barriers for peering eyes. It had not taken her long to choose Window, not long at all, for as Window she could watch forever the thing that she most loved. She turned slightly to see the moonlight on the bedroom window and felt John stir and mutter beside her. Under the covers she gripped his hand tightly, feeling his fingers answer the pressure. They lay close together, staring at the ceiling, like two youngsters on their first night in a new home.

Next morning they both got up early and dressed carefully in such sober and conservative clothes as befitted the occasion.

John immediately went to the living room and resumed his seat before the window, looking, she was glad to note, calm and peaceful. Of course, she couldn't keep still, she went from top to bottom of House at least half a dozen times, cleaning, and cleaning, and cleaning once again. She was so excited, like a child. In the garden, she fed the fish, feeling sorry for him as she watched him gobbling his food. Fishes had to die, sooner or later, go down into nothingness. Ah, well. Roses beautiful, daffodils beautiful, so happy today, so happy, so happy.

There was plenty of time to spare when she joined John in the living room, and she was pleasantly surprised to find that once she sat down she could relax, sit calmly looking out of the window. They talked a little, about old times, but the conversation soon dried up, for there was nothing they had to say to each other, nothing which hadn't been said countless times already in their life together. So there was silence as they rocked together before the window. All her life appeared to her as vividly as if it had been lived that morning. She could remember everything that had happened inside the four walls of House. Why, only yesterday morning she had been thinking about the man who had persuaded them to buy the Dustmaid, and yet that had happened over twenty-five years ago. Twenty-five years . . . so much time had accumulated in House; no dust, but mounds, great drifts of time, years falling like scales in the spotless rooms. And House was hardly different now from when they had first moved in, and not different at all if one was talking of atmospheres and moods. She realized that that was what she loved so much: the unchanging reality of House, the consistency that had maintained itself over years and years. Outside changed constantly, was never the same from one day to the next, but House under its roof (oh, what a good choice John had made) and strong timbers, House never changed. It was a universe, quite separate and distinct from Outside, with its own laws and standards and characteristics. A place of beauty, to be shielded and to act as a shield. Without feeling guilty of disloyalty, she knew with quiet calm that House came first in her affections, before John or anyone else. House had provided the solid base from which she could grow and

develop with absolute confidence; without it she was lost. She loved House with an absolute love, fulfilled herself in the day-to-day routine she carried out in service of that love.

The door signal sounded. John made as if to get up, but she put her arm out to restrain him. "It's all right, dear," she said, "I'll bring him up here. Don't bother to move."

She stood behind the front door as she opened it so that she wouldn't have to see Outside. The doctor stepped in, carrying a globe-shaped plastic case. He was a young man, but quiet and deferential. She liked him, and even conceived a deeper affection for him when he was kind enough to compliment her on House as she showed him up the stairs and into the living room. John stood to shake hands with him, rumbling confusedly, for this was the first new person they had met in some years. The doctor insisted that they both sit down. "If you wouldn't mind reading and signing these forms?" he said in his charming way. "They simply ask you to certify that you are of sound mind—" ("Never sounder," said John, booming somewhat, afraid that the doctor might think he wasn't sure about something he was spending so much money on.) "—and that you make the decision to undergo the process of your own free will—" ("Well," said John in his men's-smoking-room voice, "my wife certainly bullied me over it, but I don't suppose that counts.") "—and the tear-offs, which require both your signatures, are debit vouchers for the company's fees." When they had read and signed, he said, "What was it you, er . . . ?"

"Roof," said John, barking a little in an attempt to sound forceful.

"Window," said Ann, smiling at him and taking his hand.

"A fine choice," murmured the doctor, unzipping his plastic bag and taking out a black plastic globe, festooned with switches and dials. "If you'll excuse me?" he said, leaving the room and pulling behind him several power leads which slid smoothly out from holes on the globe's surface. While he was gone they sat and enjoyed the beauty of the garden; like a pair of upraised cupped hands receiving the sunlight. They did not speak.

"Excuse me," said the doctor, as he dragged the last cable past

their rocking chairs and attached its suckerlike end to the window. "Nearly ready now," he said, smiling at them as he began to press buttons and set dials on the globe.

"What is the, er . . . the, er, principle behind this gadget?" said John, nervously twiddling his fingers. Ann sighed: he always tried to get technical with work-people, as if to show that not even their mean lives were without interest to him, or as if to prove that he could do their jobs without any trouble if he had to. But the doctor was a nice young man, he was already answering as he adjusted his machine. "Well, sir," he was saying, "the process itself is what they call a 'spinoff' from SpaceTech. It was originally used, and still is, to set up the sentient ships they send out to the stars, but then they found it could be applied commercially, and the company obtained the license."

"Interesting," said John, staring vacantly out the window and pulling at the loose skin under his jaw.

"Briefly," continued the doctor, adjusting what looked like a pair of headbands attached to the globe, "if you imagine that your body, everything that's you, is made up of millions of tiny particles, only a very few, maybe one thousandth percent, of those particles constitute the real, essential you, the you that has some permanency apart from your flesh and blood. What this little machine does is to take that one thousandth percent before it's dragged down by the flesh and blood, and, er, sort of embed it, set it into the matrix of something else that might last a little longer than the human body."

"Uh-huh," said John, still vacant.

The doctor pressed a button on the globe and it began to hum. "If you'll allow me?" he said, smiling at them, and placed the metal bands around their heads. "Not long now," he said.

Ann was doing an inventory of House, starting at the top. Bedroom with those beautiful heavy curtains and the fitted wardrobes and wonderfully soft bed, not to mention the thick carpet so gentle on the feet and the dressing table so delicate in its elegance. Bathroom, with its warm smooth tiles and big yellow bath, and the wall mirror and—

"Ready?" said the doctor, his index fingers poised over two buttons.

She missed out the rest of House and started on kitchen straight away. Kitchen had always been her favorite room: glass-fronted crockery display cabinet, with rows of beautiful plates and cups, softly humming Dustmaid, smooth and squat—

There was a fading warmth crawling slowly across her body, thin rosy fingers trailing over her. It was not that she opened her eyes, for she had none, but suddenly the blackness was gone and she was looking at the giant orange sun slowly disappearing below the world, the last long beams of ruby light touching her with their dying heat before they sank out of sight. Between her and the sun there were roofs and roofs and roofs, their bristling aerials silhouetted against the orange globe. She was Window, many-faceted and bright. She could see in any direction she wanted to, all at once. From her attic facet she could see far out over the town, so far that she was sure she could make out the wide smile of the sea. From her ground-floor landing facet her view was of a section of the garden wall, wonderfully realistic synthetic brick, leaves casting long distorted shadows over its surface. From her bedroom facet she saw the monorails swishing like bullets along their concrete rails, faces framed in their lighted windows. There was so much to take in.

There was a stirring above her and she could sense John awakening, being born into his new existence as the strong and impervious protector of her and House from the elements, the air, the Outside. Her and House: she realized with a thrill that there was no longer any distinction, any difference between her and House. She *was* House, she was part of the known and loved fabric. Her fulfillment was now absolute and eternal, she had permanent union with the loved one.

She soon tired of the views from her facets. There was nothing of real interest to see. The stars were coming out, but she did not like them, had never liked them: they were so cold and far away, they had nothing whatsoever to do with her, with House. There were neon signs now, but she had always found them vulgar, and from her new viewpoint they even seemed pathetic, silly little flickers against the darkness. Airplanes passed low overhead with their navigation lights burning, but what had airplanes to do with

her? There was, really, when you thought about it, nothing to see Outside.

With a sense of homecoming after delicious anticipation, she reversed herself in a blink of reflected moonlight, looked not outside, but inside, observed all night without blinking the beauty of her interior, all the rooms of House with their furniture and appliances and gadgets. By morning, when the silent rooms were just beginning to receive the first light, she had decided where all the others would go. June, of course, would be Door, busily opening and closing, knowing all commerce between rooms; Alfred, her weak and bitter husband, would be Floor, willingly receiving the blows and footfalls of all who entered; ceiling, walls, timber and stone, she had the whole fabric of House allocated. Without doubt the foundations would go to her grandson, Adam, he would surely turn out the strongest and most dependable of the whole family. Yes, definitely Foundation for Adam.

The front door opened and in came June and Alfred and Adam. "Oh, what a mess!" cried June, immediately taking off her coat and switching on the Dustmaid. "Seems all right to me," muttered Alfred, following his wife closely until she thought fit to tell him that he was free for the time being. Adam said nothing, but stood for a moment in the kitchen, looking out at the garden, and then began to explore House from top to bottom.

House hummed happily.

House.

FUN PALACE

Men are pigs to begin with, so why not—?

Raylyn Moore

"Jump," said the lab assistant, a medical student named Meeford.

Heller Olay, naked on a twenty-foot tower, looked down and shivered but did not jump. Smith the gorilla, in his regular place along the far wall, grabbed with both hands the sliding grid on the front of his cage and bellowed feelingly.

Meeford penned a goose egg for "negative" in the column labeled "response" on his clipboard and said, in a burst of unintentional poetry, "Okay for today, Olay."

Heller remained immobile, causing Meeford to extend his rhyme scheme. "Hey!"

Slowly the figure on the tower got into motion, began to descend the tall steel ladder. Dr. Morgane Swoos, the project director, rested her prodigiously wrought and marvelously cloven bust on a high counter across the lab from the tower and watched the descent with an expression of troubled interest on her sharp but not really forbidding features.

Heller was a professional guinea pig. At twenty-six he was bald

as a waxed floor from some previous experiment which had produced an unexpected alopeciac side effect. His skin was parchment, his blood was soup. The insides of his forearms and the cheeks of his posterior were covered with the maculae of old needle marks. He had the ropy muscles and marsupial paunch of a man two and a half times his age; the chalky flesh of his limbs was lashed to the deteriorating bone by crawling threads of bulging violet veins.

For the benefit of humanity (and one hundred dollars an injection) he had received at many various times heavy doses of things with names like syncillin, staphcillin, and kanamycin sulfate. He had had the distinction of inhaling a lungful of CS gas long before either the cops or the IRA had ever heard of it. And once, walking home stoned on meprobamate, he had fallen full length in front of a taxi, been run clean over by all four wheels, and pronounced DOA in the emergency room of a busy hospital.

But this kind of adventure was in Heller's more or less distant past. Lately the medical experiments for which he volunteered had become markedly more sophisticated. He was frequently asked nowadays to sign releases permitting surgical removal of bits of tissue from his already ravaged body, or surgical implantation of mysterious electronic items. It was not unusual for Heller to find himself buzzing, clicking, or performing strange acts which he had not premeditated.

Yet for all this he was not unlike more ordinary members of the human race, especially in that he had not so much made a conscious choice of what to do with his life as simply allowed life's tide of vicissitudes to creep over him and finally engulf him.

Eight years before, he had come to the campus of Windy Hill Polytechnic as a freshman (undeclared major; a victim of overchoice, he was confused by the array of things it was possible to study). Having neither affluent connections (he was an orphan) nor a scholarship, he had been steered by the student employment office to the Fun Palace, which was the popular name for an impressive medical research complex lavishly funded by some foundation, or perhaps some number of foundations, judging by the grandeur of the plant and the abundance of expensive experi-

ments constantly going on there.

Or anyway *thought* to be going on there. The Palace had been built at the outside edge of the semirural campus, with staff dwellings in a wooded area behind it. This secluded setting provided enough isolation for the medics that they needed to associate only in passing with the rest of the university faculty and staff.

So all that any outsider really knew was that individual projects seemed to be reaching a conclusion while others were starting, laboratory task forces being organized, disorganized, and reorganized ad infinitum. And in addition to human resources like Heller, the Fun Palace regularly consumed hundreds of tanks of oxygen and other strange gases, crates of chemicals, tons of extraordinary pieces of equipment, and many, many cages of white mice, chameleons, fruit flies, cockroaches, rabbits, monkeys of all sizes, and cats.

When Olay got on the list as a regular volunteer and found that some weeks he made as much as six or seven hundred dollars with no sweat (and only occasional pain), he was hooked. As the academic quarters rolled past, he began to take fewer courses so he could volunteer for more experiments, and eventually and inevitably he dropped away from his studies altogether to devote full time to his work.

Experiments might begin and end, researchers appear and disappear, but Heller Olay went on, as much a fixture around the labs as the electroencephalograph which had several times measured off his alpha and theta rhythms during states of sleeping, waking, dreaming, hypnosis, mathematical problem-solving, and sexual excitation.

From the first Heller was the perfect man for the job, passive, cooperative, sometimes even quietly enthusiastic, grooving whenever possible on whatever was done to him, always ready to acknowledge that his own favorite experiment was the one currently being performed, even including the one in which he'd been shut into a small, lightless cell for several weeks.

Lately, however, working with the relentless Meeford and the inexplicable Dr. Swoos, to whose bust Heller felt drawn in moments when he was up to having feelings at all, he had been

overcome by a sweeping malaise, a haziness of purpose, a steep falling off of energy. A chronic low humming sounded in his head, though he was reasonably certain none of the implantations and prostheses connected with past experiments remained installed.

He had, in fact, felt miserable enough to think of going to a doctor until, even in his bemused condition, he had been struck with the recollection that he was already up to the eyes in doctors, was actually spending a twenty-four-hour day among them. Since he'd become such a regular at the Fun Palace, he'd been permitted to move into a dorm in the woods ordinarily reserved for bachelor staff members and assistants. Dr. Swoos herself was a neurosurgeon, and as project director she headed up a whole parade of neurologists, pathologists, psychologists, ophthalmologists, biochemists, biophysicists, and what not. And since there was already on file such a wealth of precise information on the inner workings of his body, it would seem safe to suppose that whatever was now wrong with him could be easily pinpointed without further analysis. Heller had only to choose which doctor to ask about it.

But as things turned out, this choice was taken out of his hands. The same day that he climbed down off the tower after having refused (quite rightly) to jump, and was shambling toward the exit door, Dr. Swoos called him back and invited him into a small office opening off the main part of the laboratory. She closed the door, ostensibly so that Meeford, if he were still around, wouldn't overhear, and threw Heller a white lab coat, not quite clean, to cover his nakedness.

They sat on opposite sides of a desk regarding each other uneasily. Morgane Swoos, hunched slightly forward from the hips so that she could rest her onerous bosom on the desk top, drummed two fingers against a lamp base for a time and then said abruptly, "Olay, you do trust me, don't you?"

Heller, who had never known a mother, gazed for several seconds at the mammary display before him and was finally moved to declare, "Sure thing, Dr. Swoos. Right. I trust you."

Not that his declaration of faith was quite so unsupported as

it might sound. He knew little enough about her, but what he had heard was reassuring. She had a reputation around the Fun House as an indefatigable perfectionist. If something didn't suit her exactly—and few things did—she would move whatever parts of earth and heaven she needed to in order to make things right.

Uncharacteristically hesitant now, however, Dr. Swoos chose a point on the ceiling on which to fix her focus as she said, "I'm not in clinical practice, of course, and this sort of business is a little out of my line, but I feel it's my moral obligation to warn you that you are not a well man."

"I know," said Heller. "I was already thinking of going to a doc—"

"Oh, don't do that," Dr. Swoos said quickly. "There's nothing a doctor from the—ah—outside could tell you that we don't already know. See here, Olay, I don't want to upset you, but then some things are better laid on the line, don't you agree?"

"What things?" said Heller.

"I mean to say, you're a physical wreck, Olay. Liver—arteries —spleen—heart. Frankly, I don't believe you've got six months."

The humming in Heller's head suddenly intensified. Without warning, his eyes crossed, making it seem that Morgane Swoos's two breasts had, with a scissoring movement, suddenly changed places. A chill sense of unreality settled like a light snowfall over his nervous system. In spite of all these distractions, there was no avoiding the surge of real shock, real fear.

"However," the woman was now going on encouragingly, "there seems to be nothing wrong with your brain. We've completed all the tests. Your judgments are generally acceptable, you seem to know the difference between illusion and reality, which, believe me, gets more difficult for most of us every day." She drummed against the lamp more gently.

"I have this humming in my head."

"Blood pressure," Dr. Swoos decided. "Certainly it's nothing mental." She removed her gaze from the ceiling to stare reflectively into Heller's scared face, then returned it to the ceiling. "I'm putting this badly," she apologized, "but I'm trying to convey to you not only the seriousness of your physical condition,

but the (I hope) welcome news that you have no need to despair. If you will put yourself entirely into our hands, we can—you see, we're on the very threshold of a—you're in the singular position to volunteer, if you will, for an experiment that will be mutually —let me put it this way: do you have any close relatives, anyone who cares about you?"

Heller thought about Jolene, then remembered they had parted on bad terms and he'd since heard she had left the campus. He thought about Janice but couldn't even recall her last name, nor how to get in touch with her. In (relative) health, he'd thought her not worth the pursuit, and news of his grave condition now didn't seem to reverse the judgment. As for family, there had once been a second cousin in San Diego, but for the life of him Heller couldn't recall the cousin's first name, not to mention the last. "No, no one," he told his interrogator.

At this point in their conversation Dr. Swoos drew from the lap drawer of the desk a prepared document with an "X" ready at the spot where he was to sign. Heller was so accustomed to releases, contracts, and hold-harmless agreements that he more or less automatically reached for the ball-point Morgane Swoos held out to him. She did not, however, release her grasp on the other end of the pen until she had said: "You do understand, don't you, Olay, that this will be the most serious experiment you've ever participated in? That it will have profound results for you quite aside from being a solution to your medical problems? In fact the document you are about to sign is a *carte blanche* if ever there was one."

"All I care is will the new experiment keep me from conking out dead in six months?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Heller signed.

Even around the Fun Palace, where acts of high lunacy were SOP (at least in the view of detractors), the new pet of Dr. Morgane Swoos caused a lot of comment. The animal accompanied her everywhere, trotting smartly at the end of a shiny red leash, scrambling in and out of her convertible, bringing in the morning

paper and the quart of milk (two trips, of course) from the front doorstep of her cottage on the Palace grounds.

And she was devoted to *it,* no doubt of that. She was often seen leaning down in a frenzy of sentiment to press its willing head against her breast, and when she spoke to it, her tone was never condescending or commanding but always earnest, respectful, with overtones of both pride and tenderness.

"Heller, you swine," she said, "you are my creature and I love you. Can you ever forgive me? Sure, the love may have begun as guilt. (No pun, darling, and anyway, you're a boar. No pun there, either. Sorry.) But now I'm mad about you and what's to be done? In a way I've defeated myself, but then I hadn't planned on such deep personal involvement."

Heller said nothing.

"You *do* understand why this particular choice, don't you? A dog's so unimaginative, so obvious, and one of the big cats—a panther or lion—would cause too much talk. Not that there isn't talk now. I'd have to be deaf as an amoeba not to know that. But I'm used to talk. People—men especially—have always talked about me because of my—oh, hell, I mustn't burden you with my hangups. It's just that talk is all I've ever really inspired. When it comes time for something more, men always back down. I mean, they like the idea, but at the countdown they get scared of me somehow. Between my work and my figure, I've lived a lonely life, Heller."

They were at home. It was evening. Heller sprawled on a hearth rug at her side, looking up at her, listening. She sprawled on the sofa naked, looking down at him, talking.

"But I was going to tell you why this particular choice. To put it in simplified terms you can understand, it's the metabolism. Your metabolism now is very close to what it was before, which has helped reduce the trauma of the change. The diet remaining almost identical helps, you see. A convenience, too. We can eat together."

Heller grunted.

"Not that something else couldn't have been managed. The field has opened up marvelously, and with the addition of my own

contributions, almost anything is possible. There are days when I could kick myself that I didn't choose a dog after all. Some kind of enormous dog. Or wolf, perhaps a timber wolf. For my own selfish purposes, you understand. Because—now please don't be shocked—in the annals of animal sodomy that makes more sense." She looked at him severely. "I'm not joking, you know. I may be outrageous but I am almost never unserious."

Here Morgane Swoos, her flesh flowing warmly around her, slipped off the sofa and onto the rug and took her companion in her arms. For a moment they lay quietly together, the only sound the crackling from the blaze in the fireplace, which was also the only source of light in the room.

Then she said, "Of course there are certain advantages even now. For one thing we've come to know each other well, far better than we could when I was a project director and you were just a laboratory animal. It happens I'm still directing the project, though. And come to think of it, I guess you're still just a laboratory animal." She hugged him close, and in another minute she had begun to sob. She sobbed for a long time; her breasts, which naked suggested something more than the foothills of the Alleghenies, though in fairness something less than the Grand Tetons, trembled and heaved.

At length she stopped weeping and said, "Don't worry, darling. I'll think of something." At her own words she seemed to brighten and finally giggled. "I suppose I should feel like Circe."

Heller didn't answer.

"At least you're not a male chauvinist pig, are you?" she teased him, running her hands lightly over his broad belly.

Heller made no sound except a faint snuffling.

After still another moment she decided he was asleep, and dragged down a blanket from the sofa to cover them both.

It wasn't so much the shock and anxiety of waking up changed; there were tranquilizers for that. It wasn't even the loss of dignity; his years around the Fun House had already divested him of the last traces of conventional dignity. No, what it was was the goddamned lowdownness of his field of observation. Even the lack

of binocular vision wasn't so troublesome as the fact that everything now seemed to go on several feet above his head. Signs, conversations, gestures, meaningful exchanges of glances—he missed all these and more. And the new information he picked up in compensation—that cockroaches, earwigs, sowbugs, and other such traffic swarmed boldly in the darker corners of the medical buildings, even though the floors were washed regularly with antiseptic solution, and that most of the women who worked in and around the labs had bad legs—didn't really seem worth the trouble.

In a lesser way he was affected too by arcane impulses, as on the occasion when Morgane had detached the leash to let him wander free in the park while she sat reading on a bench. It had rained hard the night before and there were puddles everywhere, none so evocative as the one at a small construction site where a gazebo was being built in the midst of a tulip bed. Heller did not want to approach this shallow trench, where rainwater had combined with the loose loam of the flowerbed to make a thick porridge. All his best thinking, in fact, was directed against his action, but once he was in up to his neck, the feel of the cool, slushy mud on his skin made him groan with delight. Even Morgane had been fascinated, had come running over, notebook at the ready, to make a complete record of the incident.

As for Morgane, he never forgot for a moment that everything he was he owed to her. He had been particularly gratified at the swift change in her attitude toward him after his operation. Not only did it make him drunk with pride to have such a woman interested in him, it also enabled him to discover that he had long been devoted to her in the same way, without ever having admitted it to himself. And he quickly discovered as well what no one else apparently knew (the others evidently not being able to get their attention past the upper part of her figure), that she had long, beautiful legs, perfectly proportioned from hip to ankle. Not that she had much competition, but she was easily the most beautiful female at the Fun Palace, a miraculous exception to the bad-legs norm around the labs.

They did everything together. He shared all her meals, eating

from a plate which she heaped full at her table (or the one in the Fun House cafeteria) and set on the floor for him. He helped her in whatever ways he could, the absence of dexterity not particularly bothering him. He had always been clumsy with his hands anyway, and now, like a convalescing amputee, he used teeth and feet with stubborn courage in unusual ways until he had developed the most improbable skills. He could reach most doorknobs, and made a practice of gallantly opening all portals ahead of his lady. By standing on his hind legs, he discovered he could take in the tops of tables, stoves, and sinks, and often did little chores around the kitchen and the laboratory.

For the rest they played a lot, rolled on the floor, took showers together during which she scrubbed him vigorously ("I don't want them ever to say you're a dirty you-know-what, darling"), and of course when they went to the Fun Palace he participated in more tests than ever before. To his relief, the tests these days took the form not of injections or implantations but of long interviews and IQ, memory, and perception examinations involving flash cards, buzzers, and colored lights, while he tapped out answers and reactions on a machine with a wide typewriter keyboard especially adapted to his condition.

And just as abruptly as he had discovered his momentous love for Morgane, he discovered his abiding hatred for Meeford. Like much other hatred in the world, it was a reasonless, witless emotion, based solely on a vague intuition that Meeford might have designs on Dr. Swoos himself and, things being what they were, would be in a better position to accomplish these designs if he ever got the chance.

Not that Morgane would encourage the likes of the lab assistant, surely. He was a thin, quick-moving, nervous fellow with a much too eager look about him. (Yet if Dr. Swoos should become attracted by Meeford's mind, would she really care what he looked like?)

In any case, Heller lost no opportunity to bite Meeford about the legs, or thrust against him without warning. Several times Meeford was sent sprawling, to Heller's immense satisfaction, once while he was carrying a huge tray of Petri dishes.

Dr. Swoos was amused, but she was also eager to clear up Heller's misapprehension on this score. "Honey, you've got to lay off poor Meeford. I know what you're thinking, but you don't understand. It's not me he's after, it's my job. He's terribly bright and ambitious and he's been working with me now for over a year, so he's convinced himself that anything I can do he can do, even operations of some intricacy. I, however, consider this a positive quality, not a negative one. If you'd had as many assistants as I have, you'd know most of them are shiftless, lazy rockheads who don't give one good damn about the project. In this respect Meeford is a real jewel. If his big chance ever comes, Meeford'll grab it and, I've no doubt, distinguish himself. And nobody will be prouder of him than I. It's always flattering to be emulated."

Heller was somewhat mollified and afterward found other ways to amuse himself around the laboratory. He would tap out love messages to Morgane on his machine, or stand in front of Smith's cage watching the strange habits of the gorilla as he studiously picked nits out of his groin or swung by hairy arms from his trapeze. No one connected with the current project, least of all Heller, really knew what Smith was doing there in the lab. Evidently some group performing some prior experimentation had ordered him up from the animal supply department in the basement and failed to return him. No one even seemed to know how he'd come by the name of Smith, but like Heller before him, Smith had become a laboratory fixture, and by now no one so much as thought of challenging his presence there.

Overall, then, with such a devoted lady and such harmless diversions to occupy him, Heller shouldn't have been having too bad a life. He might even have considered it an improvement over his old one, if only Dr. Swoos hadn't been so unhappy part of the time. She continued to cry a lot when they were alone. He knew why, naturally, and felt distressed too, and sadly helpless.

And then a totally unexpected misadventure occurred which made them both realize that their problems were more serious than even Dr. Swoos imagined.

It was inevitable that the mutual trust of their relationship

should lead them into carelessness. The red leash was so much stagecraft; Heller would have trotted devotedly at Morgane's heels without it, and usually if they went walking late at night it was left at home, along with the matching red harness.

The campus of Windy Hill Poly lay, appropriately, on a hill, with the Fun Palace grounds at the upper edge of it and the small, sleepy college town below. There wasn't much open in the town after dark, not even the drugstore, and not many errands could be done there by night strollers, unless perhaps they came after one of the daily papers in the drugstore's coin-operated racks, which remained on the sidewalk.

But that was excuse enough for Morgane and Heller to be walking down the hill from their house one night when Morgane said, "Darling, I'm tireder than I thought. I don't want to walk all the way down to town and back, especially if it turns out the morning papers aren't on the racks yet. Would you mind running ahead to find out? If you don't come right back, then I'll know they're there, and I'll join you."

Without hesitation, Heller obliged. Despite some folk notions to the contrary, his species has a lot of energy, particularly after a day or two of relative inaction, and his dash down the ten or so blocks of the long hill was swift and virtually effortless.

The morning papers weren't there, and he was just turning around on the drugstore corner to dash back up the hill and save his beloved some steps when he realized he was not alone. Cruising the gutter alongside him was the orange pickup truck that was a pickup in more than the ordinary sense, for it belonged to the town dog catcher, or "animal control deputy" as he was called in officialese. There was a sinister-looking barred cage built onto the truck bed.

Heller was too terrified even to grunt. Instead, he tried to throw the catcher off the track by dodging up and down alleys, but his pursuer abandoned his vehicle and took off on foot, hellbent after Heller, running like a track star.

It was this astonishing alacrity in so unlikely a person as a dog catcher which made Heller first realize that the deputy was not the usual man on the job, to whom Dr. Swoos's oddball pet would

have been a familiar sight around town. No, this was a stranger, a younger man who had evidently chosen his first night on the job to make his mark. And he was so well organized that he had even remembered to bring along net and lariat from the truck.

It was only moments later that Heller, having run into a walled cul-de-sac behind a restaurant, felt the net descend and tighten.

He fought like a wild boar (which, for the moment at least, he was). He tussled and thrashed, and felt the net give and rend in a dozen places, but the officer (an anomaly among dog catchers, he was no coward) waded in before Heller could break entirely free, and tossed the lariat. The loop caught, with a breath-crushing jolt, around Heller's neck, and he realized that if he didn't stop struggling, the rope could be tightened with fatal results. Then where would Morgane's experiment be? he thought selflessly.

And that's how it happened that he was led back to the truck without more protest and hazed into the cage on the rear. That and the fact that he expected to see Morgane running down the hill any minute.

But she didn't appear. The whole event had taken place so fast that Dr. Swoos was still several blocks away, suspecting nothing.

The cage banged shut, the truck sped off. And a little later Heller was goaded rudely out of the truck bed into an outdoor pen at the county animal shelter some ten miles from town. He didn't like the pen, which was a slime of foul mud (the wrong kind). And he particularly didn't like the way the man at the shelter kept hanging over the fence looking Heller over after the dog catcher had driven away.

Finally the shelter man, a coarse, hungry-looking individual with a ruined black felt hat pulled down level with his mean, acquisitive eyes, disappeared for a while, only to return with another man who looked vaguely like him, a brother perhaps, or a cousin.

"No, I ain't never done it, Clint, but it shouldn't be no trouble. No more'n dressin' out a deer."

"Gawd, but I love bacon, and at the price it's been—"

"Hold up a minute. You sure you won't land in a mess for this?

Ain't it your job to hold on to these here animals awhile till the owner calls?"

"Yeah, but if it b'longs to some rich dude farmer around these parts, he might never miss it, Cliff. And even if he checks up, I can al'ays say I never laid eyes on it. Or if it come from the aggerculture school over at that college, they'll never even ast. I hear tell they don't know what they're doin' over there half the time. Bunch a commonists."

"We-ell—"

"I got a huntin' knife in the house."

"No, Clint, if we're gonna do it, first you better let me go to work with my thirty-thirty."

"The hell you say. That ain't the way it's done. You take and tie their feet so they can't kick and then you taken the knife and you—"

"That sonofabitch must weigh more'n two hunnert pounds. Which of us is goin' in there and *tie*—?"

Fortunately, Clint and Cliff were still locked in tense discussion when Morgane Swoos roared up the drive in her convertible and halted in a fusillade of gravel. Though she couldn't have known then how dire Heller's plight was, she was furious. "Unlock that pen at once," she ordered, pointing to the padlock that was the one thing left standing in the way of Heller's rescue.

Clint, his eyes under the hat bugging in confusion and alarm at Dr. Swoos's heaving chest, moved hypnotically to comply. "Yes, *ma'am.*"

On the way home in the car Morgane, talkative with sheer relief, told him he owed his rescue to the man bringing a morning edition to one of the drugstore racks. He had been on hand in time to see Heller disappearing into the truck, and to answer Morgane's frantic inquiries when she arrived. But the emergency just past had driven her to a decision. Her new plan would at once render him not nearly so vulnerable to such outrages as the one just suffered, and make him better suited to the role she had mentioned before. It wasn't anything new. She had discussed it with him earlier but hadn't had the courage then to proceed. But now she was going to go through with it anyway, because life was

impossible the way it was, didn't he agree? And by the way, did he still trust her absolutely?

Heller grunted.

Before, when Dr. Morgane Swoos had flaunted her new pet in the surprised face of the world at the end of the red leash, acquaintances at the Palace and around the campus had made comments.

When the animal disappeared—he was thought to have died—her behavior again became remarkable, and this time perfect strangers, including even the butcher at the supermarket, made comments.

Not that the butcher remained a stranger long. It was a sure thing that he would quickly come to know any customer who appeared faithfully every afternoon to pick up a standing order of choice-grade steaks, chops, and roasts. For one thing, considering the bill, she must be rolling, he decided early in their acquaintance. Or perhaps he should say "well endowed," he corrected himself as he became pleasantly accustomed to the lady's resting her heavy front against the heavy front of his refrigerated counter while she inquired about the quality of a set of ribs or a rolled roast.

And those who already knew Morgane were amazed when they happened to be in the store at the time she, a professed vegetarian, was accepting her bloody purchases from the hands of the delighted butcher. Some of them decided that her loss—however it had come about—had unhinged her. Pity, too; such a brilliant mind. And wasn't she in charge of some real scientific breakthrough over at the Palace? And what the hell was it all about, anyway?

Even Heller had been wondering about part of the change in routine, and one day he reversed the usual order and typed out a question on the machine, which had now been brought to the Swoos cottage for his convenience. "Why don't I ever get taken to the lab anymore? How come I have to stay in the house all the time?"

Morgane laughed. "You have to stay in because I don't want

to take needless chances the way we did before. And you don't have to go to work at the lab anymore because you're retired, darling. You've earned the rest. Like a steady winner turned out to pasture. And we all know how *they* spend their time. Tell me, haven't we been having fun?"

Heller growled deep in his throat, presumably at the memory of the night just past.

"Furthermore, you don't need to work because you've been kept on salary at the lab all this time, and what with that and the bonuses and compensatory payments for one thing and another that you've been getting, you're rich. Which is a good thing, really, because if all goes well, you're going to be able to spend it, really live it up. You see, I have another surprise."

Heller tugged at her skirt to direct her attention to something else he was putting on the machine. "Eat first?"

"You're certainly a ravening wolf," she said fondly, as he followed her into the kitchen. The thick, raw steaks slipped down in two gulps.

Then he pattered back into the living room, narrow tongue lolling, toenails clicking on the places where there was no carpet, and tapped out, "Now tell me."

She lay down close to him on the rug, magnificent ivory flesh against rough gray pelt. Odors were the main thing which occupied his attention now, and he inserted his long nose under her chin the better to inhale her special fragrance, not an applied fragrance, of course, but the odor of pure femaleness.

"All right, Heller, but you have to listen carefully, because it's a very serious thing I'm going to tell you."

He made a rumbling in his throat.

"I'm still not satisfied. This last change has been—well, helpful, nearer the mark. For one thing it answers the problem I've worried a lot about but not mentioned: what would happen to you if something happened to me, an accident or something? This way you could simply run off into the woods and be self-sufficient, and as long as you kept out of sight and didn't do anything rash, like raid poultry yards or something, no one would bother you. But even yet it leaves something to be desired. So I've decided to do the ultimate, the thing no enlightened woman

ever does anymore." She sighed. "I've decided to give up my career for you. Not that it's an unfulfilled career. I've already accomplished more than most ever dare, the chickenhearts, and I've written up everything I've done. The only trouble is, nothing can be published yet. The world isn't ready for it. And if I hang around waiting for it to get ready, I'm sure to land up meanwhile in a lot of trouble. There's already a strong rumor about a big official investigation coming soon of the whole damn scene at the Fun Palace."

Heller growled.

"Well, so I'm better out of it. Not that we won't be ready for them when they come. I've already put all my data in a time vault. They won't be able to prove anything. So there remains just this one thing to be done, and that thing depends on acquisition of precisely the right donor. We must have patience and pray for a miracle."

Heller snarled.

"Miracles do happen, you know. Why, the human brain itself is a miracle. A highly improbable organ. Did you know it controls the functions of literally trillions of cells, is linked to the rest of the body by a webbing of eighty-six major neural channels all especially designed for the constant transmission of infinite numbers of messages? Which doesn't begin to explain the phenomenon of creative thought; that defies explanation altogether. Ah, Heller, it's in the brain that the soul resides, after all. Who needs anything else for perfect communion between two people? (But of course if I really believed that, I wouldn't be going to all this trouble and risk, would I?)"

It wasn't exactly a miracle that happened. Unless a miracle can be defined as the point of intersection of the trajectories of two totally unrelated events which manage to coincide profitably. As when the computer in the payroll office of Windy Hill Poly came unglued, so to speak, holding up all checks for five days, this occurring that same week when Dr. Swoos was firming up her final plan for Heller, and realizing that there was probably very little time left for her to act.

Spike Wissowiscz, a freshman business administration major

especially imported to Windy Hill for his football potential, was one of those left checkless, since he drew his scholarship money direct from the institution. And because of his powerful frame and a habit of taking five or six enormous meals a day, he required a lot of money to keep going. When he had complained a number of times at the administration building about his missing check, saying that he was almost dead broke, someone there suggested he apply at the Fun Palace for some small job to tide himself over, since they always paid in cash at the labs.

So Spike did. And sure enough, he fell into the hands of Dr. Swoos, who seemed inordinately pleased to see him. She made him feel so welcome, in fact, that he didn't hesitate for a moment when she slapped down before him a paper with a tangle of small print and asked him if he would sign.

"Jesus, lady," he said, "I'll sign anything. I ain't eaten for four hours."

Very soon after this Heller Olay walked into the Fun Palace a handsome gray timber wolf; some time later he was wheeled out of one of its operating rooms a hard-muscled, clean-living jock in top physical shape with a considerable life expectancy.

Even Meeford got his big chance at last. Returning to the scene of action after Swoos had gone off in triumph and hope with her subject, Meeford poked about disconsolately. There was nothing among the skills Dr. Swoos had just displayed that he hadn't mastered, no technique he hadn't learned as her assistant. Yet she got all the glory; he got only the cleanup jobs. He looked for a long time at some leftover gray-white, wrinkled, convoluted tissue visible behind glass as it steeped in a temperature-controlled broth, an assortment of plastic tubes linking it to some inscrutable machinery. Then he wandered on, coming at last into the deserted main lab assigned to the Swoos project. It was just dusk and the place seemed more than ordinarily gloomy.

Meeford flipped on all the lights to cheer himself up, and his eye fell upon Smith, who with one hand was idly scratching a flea on his massive chest, while with the other he masturbated in a kind of absent-minded way.

Morgane Swoos and Heller Olay, each of them independently wealthy, both of them brimming with health and good spirits *(mens sana in corpore sano)*, and together thought by many to be the most spectacularly handsome couple since Mansfield and Hargitay, went to live in Dominica. Of course they had to change their names, and practice other similar discretions, because of all the things Dr. Swoos might otherwise have been called to account for in her past distinguished but unorthodox career.

And that's not quite all. There is a secondary story about how Windy Hill Poly, a third-rate university, the following autumn managed to field a football team that very soon established a first-rate intercollegiate record for no lost games and unheard-of scores. It seems the Hill's secret weapon was a newcomer, a running back named Spike Wissowiscz. This instant hero played a fast-moving, hard-driving game, halting just short of what was forbidden by NCAA codes. There was no stopping him. He was known affectionately to his teammates as "the big ape," and sportswriters and telecasters occasionally described him as "a real gorilla."

WHEN WE WERE GOOD

What are children for, anyway? (And if the answer is so obvious, why can't you think of it right now?)

Dave Skal

On Friday my father beats me.

On weekends I play granddaughter to a jet-setting dowager, covering my quick-healing bruises with elegant frocks bought specially for the purpose. I spend Monday afternoons in church, giving comfort to men of the cloth who need assurance that all is well with youth. On Tuesdays I lend my services to a licensed child molester, and Wednesdays to a lower-class dyad, who treat me with all the respect befitting the size of their investment.

Thursdays are open.

Anything can happen today.

I wake early to the cold hostel, switch off the sleeper's programmed tapes and hurry shivering into the lightbath adjacent to my cubicle. I close my eyes tightly and activate the unit, feeling the sudden blast of ultraviolet light, the ticklish flurry of dead skin. My body glows pinkly as I brush away the monomolecular flakes that remain. Like a chrysalis, or a snake shedding its skin. I recite an invocation silently and begin to dress, picking a work-

skirt from the closet. A flowing garment of many possibilities, ideally suited to our needs. Psychodrama. Mime. Improvisation. Anything can happen, as long as one remains flexible.

Morning sounds within the hostel: a sleeper unit groaning, the rush of a distant lightbath. I go to the dining area early for my allotted fare. The proctors are already eating. I sit near them, shamelessly hoping they may notice me. Soon, perhaps, I will be a proctor myself. In the meantime I must make a good impression. I take my food and again recite an invocation—this time to the hormone regulators that protect us.

Breakfast finished, I hurry across the garden to the amphitheater. Already hungry faces have assembled at the observation areas. For the moment I ignore them and join the other chiggies. The domed theater rapidly fills; the class murmurs eagerly as we await the appearance of our protector, God. A buzzer signals his arrival. All chiggies hush and stand at attention. The proctors survey us sternly.

A door opens to reveal an elegant woman of late middle age. She has Teutonic features and a mane of silver hair. A black evening dress and matching pumps complete the picture. There is a momentary silence—surely this cannot be our God! But then the woman smiles warmly, motioning us to be seated with a familiar gesture. There are gasps of approval and recognition. Another triumph of disguise! God is a model for us all. His disguises are as unpredictable as life itself—he has appeared to us variously as man and woman, youth and sage. Once he even appeared as a dwarf. It is not known how he effects these illusions; this is a matter of faith. We are only expected to follow his protean example as best we can. Life is change, and change requires adaptation—even at the expense of recognizable personality.

God often says that.

"This morning I've decided it might be wise to refresh our minds with a discussion of aims and goals," he begins, his voice a dark contralto. "I fear that many of us have been taking our duties lightly, and have lost sight of the profound moral responsibility our culture has bestowed upon us. It has been many years

since the privilege of procreation was entrusted to the state, and it will be many years more until population levels once more reach manageable levels. In the meantime, child-surrogates have become increasingly important as morale-boosting tools. . . ."

I think of the famine, the crowded streets and despair that only touch us tangentially. "Infants have an inborn tendency to smile," says God. "The primary function of this reflex is to reinforce parental behavior in regard to care and feeding. The illusion of being loved by the child is of the utmost survival importance—"

I realize my attitude is regrettably ambivalent. I have my duties, yes—but the haggard faces beyond the garden wall I find irksome and depressing. I shudder with a barely suppressed anger at the thought of their withered balls, their useless breasts. *Oh, slick, cynical chiggie! Have you no humility? Your duty is to the state—survival supplants all other values. . . .*

"Personality is a myth," says God, "a dangerous myth, the quest for identity man's oldest source of torment. Give it up! There is no place for self-interest when racial survival is hanging in the balance."

He is right, I know. The world is a crowded, evil place, its affairs too long left to chance. It needs discipline, control. Individual whims are of no consequence. And yet I have ambitions of my own. I recite an invocation and try not to think about it.

God continues, "There have been wonderful accomplishments in the laboratories, not the least of which are your healthy young minds and bodies. Thanks to incubation *in vitro* and other measures, birth defects have been almost entirely eliminated. . . ."

Yes, we are perfect. All the world worships us—knowing this fact gives me a certain satisfaction. As the little heroine of Mr. Nabokov's instructive novel amply demonstrates, the world is obsessed with youth, purity, the seeming of innocence. Adults have always required clean sheets to befoul. I enjoy the attention, although I would dare not reveal this to the others (I think of the jealous stares from high places when Cornelia Vandermeer shows me off in public—envious fools who must make do with dogs and cats!).

God dismisses us for the day. The weather is sunny and brisk;

I go out into the garden without a sweater, warming myself with my arms. The air is thick with adult voices—good weather always brings them out! They strain against the fences, three deep at times, faces full of hunger. The chiggies display themselves self-consciously, a Sunday promenade. There are chiggies to suit every taste: chiggies in sailor suits, chiggies in pinafores. The air is alive with footballs, parasols, the laughter of rough-and-tumble tomboys. The adults make their usual frantic pitch for attention. They bellow, cajole, whistle like tourists at the zoo. Some throw candy, others more extravagant supplications. . . .

"Look, she smiled! She's waving at us!"

Outside the garden, they do not bother us—we are armed and have little patience with unsolicited attention. The state, wary of the psychological requirements of those who cannot afford more personalized service, provides the garden. They need us the way they need the stinking, spoiled pets that overrun the city, or the snapshots they hoard in moldering shoe boxes. To make sure they have been noticed. To prove that they exist.

A runt chiggie teases a gaggle of spectators. They threaten to spill through the barrier like a hot fluid, uncontrollable. He prances and flirts with them, bouncing a flabby rubber ball in their direction, catching it at the last moment. His actions are vain and kittenish. He flatters himself. A deadly sin. I feel a vague, swelling resentment at his antics, which I have observed on many occasions. Is it possible he reminds me of myself? I shrug off the thought. Perhaps tomorrow I will file a report.

Another Wednesday. Clive and Dante take custody of me for the day. A struggling ambidexter dyad—no doubt I represent a sizable crimp in their pocketbook. Dante's ears have been pointed, either through genetic accident or design. Clive is less theatrical, although he is deathly allergic to oranges and can have them nowhere in the house.

I have no opinion of them. They take me shopping and buy me a lot of garish clothes. They think they are indulging me, although it is clear the spree is for their benefit. I try to seem pleased.

Dante buys Cokes. He addresses me in conspiratorial tones, as

if I had never heard his story before.

"... our *own* child, once, when that sort of thing was possible." He stirs away his drink's carbonation. "Three thousand for the ovum, another grand for the cow to plant it in. Goddamn *hus*band turned out a wife-beater. The child was hydrocephalic."

Both men still have terrible fights, blaming one another for the tragedy that began with an enucleated cell each had helped to fill. That was before they changed the water, and other things.

"Of course back then we needed a woman," says Clive with a tired sigh. "Things are so much simpler now."

The runt continues his taunting.

Today I will file a formal complaint. I feel myself smile as a middle-aged man in a rumpled suit reaches through the grating and snatches the semi-inflated toy the runt has allowed to bounce too close. "C'mon," he says. "C'mon and get the ball from Daddy!"

The runt hesitates. He is responsible for the play equipment, but he is wary of the yellow line across which he is forbidden to move. He looks diminished and vulnerable without his prop. He squints uneasily in the afternoon sun, shifts his stance, brushes aside a stray length of pale hair. No matter what he does, I've got him.

"C'mon! Come to Daddy!"

The runt steps cautiously over the line—another item for my report! A demented look illuminates the man's face as he holds out the plaything. The other adults cluster behind him, waiting. The runt moves forward. I scarcely breathe. The man's face is florid, feverish—he drops the ball, laughing now, and his arms wrap around the boy like the tentacles of a carnivorous plant.

Laughing, the red-faced man pulls the runt against the iron fence. The crowd goes wild. They have been denied too long. They tear at the screaming runt like a school of piranha. It goes on forever. Perhaps I am screaming too. The torn body slumps to the asphalt. The adults babble and keen. A red-smeared woman holds a piece of rib in her hand and beats it against the fence in a mechanical gesture. . . .

I run from the garden. I must find our protector. *A piece of rib, wielded like a crazy weapon.*

The corridors are empty. I shout God's name. There is no answer. Does he know what has happened? Does he dare send us among them, now?

I go directly to his quarters, where it is forbidden to pass. But the proctors are nowhere in sight. Possibly they were drawn by the screams. In that case God will favor me, being first to report.

The door is not locked. I push it open upon a closet smell, darkness and something more. Oppressive and unventilated, the room stretches on endlessly. There are row upon row of clothes, costumes. There are tricorn hats and flowing Inverness capes, all dash and bravado; chain mail from the Middle Ages, elaborate powdered wigs and sachets. Some I recognize—they have been part of God's disguises. There are some biofab designs as well; rippling, mewling inventions grown from strange tissue cultures. These hang above a special trough that feeds them a steady stream of nutrients. They lap it up like kittens, a delicate sound.

Then I see it, hanging grotesquely on a rack of its own. A woman's skin.

He's gone crazy! He's killed a woman and cut off her skin!

I approach the pale object, my heart choking on its own blood. The skin flaps out at me like an atrocious flag, something from a torture chamber. Alive, impossibly, it shudders as I draw near . . . a woman's fine white pelt, peeled off like the skin of a fruit, the actual woman discarded.

I touch it. It recoils.

I take it firmly in both hands, half in horror, half in fascination. Its silky writhing subsides and I can see that it is a total organism in itself. They must have grown it for him, in those laboratories. The edges reach out, seem to melt and join with my own skin. The epidermal fusion tingles. Its nipples swell, big as walnut halfshells. It wants me.

I leave the pelt and call out God's name. I look around the room, but it is lined with mirrors and multiplies my own image endlessly. I pull down a rack of clothes, screaming. I forget what

I have come here for. Another rack comes crashing down, and another, and there I see him.

It is God. He lies comatose on a hydrobed—armless, legless, incomplete and vulnerable, surrounded by his living prostheses. His face is claylike, final as a death mask. Arms, legs, whole sections of bodies squirm on their hooks.

I hurry to my cubicle and vomit into the sink. My legs cannot support my weight. My mind cannot deal with the enormity of the fraud I have witnessed. I try to blot it out, but I think I understand anyway.

God is our prosthesis.

"You don't have to listen to them, the ones who come to me, the ones who still have use for people like me. They talk of the void in their lives, the futility of existence, and, yes, I understand them. No sense of personal continuity, only a vague promise of racial salvation . . . sometimes it is difficult to encourage them. . . ."

The priest has been drinking. I listen politely to his confession, although his tone has become blustery and aggressive. The events of the previous day rush into my mind, disrupt my concentration. I watch the priest through a haze, not really hearing his words. An unhealthy man in a clerical collar . . . my mind focuses on random details; an angry shaving rash, spiky hair. "They own our bodies," he says. "Do you know they even sterilize priests? Yes, it's true . . . but you'll never have to worry about that, will you? You'll stay young forever and never have to deal with such things . . . a good chiggie never gets old, isn't that the way?" He takes another drink. "In the eyes of God—"

"You forget. I don't recognize your god." Nor mine either.

"Ah, they've taken care of that, too? They grow gods as well as men in those bottles?" He laughs explosively, dropping his head onto the desk before him. An angry boil glistens at the back of his neck. Die, I think. If you can't deal with life then die and be done with it! I can do nothing for you! A truncated god, a sideshow diety, a life propped up with illusions—

My muscles tighten. How I hate this man, my existence with

him, the chaste, ridiculous clothes I wear! Shall I confront him with my body, the body which other men have beaten and violated? And women! Would he be surprised at the deception? The way I have been deceived . . .

"Tell me," he says, raising his head from the blotter. "How long have you been this way? Ten, twenty years?"

I do not answer. The priest begins muttering to himself angrily. ". . . an abomination . . . spiritual abortion . . ." He stands up. He reaches out to touch me and I can smell his liquorish breath.

"That's not in our contract," I caution him.

"You can't go on like this . . . they've corrupted us, whored us, sold our souls to the devil! But we can still save one another—there is still that possibility . . ."

"No—" Rough hands seek me out.

"Just a little longer . . ."

I push away, fumble for the holster beneath my frock. "You have violated the terms of our contract. No one would ask questions." I aim for the heart. *Armless, legless, a sitting target—*

He stares at me with bleary eyes. My hand trembles—why? It has killed before. But now the situation is suddenly changed. I leave the room abruptly, a failure. I am no longer in control.

God is angry. I do not look at him, whatever form he has taken. Does he know my secret? Our secret?

"There have been complaints," he says, "serious complaints which you can no doubt help explain. A priest has attempted suicide—luckily he was saved. But there have been others." The air smells sweetly of some fresh cologne. Here God is clean, immaculate. But in that awful skin I smelled his sweat.

I do not answer. I stare out the window in an embarrassed silence, past the garden fence (now electrified), at an old woman on a park bench. A life-sized doll sits at her side, and she talks to it as if it were a living child. It does not have eyes.

"Well?"

I have nothing to say. I am dead. "I must warn you," says God. "Turn back before it is too late. Return to your duties in a spirit

of humility. Have we not impressed upon you the hellishness of the outside world, the torments that would await you upon leaving the fold? Here, at least, you are part of a solution—a harsh solution, but a solution nevertheless!"

I look up slowly. A dark figure, covered with a veil. He shakes his head wearily. He has been through this before. I go back to my cubicle and lie quietly on the sleeper. I stare obliviously into the hypnohood, and dream of nothing.

They've changed the food. I've begun to menstruate.

Time passes. I have taken a name, taken a lover. He brings a gift to our cramped rooms—a drug that will induce a psychological simulation of pregnancy and birth. The latest thing. I swallow it hesitantly. The taste is bitter.

"Will it hurt?" I ask.

"I don't know," he says, and leaves the room. For men there are few condolences, chemical or otherwise. I cry briefly for him, but soon the drug is in command.

The room grows dim. Silently, the phantom child takes form —a child of impossible beauty, eyes tightly closed, its face frozen in a perpetual smile of respect and adoration. Formed in my own image, stillborn, inert . . . a perfect child.

The Memory Machine

I challenge my opponent to give a frank, affirmative answer: Yes or No!

—Abraham Beame

Quel Beau Sentiment!

There's a handsome mountain called Avala near Belgrade; people go there on one-day excursions. . . . It also has a small plaque to the memory of Soviet Marshal Zhokov, who died there a few years ago when his plane crashed into the mountain.

—"SF East, an SF Safari to Redland," by Frederik Pohl, *Galaxy*, November 1974

Poets' Corner

Once a space-ship, filled with beetles
  Faced the unknown; sailed from Neptune,
Sailed into the empty heavens
  Soared into the mighty vacuum.

They explored the solar system
  Making weighty calculations,
Marking moons and mapping planets
  Filling books with great equations.

Then, approaching one great planet
  Covered o'er with seas of air
Which was dark unto their vision
  Murky, desert, ocean bare.

For their sight sense was so different
  That they saw but ultra-waves,
Which, invisible to mankind,
  Yet reflect from air to space.

"Is it possible," one shouted,
  "That life be on a plane that lays
Far below this seething mixture
  Which shuts out our Ultra-rays?

"Fifteen pounds an inch, I've figured
  Would lie upon each poor inmate,
No! If life dared such unheard pressure
  It would surely meet its fate."

So they turned their space-ship homeward
  While was entered in a tome,
"Earth is barren, life unthought of,
  It is drown'd in some strange foam."

—"At the End of the Spectrum," by The Planet Prince, *Wonder Stories*, December 1931

I'll never forget the time I wrote a gag-piece on a Goose that laid golden eggs and invited readers to write in with suggestions as to how to get the golden eggs to hatch. I got a number of letters, some from men and some from women. The men went through all sorts of scientific folderol (some of it damned ingenious). As for the women, almost to a woman, they said, "Get a gander."

—Isaac Asimov, in *PITFCS 136*, undated (1960)

Just Fooling Around, Though?

3. *Mechanical isolation.* Mating is attempted but fertilization cannot be achieved because the genitalia do not fit together. This

type of incompatibility was long thought to be a primary isolating mechanism in animals. At present, however, there is little evidence that matings in which the genitalia are markedly different are ever seriously attempted.

—*Genetics,* by Monroe W. Strickberger

Eat Your Heart Out, John Glenn

"What, your wife is going with you?"

"Somebody must do the housekeeping, even in the rocket. That is not work for men."

—"A Daring Trip to Mars," by Max Valier, *Wonder Stories,* July 1931

Swingers of Space

Each girl looked at the other, and each liked what she saw. (*The Skylark of Space,* p. 61.) "If you don't need us for anything, Dick, I think Peggy and I will go upstairs," Dorothy broke the long silence. (*Skylark Three,* p. 50.)

. . . Seaton stood motionless beside his friend's wife upon the slowly rising lift; while Crane, Dorothy, and Shiro remained in the control room of the *Skylark.* (*Skylark of Valeron,* p. 86.)

They drank; lightly and intermittently at first, then deeply. (*Skylark of Valeron,* p. 114.)

"Well, I won't, then—why, I wouldn't touch that thing for a million dollars!"

"All right; watch me feel mine, then. . . ." (*Skylark of Valeron,* p. 65.)

Seaton, although now restored to full vigor, held himself rigorously in check. (*Ibid.,* p. 91.)

"No; keep on coming one minute more, Peg—" (*Ibid.*, p. 105.)

" 'And that,' " put in Margaret roguishly, "as you so feelingly remark, 'is a cheerful thought to dwell on—let's dwell on it!' " (*Ibid.*, p. 116.)

"Yes . . . and I love you . . . it's wonderful, how happy you and I are . . . I wish more people could be like us . . . more of them will be, too, don't you think, when they have learned what cooperation can do?" (*Ibid.*, p. 206.)

WHICH IN THE WOOD DECAYS

Try your nefarious schemes on anyone else, but never on a thousand-year-old woman whose children die young.

Seth McEvoy

The old lady popped a chocolate in her mouth and began reading from a slender volume of poetry. " 'First the Waves shall lose their biting Salts / The Winds shall cease to sound in hollow Vaults / and wanton Fish shall leave their native Seas / and bask on Earth, or brouse on leavy Trees.' " She turned and looked at her companion. "Do you know who said that, Glaucus?"

"No, madam, I do not. I was not hired to know such things."

"Be that as it may, I am trying to teach you. Now, Glaucus, you were the author of that poetic phrase."

"Madam, I did no such thing. I have no talent. Perhaps you wrote it?"

"I haven't written any poetry since I was a little girl, and you know that was a very long time ago. You didn't really write it, a human wrote it in the eighteenth century, one William Diaper. A character of his *named* Glaucus said that."

"Diaper. An odd name for a poet. Are you trying to play a joke —is it a pun?"

"Robots!" Sibyl sighed. "Would I lie to you, my own slave?"

"No, madam, I suppose you would not. Can you tell me anything else about this William Diaper?"

"Yes. Swift said of him, 'His name is Diaper, P— on him.' Will that do?"

"I think that will do. How much longer are you going to be teaching me poetry? Even though I am a robot, I grow tired of poetry easily. Why do you teach me this thing you call poetry?"

"Oh, I don't really know. I suppose it is because it is more amusing than counting my money."

"Perhaps, madam, if you had some children, you would enjoy teaching them."

"Glaucus, you know I haven't had any children in four hundred years. I could have some, I know, but it is so disappointing. They die so soon. Most of them don't even live a quarter of a century. Such a shame. I don't believe that I even have any grandchildren. Of course, I could have forgotten one or two."

"No, madam, I think they are all dead. As I recall from studying your family records, the only one who didn't die of Wainright's Syndrome was young Jack Hall, who wandered off in the swamps of Venus. He was your twenty-three times great-grandson."

"Anyway, I don't think I want to have any more children. Besides, I've not found any attractive men who could love me for my money and ignore my looks. I guess no one wants to fool around with a wrinkled old prune, even if she is strong, healthy, and disgustingly wealthy."

"Yes, madam. Shall I prepare your tea?"

Sibyl nodded, and Glaucus rolled out of the sunroom. Sibyl sat down in a plush chair and read a volume of twenty-fourth-century verse. After a few minutes, Glaucus rolled back in.

"Madam?"

She looked up. "Where's the tea, Glaucus? We haven't run out of cakes, have we?"

"No, madam, there's someone to see you."

"Tell them I'm not interested. I gave up charities a hundred years ago. Show them out, if you've made the mistake of letting them in."

"No, madam, they aren't asking for charity. It is a Miss Ann Hall, who claims to be related to you. Her papers seem to be authentic—I took the liberty of checking, since there are many who would like to claim to be related to you."

"Oh, her. I remember now. I'd forgotten. Don't know how I could have, when you mentioned Jack Hall a few minutes ago. She's Jack's daughter. Wrote me a few years ago and wanted some money. I, of course, ignored her. I made my way in the world, and she must make hers, in the few short years she has to live. How old is she?"

"Twenty."

"She'll live five more years, and then Wainright's Syndrome will get her too, if the Hall blood runs true. I suppose I must be civil, so show her in."

Glaucus left, and rolled back a few minutes later with Ann Hall and a tall green man.

Sibyl looked up. "You must be Ann Hall. Who is your green young friend, and why is he smoking a cigar in my house?"

"Hello, Grandmother." Ann smiled hesitantly. "This is Rintz Jawakian. He's from Venus, and he's my boy friend." Rintz smiled and puffed on his cigar.

"If you *are* my granddaughter, you ought to be more careful whom you associate with. I thought the Venerians were still savages." She sniffed the air. "You smell funny, too. Are you a savage, Mr. Jawakian?"

Rintz turned a brighter shade of green and looked at Ann. Ann smiled and nudged him.

"My people are not savages," he said. He puffed his cigar a little.

"Please, Mr. Jawakian. Give me your cigar. The stench is enough to turn my delicate little stomach."

Rintz sighed, took one last puff, and handed it to Sybil. She held it gingerly and put it in a little box on the bookshelf. "Thank you, Mr. Jawakian. Now, who wrote, 'Twas near that long deserted hut / Which in the wood decays / Death's axe, self-wielded, struck his root / and lopped his desperate days'?"

Rintz fidgeted. "I'm sorry, but I don't know."

"Of course you don't know. Ignorance abounds these days. It was Charlotte Brontë, of course."

Sibyl turned toward Ann. "Now, what can I do for you? Tell me, dear Ann, what brings you here from cloud-filled Venus?"

"Grandmother, you remember when I wrote you a few years ago?"

"Yes, and you need not mention it. There's no point in discussing it."

"That's what I was afraid of. I came to visit you anyway. I won a jingle contest that Bartz's Soap Flakes had."

"Ah, I see you serve the muse of poetry, too. Tell me, what could possibly rhyme with Bartz?"

"Never mind that. Tell me, Grandmother. Who will inherit all your fortune if you should—uh—pass away?"

"Why, one of my children, or one of their children. I suppose you would, my dear. But that won't happen. The doctors don't know why, but I just keep on living, year after boring year. I'll be one thousand one hundred and eighty-seven next July."

"Of course, you might die if you were injured or something, wouldn't you?"

"That's not likely to happen. Glaucus here will protect me, won't you, Glaucus?" The robot nodded. "I'm trying to educate him, but he still remains the latest model in guard-robots. Why, Glaucus could snuff you both out like votive candles. But what a morbid conversation. Don't you young people have anything more cheerful to talk about? What were you doing on Venus before you won the soap-flakes contest?"

"I was a waitress. Times are hard for most of us these days."

"Well, don't worry, my dear. You'll make your way in the world. Why, when I was a little girl, I used to— Say, I just remembered that I've got to watch a poetry program on the TV. I hate to be rude, but Glaucus will show you out. Run along now, and do come back and visit me before you leave for that stinky planet." She sniffed the air, and looked at Rintz. "Yes, a very stinky planet."

"Thank you for seeing us, Grandmother. We'll be back to see you and I think we'll bring you a present." Ann took Rintz's arm

and they walked out, escorted by Glaucus.

Glaucus rolled back a minute later. "Do you want your tea, madam?"

"Yes, that would be nice. Such a charming couple, don't you think?"

"A bit peculiar, madam. I think you were a little impolite to that green gentleman."

"He was no gentleman, Glaucus. I recognize a Venerian swamp pirate, even if you don't. He certainly smelled awful, even after I took his cigar away. I've met Venerians before, but he smelled quite odd, now that I think of it."

"If you say so, madam."

"I wonder what that smell reminds me of?" She opened the little box on the bookshelf and took out Rintz's cigar. "Beastly things, cigars. I have an idea, Glaucus. My seventh husband smoked cigars, and he always made sure that they were kept in airtight cases."

"So that they wouldn't dry up, I would guess."

"Yes, but another reason as well. Tobacco takes in any stray odors very easily. I want you to take this cigar down to the basement. My fourth husband was a chemistry nut, and I think most of his automatic analyzing equipment is still working. Find out what smells are in this cigar."

Glaucus took the cigar from her and turned around.

"Oh, Glaucus, wait until after tea."

"Yes, madam." If robots could sigh, Glaucus would probably have sighed.

Two days later the doorbell rang and Glaucus answered it.

It was Ann and Rintz. Rintz was carrying a wooden box under his arm.

Glaucus opened the door. "Tradesmen to the rear, please."

"We're not tradesmen," said Ann. "Don't you remember us?"

"Yes. I was practicing humor. Your grandmother is trying to teach me about jokes. I applied her third rule and called you something that you were not. Was it funny?"

"Not very. Is Grandmother home?"

"She is always home, Miss Hall. I don't believe she has left this house in the last hundred years. She said to show you in if you came back."

When Ann and Rintz moved to enter, Glaucus blocked their path. "I must apologize. I am a guard-robot, and it is my function to guard madam. May I see what you have in the box?"

Rintz smiled and handed the box to Glaucus. "It's a present for Ann's grandmother. A present all the way from Venus."

Glaucus opened the box and reached inside. He pulled out a small animal that looked just like a tiger-striped cat. "Is this a domestic cat?"

Ann patted the cat. It purred and wriggled in Glaucus' hand. "This is a tame cat from Venus. A very unusual present."

"Yes, I would say so. Madam has shown me pictures of cats. All Earth pets were outlawed a long time ago. How did you get this past customs?" He put the cat back in the box and handed it back to Rintz.

"We put it to sleep and hid it inside a fur coat. May I see my grandmother? We have to go back to Venus tonight."

Glaucus led them to the sunroom, where Sibyl was reading poetry.

"Madam, here is your granddaughter and her companion."

" 'Far less than Mites, on Mites they prey / Minutest Things may Swarms contain / When o'er your Iv'ry Teeth they stray / Then throb your little Nerves with Pain.' " Sibyl turned around to her guests. "Oh, it's you again. I had no idea you'd be back so soon. Glaucus, bring some tea for our guests." As Glaucus rolled out of the room, she continued, "What brings you back so soon? Not more gloomy conversation, I hope. I was just reading Richard Savage. Charming fellow, he was."

"Yes, Grandmother. We brought you a gift, all the way from Venus." Ann looked to make sure that the robot was still out of the room. "Yes, we brought you a kitty-cat all the way from Venus. It's well trained and housebroken. Rintz trained it himself."

"Why, thank you. I haven't seen a kitty in ages. How did you know I loved cats?"

Glaucus rolled in with a tea tray. As he served tea, Sibyl said, "Well, where's my present? I just love kitties."

Rintz reached inside his shirt. There was a faint humming sound; Glaucus fell over with a crash. Rintz stood up. "Your robot seems to have something wrong with it." He examined the robot and sat down again.

"Poor thing. He's always been so good. I'll call the repair service and they'll bring me one while he's being fixed. I'd hate to waste all the training I've given good old Glaucus." She reached for the phone.

Ann said, "Wait till we're gone, Grandmother. We've got to go home soon. Don't you want to see your present?" She carefully opened the box. Inside, the cat lay and purred. "Come on, kitty, come out and see Grandmother." The cat still lay there. Ann turned to Rintz. "The damn thing won't come out of the box."

Sibyl spoke. "Here, maybe I can coax it out." Ann and Rintz looked at each other and smiled. "Yes, Grandmother, coax it out."

Sibyl reached behind her chair and pulled out a small brown package. She unwrapped it. Inside was a bloody piece of steak.

The cat wrinkled its nose and sat up. It leaped out of the box, across the room, and tore the steak out of Sibyl's hands. It quickly devoured the steak, then leaped up on the table beside Sibyl.

Ann was visibly startled. "Why did it hit the steak, Rintz?"

"You mean," said Sibyl, "why didn't it tear me to pieces instead?"

"Uh, er, no, Grandmother. What would give you that idea?"

Sibyl took a piece of paper out of her pocket and read from it. " 'The kirsk is a native of the planet Venus. Normally a docile animal, it will attack any warm-blooded creature without provocation. The natives of Venus . . .' That's you, Mr. Jawakian. 'The natives of Venus protect themselves and their animals by using the juice of the paug plant smeared over their bodies, which neutralizes the kirsk's hostile tendencies.' " She petted the kirsk, which purred and playfully batted her hand. "Nice kitty-kirsk. Thank you for such a nice present."

Ann stood up. "Why, Rintz, how could you do such a thing?

To try and—and—kill my grandmother."

"Shut up, Ann," said Rintz. "Our little plan didn't work, but there's more than one way to skin a kirsk, as my people say."

"Yes, dear Ann, don't pretend innocence. It really doesn't become you."

Ann sat down. "Well, Grandmother, how did you figure it out?"

"Elementary, my dear Watson, as an old writer used to say. I smelled something unpleasant about your Venerian friend, and analyzed it by using the remains of his horrid cigar. It was simple to do, really. I tracked it down, and the library was most helpful in telling me what paug plant juice is used for on Venus. I had Glaucus synthesize some, and that's why the kirsk didn't tear *me* to pieces. Still, it's the thought that counts, and it's such a nice present." The kirsk gave a friendly meow and Sibyl patted it. "Now, what am I going to do with you two, my dear?"

Rintz stood up. "You aren't going to do anything. Your robot isn't going to be able to stop you from having a little 'accident.' Old ladies like you fall down sometimes."

"Wait, my friend. I am not without my own resources." Sibyl reached into her pocket and pulled out something. "Do you know what this is, Mr. Jawakian?"

Rintz stopped. "No. Some kind of weapon? Do you know what it is, Ann?"

"It looks like a simple perfume sprayer, an atomizer."

Sibyl nodded. "Yes, a simple atomizer."

"What's in it? Acid? Acid couldn't kill me fast enough. You might miss," said Rintz, edging behind a chair.

"Oh, no. What do you think I am? There's nothing in this atomizer except water."

"You were just fooling me, then." Rintz came out from behind his chair and walked toward Sibyl, his arms outstretched. "This won't take long, Ann. You'd better look the other way."

Sibyl held out the atomizer. Just before Rintz reached her, she gave the bulb a squeeze and water sprayed out, right into his eyes.

Rintz staggered back and wiped his face with his shirt. The kirsk looked up and wrinkled its nose. The kirsk leaped at Rintz's

face and scratched and clawed and bit. Rintz tried to pull it away, but the kirsk sank its sharp teeth into his throat. Rintz fell over and the kirsk tore at his throat awhile, then jumped back up on the table beside Sibyl.

Ann's face contorted. "Don't kill me! You won't kill me, will you, Grandmother? I'm your own flesh and blood."

"My dear, you were prepared to kill me, just for a few parcels of money."

"Why not let me go? I'll go back to Venus and never bother you again."

"Yes, I could let you go, but I won't. Say, have you ever wondered why I have lived so long? Why I haven't died of Wainright's Syndrome like all the other Halls?"

"I thought it was just because of some genetic quirk."

"Oh, no. The doctors just theorized that, but that was what I wanted them to think. The real answer is that I, too, have Wainright's Syndrome."

"Why don't you die, then, like the rest of us?"

"Because I'm a vampire."

Ann laughed. "Oh, Grandmother. You can't be a vampire. That's too corny. There aren't any vampires. You aren't going to drink my blood, are you?"

"I was speaking poetically, my dear. I don't really drink blood, or cavort with bats. My dear late first husband found a rather effective method of capturing what he called the life force. So, instead of dying, every twenty-five years I just take another person's life force. Much as I hate to do so, I think I'll have to take yours."

"Wait, Grandmother. You don't have to do that. You can stop killing people and lead a normal life. My father found a *cure* for Wainright's Syndrome. That's why I wanted to get your money. When I found out that I could live a normal life-span, I wanted to enjoy it. You won't have to kill anymore."

"Who wants to live normally, when I can live forever? No, my dear, I don't really care to be cured of my disease or my bad habits. Now, at least, Glaucus won't have to hunt up a 'donor' for me. Come here, my dear. It won't hurt a bit."

Ann started to get out of her chair. Before she could stand up, Sibyl crossed the room and placed her hands on Ann's head. Ann slumped to the floor, lifeless.

"Poor dear, she shouldn't have let greed take over her life so much. I think I'll read some poetry, to relax me after such an exciting afternoon."

Sitting down, she began to read aloud. " 'Dim moon-eyed fishes near / gaze at the gilded gear / And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here?" ' " She stroked the kirsk. "Thomas Hardy was always a bit of a kindly old uncle." The kirsk purred, and dreamed of fresh meat.

GREAT DAY IN THE MORNING

"What do they do if they're not allowed to cross the streets?"
"Oh, I suppose they walk around them," the young lady said.

R. A. Lafferty

This is the sea (nor shores, nor strands):
This is the clock that has no hands.

"Great Day coming, Mr. Duffy," a young black boy called to him. "Great Day just got here."

"Is this the Day Itself, Mike?" Melchisedech Duffy asked him.

"This is the Great Day. It come, it come," the young boy insisted.

"Why, then it has come," Duffy told himself, "and I wouldn't even have noticed it except for the words of a youngster."

It was about an hour before dawn, before the dawning of the Great Day, perhaps.

"We will have to fix your watch," a big, suddenly appearing young man said, and he had a hammer in his hand.

"Begone, man," Melchisedech growled at him, "or it's that *I* will stop *your* clock."

But the big young man had two fellows with him who were even

larger than himself. They all reeled and wobbled a bit, but they were more drunken in their heads than in their legs. It was still quite early, before sunup. Melchisedech had been taking a brisk, early walk through the littered streets.

"Hold him!" the first man said sharply, and the other two fellows pinioned Duffy. He rolled them around; he didn't pinion easily. He rattled and shook them, almost shook them loose, though they were much larger and younger than himself. But the first man had Duffy's wrist in a crushing grip. He turned the hand and wrist over and exposed the watch. With curious care he smashed the glass of the watch with the hammer, gently, most gently. How does one smash a glass gently with a hammer? Then, with even more studious care, the man shook out every glass sliver and sparkle and powdery fragment.

"Easy now, old man, very easy," he said. "We wouldn't want to damage the watch, would we?"

"You smash it with a hammer, and then you say 'We wouldn't want to damage it, would we?' " Melchisedech fumed. "You're mad. Let me go!"

"We are not mad," that first and main man of them said. "Madness is of the old day, and we're of the New. Hold him tighter, men, for just an instant more." Himself, he held the wrist and hand of Melchisedech much tighter. "You are probably hopeless, old wineskin," he told Duffy, "but even you must realize that time is not overly particularized on the Great Day." With absolute precision he reached in, neatly broke off and removed the minute hand from the watch, then let go of hand and wrist. "Let him go," he said to the other two oversized young men, and they let Melchisedech go.

"And just what was that for?" Melchisedech demanded, holding his watch to his ear and making sure that it was still running.

"You really don't know?" the main man asked. "I was sure that a wise old man like you would understand it. I'm sorry I had to break the glass, but a crystal of a watch of this type isn't quickly removed. You can have another glass put in. The watch will still show the hours, and the minutes will not matter. This is a concession we make to some of the old ones; they do not realize immedi-

ately that time in the Great Day is not what it was before."

"For the first two centuries of clock (not watch) manufacture, minute hands were not used," Melchisedech said, waiting for an opening to land one (Oh for an opening to land one!). "The makers were right, *then,* not to use them. An overprecision hits too close in early days. The makers would be almost, but not quite, right not to use them now."

"Then you do understand," the man said, "but you are maintaining that the idea is not new with us. It has to be new. Everything has to be new today. This is the great thing happening and it has to be happening for the first time. We *are* original. This *is* the great thing."

"Nah," old Melchisedech said. "Original you are not, and I doubt that this is the great thing. When it comes, it will not come with such harbingers as yourselves."

"Admit that we are original, or we will do something really original to your face!" the man cried, becoming very drunk in an instant.

"You'll not manhandle me!" Duffy shouted. Great Day or not, here was the great opening that he had been waiting for. He landed one on the man coming in, he clouted him in the mouth and dropped him to a stunned and sitting position on the sidewalk. Then Melchisedech upset the other two men somehow (they had become much more wobbly) with pushing, blows, and shouting. He left the three of them there in a heap. There is honest satisfaction in such doings.

"You'll spoil it, old flintskin, old muleskin, old camelskin," the main man blubbered from the sidewalk. "All old muleskins should be cast away. They'll burst otherwise, and it'll all run out and that portion will be lost."

There had to be something irrelevant here, like a picture without a frame, like a sea without a shore. Melchisedech Duffy left the three downed men and continued on his thoughtful way. He often had such encounters on his early-morning walks. That was half the fun of walking before the sun was up. But there was the nagging feeling that the sun wouldn't come up on an ordinary day.

On the Great Delta Insurance Company Building, high up there in the tower, three other young men were doing something dogged and dangerous. They had swung open the front of the big tower clock. They attacked the hands with hacksaws. They cut them both off to stubs, the hour hand as well as the minute hand. They swung shut the front of the big clock then, and began to climb down from the tower. And one of the young men fell to the street and was killed.

"It's the clock without hands that was foretold in such murky manner by Nostradamus," Melchisedech said. "It's another name for the turning-over, for the change that isn't a change. There cannot be change when time is not running. But, no, I will not accept this as the turning, as the thing, as the Great Thing. Yet there was another prophecy: that the metanoia, when it came, would come grotesque and not completely holy."

Melchisedech continued his walk, thoughtful as ever. Had anyone else noticed that so many things had been changing these last few whiles? Melchisedech Duffy must have noticed it, but he was not yet willing to admit it to himself. He believed in a substantial universe made out of substantial people and things. Take substance away from the universe and what do you have left?

If anything happened, Melchisedech said, he should be the first to know about it. Night people, who might be first on the spot, are drowsy or drunken, and they are inattentive. And Duffy was always first of the morning people.

He went into a coffee shop.

This is the ewe that has no tup;
This is the coffee without a cup.

The coffee had a good aroma and a jolting, fair taste. It was coffee to wake up by. But the cup felt funny, and Duffy supposed (looking at it out of the edge of his eye) that it looked funny. Well, coffee people are entitled to get new cups when they will.

The coffee lady was an unmarried young lady, a very much unmarried lady, an intense and relentless young lady. She hovered over Duffy, as she often did. She was waiting for a reaction, or she was intent on drawing a reaction.

"Don't you spoil it," she said irrationally. "Everyone else has accepted it just the way it is without even looking at it. It's the Great Day, so I know that I can do it. I know I can do it, if you and two or three others like you don't spoil it. What I have is a lot of faith. You can't create something new like this without faith. A lady has to have a lot of faith if she doesn't have a husband."

"True, Charlotte, quite true," Melchisedech said. He saw now what was funny about the coffee cups: there *weren't* any coffee cups. There were five other men in the place, listless, rather sleepy men, and all were drinking coffee without cups.

Duffy had always known that new things, when they came, never came by way of elite folks. They came by way of scramble-brained, intense, humorless, and unilluminated people like—well, like Charlotte here.

Duffy was trying to read his morning paper, and he found it somehow unsatisfactory. He was trying *not* to notice that he was drinking coffee without a cup; he wasn't quite ready for that yet. He was trying *not* to put any meaning to the words of the stringy waitress Charlotte. And yet there were the words:

"I hate cups," she was saying. "I hate glasses. I hate clothes, I hate walls. I hate containers. It isn't right that anything should be contained by anything else. I hate sacks, I hate boxes. If we have faith we can make them all go away. It has to start with somebody. I believe that it has already started with me. I had a feeling that this would be a special morning."

"I have a great fear that it is, Charlotte," Melchisedech said. There was something more than wrong about the morning paper; there was something rotten about it. And there was something that would have to be acknowledged about the cups, that would have to be acknowledged absently.

"You're the one I worry about more than any of my early-morning customers," Charlotte was saying. "If I blow it in the early morning, I've blown it for all day. And you're just the one to make me blow it. I bet you have clothes on under your clothes and skin on under your skin. You're an old skinsack, that's what you are, an old container. And you are the most contained man I know."

"Self-contained, Charlotte?"

"That's right. Ugh! It isn't decent for anything to be contained. It isn't right for there to be any containers. I have it started now. Don't spoil it."

The newspaper was intolerable; and the diminished coffee in the cup (whup, no cup!) was cold. Melchisedech raised his remnant coffee to Charlotte, and by coincidence the five other customers had all raised their coffee to their mouths at once.

"A little of the hot, Charlotte," Melchisedech said.

"Don't spoil it," she warned as she started to pour. "If you don't have faith, then don't look at it so close. I'm telling you, don't spoil it."

Melchisedech spoiled it. The cold remnant burst and ran down his hand and wrist. And the scalding hot coffee poured by Charlotte cascaded over his hand and down his arm to set him howling with pain. After all, what does happen when someone pours boiling hot coffee in your bare hand?

And the other five customers had coffee suddenly loosed into their hands. Whoosh! They all rose and shook themselves in stammering and soggy bewilderment to discover that they had been drinking coffee without cups, and that now even the non-cups had collapsed and vanished.

"You spoiled it!" Charlotte shrilled at Melchisedech. "If I had a husband I'd have him shoot you if he had a gun. You ought to be skinned alive, you old crate, you old bagworm, you old wineskin. All the faith in the world can be sucked into one old skin like you, and then nothing works. You get out of here!"

> This is the paper: no date is in sight,
> Nor numbers on pages, nor anything right.

"Is it possible that I, who have always been so far ahead of the times, have now fallen behind the peasants and the peckerwoods?" Melchisedech Duffy asked himself in a loud and truculent voice. His hand was badly burned and he was flustered generally. "Is it possible that this is really the Great Day dawning, and that I alone lack the grace to comprehend it? Oh well, two things at a time. I'll just go around to that newspaper office, to

complain, to cajole, perhaps to correct. But I suspect that the cupless coffee has burned me deeper than my hand."

The morning paper had been as defective as the morning coffee, and in much the same way. It had no date on any of the pages, and the pages were not numbered. It must have been put together by drunken cajuns working through the night. All the headlines were gathered together on the first two pages (Melchisedech supposed they were the first two pages; they weren't numbered either, and there were no headings at all on any of the stories or articles in the body of the paper).

The whole journal had an odd flavor, fishy or at least amphibian, as though an unmoored thought process were behind it all. The stories just weren't as newspaper stories should be. They didn't tell one anything. They made a person want to shout "What did you say?" at the newspaper. Melchisedech was himself a sometime journalist, and this all seemed like sloppy journalism to him. He twitched his whitish beard in annoyance. It had been the first beard of the late Pleistocene, and (the way things were going) it would likely be the last.

But he was uneasy as he went through the streets toward the newspaper building. It just seemed to him that there was something a little bit different about everything this morning. There was something different about the cars and the buses in the streets, a great but subtle difference; and Duffy could not find a name for it immediately.

He several times narrowly missed death on that three-block walk. One reason for the frightful danger that was abroad was the behavior of the frightful traffic signals. They will be considered in a few minutes: who has the nerve to consider them right now?

And there was something very wrong about the newspaper building itself. It was not exactly that there was any new thing added to it. It was more as if some main thing had been forgotten or removed from it. But Melchisedech Duffy boldly entered the somehow wrong newspaper building, and he entered his outraged protest as he usually did.

"Your paper this morning is weird beyond comprehension," he said to an editorial assistant. Duffy knew the young man

slightly, but he could not now remember his name. It was as though the young man's name had been removed on purpose. In any case, the young man had not taken any notice of Melchisedech's sputtering statement. Try again, then.

"Your paper this morning is the worst I have ever seen," Duffy said in an elegant but tight way, and he banged the paper down in front of the young man.

"Why do you say that it is *our* paper?" the young man said. "Everything is everybody's now. You will notice that the paper hasn't any name on it anywhere. Neither do we, the building, I mean."

"That's so," Duffy admitted. "It hasn't and you haven't. I wondered what main thing had been removed from this building. It is that big, gawky sign from your roof that is gone."

"It's the newest thing not to have a name for anything," the young man said, "or for anybody. Names are enslaving. But why do you say that it's this morning's paper? Being undated, it cannot be identified positively as this morning's paper. We believe that this is the Great Day Coming itself, and the Great Day is one that doesn't need a name or a number. Why do you even say that it's a morning paper? It may be an afternoon or an evening or a graveyard-shift paper."

"Aw, jay-walking Judas Priest!" Duffy exploded. "Let me talk to the editor. You can't run a paper like that."

"We are all equally editors here now," the young man said. "We are all equally everything, but we will not use that title or any title. We will do just what work we feel like doing, and the days when we are nothing-minded we will do nothing. We call this job enrichment.

"But I don't believe there will be any paper printed here today. When everything in the world is new, then there can be no such thing as 'news.' We may put out a comic book instead. Reruns of old comics, probably. What do you think?"

"I feel like the rerun of an old comic myself," Melchisedech said. "And you do put me out a bit. How did all these changes happen?"

"All these rectifications, rather. Oh, we noticed that there

wasn't anyone of any importance around the paper last night. So a couple of us persons of no importance put it into effect. That's the way major things always happen. The paper really should have been brought out blank, but we're not perfected in the new ways yet."

"Couldn't your paper even have said that your Great Day a-Coming had come? Any explanation is better than none at all."

"It does say so on page—oh, I forgot that pages aren't numbered anymore. It's on one of the back pages. It's a little filler at the bottom."

"I see that there is no sanity here," Melchisedech said. He left the newspaper building, unsatisfied. He noticed that the big, gawky sign hadn't really been removed from the roof of the newspaper building. But it had been felled. It lay in broken pieces, and some of the pieces had fallen into the street. There was a steady sputtering and sparking where the electrical feeders to the big sign had been ruptured. Wires dangled and hissed above the street. "Someone will touch one of those and be killed," Duffy said. Then he noticed that it had already happened. There was a scorched and charred child on the sidewalk, dead and unnoticed by the passersby. But you can't make changes without breaking up old patterns of life.

Melchisedech Duffy, pawnbroker, art dealer, bookseller, part-time personage, stood undecided. He wasn't sure that this was the Great Day, and he wasn't sure that he liked it if it was.

> These are the signals that harry one hence:
> These are the beacons that don't make sense.

Oh, oh, those life-endangering traffic signals once more! There had been a time, no longer ago than last night, when lights were red or green, or they were amber; when the signals said "Go" or they said "Stop"; when they flashed "Walk" or "Don't walk"; when they indicated turns and such things.

But this morning those signals lit up in a hundred different colors or blends of colors; perhaps some of them were subjective, but they could not all be. And the signals flashed such words as "When you feel like it, go," "People's Intersection," "To stop is

to die, to stop growing is to die a little," "Shout *Liberty* before crossing," "If you're not part of the confluence you're part of the collision," "Capricorns should not cross any streets today," "Leos should not cross any streets ever." These weren't the traffic signals that Melchisedech was used to.

"How do you know when to cross the street?" he asked a young lady there. Mighty funny business. Duffy was usually the one to come up with an answer: why did he have to ask this strange young lady?

"It is the Emancipation," the young lady said with some heat, "and old goatskin here wants to know when to cross the street!"

"Don't people cross streets after the Emancipation?" Duffy asked.

"Only emancipated people. Don't you relate at all?" the lady asked crossly.

"No, I don't seem to relate to this," Duffy said. Funnier and funnier. Melchisedech Duffy had almost always related to things, even before they happened.

"People who don't relate are simply not allowed to cross the streets," the young lady laid down the law.

"What do they do if they're not allowed to cross the streets?"

"Oh, I suppose they walk around them," the young lady said.

> This is the world that bans the heels;
> These are the cars that don't have wheels.

The buses, Melchisedech Duffy now saw, no longer had wheels. Many of the trucks had none, and some of the cars had not.

"What happened to all the wheels?" Melchisedech asked a workman.

"You really have to ask that on the Day of total change?" the workman challenged. "If there's one thing worse than a square it's a round. Get out of here, you roundskin, you roundheel." But what did they have in place of wheels?

There was a fog before the eyes as to this, and yet it was a quite clear morning and the sun was nearly up. The vehicles had something else instead of wheels, and they moved along almost as well on this something else. The change seemed to have been a simple

one. Even now, workmen as well as owners were taking the wheels off cars and putting on something else, something that came out of a kit.

"Are you sure that that, whatever it is that comes out of the kits, is better than wheels?" Duffy asked a young car owner who was making the changeover himself.

"No, of course not," the man said. "How would it be better? The thought for today is that nothing is any better than anything else. Don't you even know the thought for the day?"

"I am having some second thoughts for this day," Duffy said. He was amazed. People were dismantling and taking off the walls of all the buildings. The buildings, without the support of the walls, didn't seem to collapse one floor upon another, though some of them sagged a little.

"Faith maintains better than walls," a pious and bearded teenager said. "Walls were the enemy of freedom." Then he began to pull out his beard in big hunks.

People were dismantling and taking off their clothes. The people, without the support, didn't seem to collapse one section upon another, though some of them sagged a little.

"I know a green oasis," Melchisedech Duffy said. "I know a green oasis in this world of dusty insanity. I will go there."

> In turbulent world, one thing to bless:
> Salvation as found at the Pelican Press.

Melchisedech Duffy went over to the Pelican Press. It was only three blocks. In the Quarter, everything is only three blocks. It was still in the same old ratty building where he had started it so many years ago, with Finnegan and Dotty Yekouris.

And the publishing schedule had never changed. On Monday the seamen's paper came out, on Tuesday the union sheet, on Wednesday the *Sporting News,* on Friday the jazz paper. *The Bark* was special; it was printed on Thursday or whenever. Sometimes it didn't even come out every week.

Today they should be printing *The Bark,* for it was Thursday. But was it? Was it indeed Thursday? Or was it the Great Day that breaks the sequence? *This is the Hero void of fame: this is the Day*

without a Name, as the Great Day Rime had it: and the Great Day Rime was everywhere, tongueless, soundless, but hanging in the air.

Well, if it wasn't Thursday, then it was (Great Day or not) whenever; and *The Bark* still should be printing. Melchisedech went into the Pelican Press Building.

Mary Virginia Schaeffer was there, and Salvation Sally, and Margaret Stone. There was something quite revealing about them all.

"Oh, Duff," Mary Virginia cried. "Oh, I'm sorry. I haven't learned to get along without using names yet. You were right. You were right in every detail. I believe that you are the smartest man I know."

"Very likely, girl, very likely," Melchisedech said. "Perhaps you should broaden your acquaintance with us more intelligent types."

"Have some coffee, Duff. Isn't it, ah, interesting the way this day is turning out, and it hardly started yet?"

"Interesting, yes. Are you using cups?"

"I'm afraid so. We're old-fashioned. I imagine we'll get used to it by sunup. Margaret made an act of faith and we all had it going a while ago, drank it without cups. Then we got to laughing and we broke it. You can't laugh at the things of the Great Day. I burned myself when my coffee collapsed. I see that you did too. But Salvation Sally is drinking tea without a cup. That filthy Aussie says that it's all right to laugh at coffee, but we must never laugh at tea."

Yes, Salvation Sally was drinking tea without a cup. She winked at Duffy, and when she winked she winked all the way down to her navel. How come he could see her navel anyhow? Had these fine ladies at the Pelican joined the commoners in this newness?

Little Margaret Stone, with a big mallet, was breaking out all the walls of the building. It just didn't seem right to Melchisedech.

"You have to have walls," he protested. "You have to have walls to hang things on, if for nothing else."

"No, you don't," Margaret said, swinging energetically (she

had always been strong as a little burro). "You are the one who explained how it would be in the first place. Don't you remember?"

"I was kidding when I wrote that."

"I'm not. If one has faith, then one doesn't need walls or any of such things. Oops! Lack of faith myself."

A large picture had fallen to the floor only a short while after the wall to which it had been fastened was demolished. It was one of those old, little-known masterpieces of Finnegan, his orange period. Margaret picked the picture up again, nailed it up on the empty air, and it stayed there. The nail going into the empty air sounded like a nail going into white pine.

But, yes, Margaret also had joined the commoners in one new fashion. However, she was at the moment pretty well clothed in dust, plaster, and sweat, from her hammering down the walls. She took out the studs violently with an axe. And now there was nothing at all supporting the room above them. It rocked like a boat, but it didn't fall down on them yet.

"Look, Duff," Mary Virginia said. "Oh, damn, there I go using names again. It's as though I didn't realize yet that there's no point where one person ends and another begins. But look at this old copy." She handed Melchisedech an old copy of that wonderful magazine-journal named *The Bark* that was printed on these same premises. "It's amazing the way you predicted it all," she said, "how we would become uncontained, how we would live by faith and not by substance, how we would be completely emancipated, how we would merge with each other, how all walls and clothes and skins would be dismantled, how our minds would disappear (with faith, who needs minds?); you set it down in every detail, just a year ago. I feel that the people of the world are fulfilling the remainder of your details now."

She had handed him *The Bark* opened at the article "Great Day in the Morning" by Melchisedech Duffy. And Duffy's hands shook as he held it.

"But, Mary Virginia," he said, "this was a comic article, a bitterly comic article."

"Oh yes, that's the tragedy of it, from the old viewpoint. You

put it so well in the final lines, 'If ever the world forgets to laugh, these things and others will come to pass.' How could you have known that it would forget? It's wonderful, isn't it? But when you're just coming into the thing, it sure is hard not to laugh at the way it's coming out. But to laugh is disastrous."

"Then let there be disaster!" Melchisedech thundered in not very convincing tones. "A disaster is surely better than what this day is turning into. Let the laughter of the Pelican People be the salvation of the world."

"No, no, never," Salvation Sally protested. "The only salvation here is myself. Salvation is in time, and we are beyond that. And laughter is simply not allowed. How lacking in faith would one have to be to laugh ever! Oh, take your clothes off, Duff, and at least one layer of skin. Join the thing. You invented the Day; and will you be the only one in the world too rigid to live in it?"

"Laughter was useful only in the transition period," Mary Virginia said. "Now that the Great Day is here, laughter would surely be a handicap, a blasphemy."

Melchisedech decided that things were going badly. The green oasis in the world of dusty insanity now proved to be of a very peculiar, almost sickly green.

"Are you printing *The Bark* today?" he asked. Could he somehow slip another article into it and undo the frightful good that he had done?

Whoosh! Margaret Stone pushed down another section of the outside wall, killing a little kid on the sidewalk. "Freedom, freedom!" she cried. And the Great-Day Freedom rushed in on them, and rushed out from them, and mingled.

"What do you mean, are we printing *The Bark* today?" Mary Virginia demanded. "You're not making sense, Duff—I mean you're not making sense, temporary and contingent person. There isn't any today. You wrote yourself that the Great Day can never be referred to as 'today,' since 'today' implies a sequence and—"

"Shut your Great Mouth this Great Day!" Melchisedech shouted with pinkish anger. It is hard to take serious a man who turns pink instead of purple with anger, but all things must be

taken serious on the Great Day. The situation had certainly become serious with Melchisedech.

"Great Day to you, you filthy Irishman," Absalom Stein bellowed with a flourishing entrance. He could make a flourishing entrance even when there were no longer doors or walls to enter past.

"Small day to you, you filthy Jew," Melchisedech gave it back to him. Ah, this was one relationship as beautiful as it had ever been. Here, surely, was one friend remaining as an integral person, one acquaintance of kindred (if not quite equal) intelligence, one—

But Absalom was clothed only in billowing smoke and a reeking cigar. (He had left written orders that he be finally buried in a plain pine box and with a lighted cigar in his mouth. "How will you keep it lit, Absie?" Margaret Stone had asked him. "Never mind, I'll keep it lit," Stein had said, "I'll never be too dead for that.") And the cigar, though lacking its outer wrapper leaf, held together and fumed prodigiously.

"Freedom, Faith, Great Day," Absalom said, and there was something uncontained about his eyes and manner. Melchisedech made one of Stein's own contempt-carrying gestures back at him, the one that said, without words, "Above the ears, nothing!" And Stein understood it not at all.

Why, Stein's brains were shot, gone completely! Stein had always had a lot of brains, but they had been of a volatile nature, quite near the surface, and now they had evaporated.

"I wonder whether you'll miss them, Absalom," Melchisedech said. "Your brains, I mean."

"No, I don't think so. Brains were useful only during the transition period. Now that the Great Day is here, they would probably prove a handicap. I've divested myself of mine, yes. I've divested myself of everything except the stogie. It will become my token and it will take the place of my name. Do you notice anything special about it?"

"That the longer you smoke it the longer it gets? Yes. You are all full of tricks this morning."

"Faith and Freedom, those are the things," Stein said. "This is the cigar made from faith-tobacco, not from physical tobacco. It is of the celestial tobacco foretold in scripture."

Stein had, in these latter years, become an obese man. When uncovered and uncontained, he became very much so. And he had always been a straight-faced kidder. But was he now? Could he be trusted? What is more noxious than a kidder gone serious? But he remained the distant possibility of hope.

"I suppose that we won't print any of the papers or magazines anymore," Mary Virginia was saying. (Of all of them she was the only one formly enough to go divested.) "Papers and magazines were useful only for the transition period. Now that the Great Day is here we should be doing Great-Day stuff instead."

"What would that be?" Melchisedech asked.

"Oh, sing songs without words, I guess. Finger-paint with faith-paint, not with physical paint. Be very close to each other. These are all forms of Great Day communication."

Zabotski, well known in that neighborhood, probably stuck his head into the building. Probably, for it was hard to say just when a head was stuck into a building now that there were no walls or doors left.

"There's a fellow over on O'Dwyer Street who's already shed his skin completely," he said. "Duff, why aren't you in the buff?"

"Clothed and in my right mind I'll remain," Melchisedech said. "Now, what were you jabbering, Zabotski?"

"A Great Day first: a fellow over on O'Dwyer Street has already shed his skin completely. That makes him the most emancipated man in town, possibly in the world."

"Oh, we'll all be doing it before the day is over with," Mary Virginia said.

"Except me," Melchisedech challenged.

"Oh, I forgot, this Day isn't ever over with," Mary Virginia corrected herself. "It is now Great Day forever, and yet we'll all be doing it soon. And when we are all skin-shed, then we'll be well on the way to true liberation. We'll be able to get so *close* to each other after we're skinless. Rubbing eyeballs with each other isn't in it for closeness anymore."

"Some of the fellows are making their diaphragms disappear," Stein said, "for greater visceral freedom."

"That's nice," Salvation Sally said.

This Zabotski, though bluff, was a good man. He had put up a big pot and a lot of money to keep the soup kitchen going through the years. And, providentially, he still had a big pot and a lot of money left. His appearance brought a question out of Melchisedech's gorge:

"The soup kitchen, is it still operating today? Is the big pot still boiling, the pot that never ceases to boil?" The soup kitchen and the flophouse for the poor were adjacent to the Pelican Press.

"The big pot is still boiling," Margaret Stone said. "It is boiling with faith-soup now. There's no need to put anything physical into it."

"Is this thing worldwide?" Melchisedech asked them. He had invented the Day, and he knew less about it than any of them.

"Of course it is worldwide," Stein said. "From the East even unto the West and all that. And, of course, we have no old-style communication with the rest of the world on the subject. Electronic and mechanical communications aren't being used. Why should they be? Faith and Freedom and Sense of Community have arrived, and nothing else is needed."

"Ah me," Melchisedech said. "I had always regarded the Pelican as a refuge, as an anchor to hold fast in the great storms of the world."

"Both the sea ships and the river boats are cutting loose their anchors and letting them sink forever," Zabotski said. "With faith, who needs anchors?"

"You have failed me, all of you," Melchisedech said. "You are the lump and not the leaven. You are as the world, worldly, but with none of the redeeming quality of solid black earth. But I know a greener oasis and a more unfailing fountain. I leave you."

"Good-by, Duff, I mean good-by, person," Mary Virginia said.

"And *do* take your clothes off, please," Salvation Sally said. "Why do you always want to be conspicuous?"

Melchisedech Duffy left the Pelican. If this was indeed the Great Day, then he left it forever.

This is the Michael making moan
With stony tears and a sword of stone.

Melchisedech walked over to St. Michael's. A bare yellow sliver of sun was showing at the end of one street.

"Ah, you crooked, cranky thing," Melchisedech told it, "I'll trap you now. Move once and I'll have you."

But the sun did not move. It would not move while anyone was watching. If it could be seen to move, then time was still running; and that would be a contradiction on the Great Day. The Great Day, if this was it, must remain forever dawning.

Melchisedech looked away a bit to test it. When he looked back, the sun had moved, but only to make itself more comfortable, to get a better hold on its dawning. Now it would move no more.

St. Michael's was being unstructured by various people. They were using faith rather than hammers and rams, but they had brought most of the building down. The building had contained something, so it was said, and that was disapproved. Melchisedech stopped to talk to the stone statue of St. Michael in what had been the entry.

"It's a sad day, Mike," he said. "If an oasis cannot be found here, then it can be found nowhere."

"It's a sad day," Michael agreed. "And the living water has gone out from this place. You'll find no oasis here." Michael had had an eye gouged out, by hammer and chisel it seemed, perhaps faith-hammer and chisel, perhaps real.

"Look, mama," a little girl was saying somewhere. "There's the crazy old man who talks to statues."

"Shh, don't look at him," the mother said. "It isn't nice to look. He's wearing clothes."

"Will there be mass this morning, Mike?" Melchisedech asked.

"There won't even be any this morning," the statue said sadly. "This Great-Day business has bitten the whole world. Ah, Duff, if there were only some way to put a good edge on a marble sword, then I'd have at them. They are unstructuring the church and they have put up the twelve signs of the zodiac and the sun and the moon in place of the stations of the cross. But the Unfaithful Assembled will not notice any difference at all in the services, they have gone so weird for such a long while."

The holy figure of the demiurge Teilhard had come down on the altar. With him appeared McLuhan on his right hand and McGonigal on his left. They were transfigured with light.

"Lord, it is good that we be here," the Unfaithful Assembled intoned. "Great Day."

"Peduncle, peduncle, Point Edhead, cosmogenization, valorization, obfuscation. Great Day," the holy demiurge blessed them.

"Lord, let us build three tents here," the Unfaithful Assembled intoned. "Great Day."

"Peduncle, neo-anthropocentrism, corpusculization, nookonos, peduncle. Great Day," the holy demiurge blessed again.

"Kind of gets you, doesn't it, Duff?" Michael said. "What am I saying? Well, it would kind of get me if I weren't Michael. Ah, I wish there was some way to put a good double edge on a stone sword. If you run onto a good blade man, send him by. I'll have me a cutting and flaming sword yet. Who's going to know that I'm an archangel when I'm here with the toes broken off me and one eye gouged out and only a dull stone sword in my hand?"

"If I run onto a good blade man I'll send him by," Melchisedech said. He left Michael there crying stone tears.

"Well, I bet I know an oasis that is wet if nothing else," Melchisedech said. He left St. Michael's and headed for the Stumble-Bum Royal Rendezvous and Oyster Bar. Young fellows tried to pull his beard off as he walked through the streets, and they did pull out some bloody gouts of it. He noticed that most of the beards had been shed, both of the teen-agers and of the few grown men who had sported them. They were shed by acts of faith. If one has faith, what does he need with a beard? The beards of most of the folks had come off easily. An easy breeze was now blowing remaining beard-patches off various faces. Soon it would be a barefaced world.

Young ladies tried to pull his clothes off as he walked through the streets, and they did pull some ripped strips of them off. "Be free, be unenclosed, be emancipated, be unstructured," they all insisted to him. "Is there anything dirtier than a dirty old man with clothes on?"

"A sazarac," Melchisedech ordered as he entered the Stumble-

Bum. He felt the looks at him like those manifold whips with little tearing hooks at the end of the lashes. The barkeep shook his head. "A salty dog, then," Melchisedech said, and he felt the hatred rising against him. "An old fashioned," Melchisedech said. He should never have said that.

"Get this nut," the barkeep said, hooking a sneering thumb toward Melchisedech, and the grumbling hatred rose against this nonconformist who refused to be free. "We haven't had any of those drinks since yesterday."

"What do you have to drink, then?" Melchisedech asked humbly.

"The New Day Dawner. That's what everyone drinks. Who would want anything else?"

Melchisedech left the Stumble-Bum. There were no wet oases, no green oases, no unfailing fountains anywhere.

> This is the drink that nothing slakes:
> This is the dream whence none awakes.

Melchisedech experimented a bit. He had noticed people, here and there, walking through visible walls as easily as if they were not there.

"Why, then they are not there," Melchisedech said. "The people have removed them by faith, and they are visible only to my faithless eyes. Let me see whether I can walk through those walls also."

But he could not. He bruised and bloodied himself, but he could not go through this sort of walls as other people could.

"Then part of this wall-demolishing is a subjective thing," he said. "But I am outnumbered. Many persons pass through, and I do not. It must be my own subjective that is awry."

The sun was still in the process of dawning, but it had not moved at all since it was last viewed. There was not a lot of movement of any sort on the Great Day. The real action was hidden, and yet almost everything had all the wraps off it.

But the people were all interiorizing themselves. Some skinless, some only part so, they looked blank, blank in every part of them. And they were merging. They were coming together wit-

lessly, blankly, spherically. Dozens of them had now formed into great balls all together. These rolled, and they merged with other great balls of people-substance. Soon all the people in the whole city would be coalesced into one big fleshy sphere, communicating and interiorizing like anything.

Then the peoples of all the world would somehow roll together and become one thing, although the mechanics of this were far from clear.

"Everybody will have joined it except myself," Melchisedech said, "and I invented it in a time of cranky humor. Should I stand proud apart then? But how can one stand proud with no one to stand before?"

Subjectively, quite a while went by, but the sun did not move. Melchisedech walked himself weary, and then sat on a bench in Jackson Square. Most of the buildings of the city had disappeared now. That business of them standing after their walls and supports had been removed was only a transition thing.

"This is only a nightmare," Melchisedech said. "I am sleeping, and this is not one of my better dreams. Now I must make a great effort to wake up."

"You can't," Morpheus said. "You will have to change your whole idea about sleeping. More important, you will have to change your whole idea about waking up. Both are illusions."

"Anyone can be a showboat in his own field of study," Melchisedech said. "You are the god of sleep, so you have the advantage over me in the discussion."

"Everyone is the god of something," Morpheus said. "You did not know that? But I have broader interests than most. 'Morpheus' ('sleep') and 'Morphē' ('shape') are really the same word, and shape is known only in sleep. A waking world would be a shapeless and formless monstrosity."

"I'll take that chance. Help me to wake up."

"Absolutely not. There is no longer any such thing as waking up."

"Where did I go wrong?" Melchisedech asked the empty ears of misty Morpheus. "Why am I alone unamalgamated in this thing?"

"Where did you go wrong, where did you go right? It was in

being too stiff to change. You allowed yourself to become an old wineskin," Morpheus said.

("Neither do men put new wine into old bottles," Matthew said. "If they do, the skins burst and the wine runs out. See me, 9:17."

"No man, having drunk old wine, straightway desires new, for he says, 'The old is better,' " Luke said. "See me, 5:39."

"You evangelists go settle it among yourself," Melchisedech told them, "with eight-ounce gloves." The evangelists went away.)

"Now tell me true, Morph, am I awake or not?" Melchisedech asked the sleep god.

"No, you are not awake and you are not not. You can never wake up, for waking up is one of the options that have now disappeared from the world. And you cannot really sleep. You can only dream a diminishing dream in a state of half-sleep. It all closes up on itself. It goes out of business."

"Is the whole world only my dream, Morph?" Melchisedech asked.

"Yours or mine, Duff. We seem to be the only two left. We'll end as two submicroscopic snakes, the only remaining things in the worlds, and then one of us must swallow the other."

"I'll not like that. There must be more than that."

"No. The whole thousand-times-mega cosmos began as one single-celled creature. Then he had the notion that there were two of him, and this notion was the beginning of his dreaming. He dreamed the whole multiplex thing that has seemed to be the worlds. The dream grew for long eons, but now it shrinks back again to its beginning. There is still one single cell left, dreaming a diminishing dream."

"So let it be," Melchisedech said, "so long as *I* am that single cell."

"Or I," said Morpheus, "but there is still only one. I'll wrestle you for the illusion."

They wrestled. But Morpheus was one of those timeless, ever-

young Greek gods, and cosmic wrestling is their game. Moreover, they smear themselves completely with a numenous grease that makes them very hard to get hold of.

There came over Melchisedech the panic of extinction. The old-fashioned fear of damnation isn't even in the same league with it. The lungs pop like toy balloons, the kidneys melt like wax, the heart bursts like a cherry bomb. Melchisedech collapsed on himself and became smaller by a million orders, and Morpheus followed him down. They were a single-celled creature swallowing itself. Melchisedech screamed as loudly as a single-celled creature can scream in a void, after he's swallowed himself.

"It's the end," he gasped.

"No, it's the beginning," Morpheus gurgled in his swallowed state. "We've been here before."

A hint as to a possible alternate outcome had been given in an article in the magazine-journal *The Bark* one year before. But how is a single-celled creature that has just swallowed itself going to have access to back issues of obscure magazines?

ALMOST THE END

There are a few Great Day verses left over, and the world affair cannot be concluded until they are disposed of. There are also, unaccountably, about the same number of persons left over, and they must also be disposed of.

If each person will come forward and proclaim loudly one of the verses, then both that person and that verse can be forever obliterated. Try it. Lose yourself in it.

This is the meadow that has no grass.
This is the wine without a glass.

This is the building lacking walls.
This is the murder that none appalls.

This is the hero void of fame.
This is the Day without a name.

This is the move without a mean.
This is the sun less shine and sheen.

This is the wineskin Matthew told.
This is the old skin-bottle, old.

Here is the crowd that lurks alone.
Here is the grave without a stone.

There, it worked, didn't it? Got rid of everything.

THE BITTER END

THE MAZE

A mighty maze! but not without a plan.

Stuart Dybek

He gives her a starched white gown and surgeon's mask and leads her down tiled corridors past caged rats, through wards of muzzled dogs, cats with electrodes in their brains, convalescing baboons strapped to tables.

Red arrows point the way through the tunnels to the employees' cafeteria. Each noon she hurries along enormous pipes insulated in asbestos. When the generators kick the light bulbs dim. At intersections the arrows are almost scuffed away. She's grateful when he begins bringing her lunch in the laboratory. Each noon she eats it off a corner of the stainless-steel table: grilled cheese, slice of pickle, black coffee.

It's not the maze itself that's important. The maze is only one component of his experiment. Through a combination of radioactively induced mutation and the chemical alteration of DNA, he intends to expand intelligence. The maze will afford controlled problems of survival, a method of testing, measuring, and finally selecting out subjects that have been successfully altered.

The subjects will be mice. They never discuss correlations with other species. Still, sometimes she feels the air so charged that excitement seems to crackle like a current leaping between electrodes in old horror films.

It's the year of constant zero. The year of the twenty-eight-day blizzard. He shows her an article in *Scientific American* that claims a new ice age is beginning. She doesn't really mind being stranded. After working late it's easier not to worry about getting home, to simply curl up on the operating table and rest one's eyes after a day's close work translating ancient Minoan blueprints. There's always clean sheets and each morning a fresh uniform waiting. At night she dreams of unmapped subterranean rivers—of bolting black rapids on a sheet of ice.

From the start her task has been maze research. The years have carried her through the fabled Labyrinth, the Catacombs, secret passageways of Borgia's castle, *fin de siècle* funhouses, the Paris sewer system, the Pentagon. Now, finding man's intricacies simple beside Nature's, she delves into the seashell's plumbing, mysteries of mole and earthworm, enters the anthole, down pulsing corridors past pupa nurseries, Mammoth Cave, Carlsbad Caverns, there are so many dead ends. How many lives would be needed to travel them all and back?

—Oh, so beautiful! she says. Ablaze with shifting angles like a gem turning under a spotlight. Stainless steel, magnesium, fiberglass incorporating all shapes. Curving back on itself like space.
—Yes, he says, now the real work can begin.

And now she wanders back on herself through all those years of preparation, remembering the first walk down the tiled corridors, pacing the red arrows backward till they are erased by footsteps, leaving only a snowblinding dazzle like the landscape one morning when the blizzard fell from her eyes like gauze. Her eyes are always tired now, staring back bloodshot from the shining planes of steel. Sometimes she catches a glimpse of her reflection: a pale contour of cheek, the drained curve of chewed lips, grey roots at the hairline.

She watches the generations of mice come and go. Watches the

maze digest them. Sometimes in the late afternoon, she switches off the machines computing their progress, unable to concentrate on the constantly oscillating lines of their anxiety, the zigzagging pens scratching across revolving graph paper as the mice go mad. She leaves it to him now to focus in on them with the tiny TV eyes implanted in each tunnel, to observe them as they nose helplessly up interconnected corridors, starving, deprived of water, driving on desperate for reproduction. He keeps scrupulous records of their progress. When one advances beyond the rest, he's removed to breed a new generation of more brilliant mice.

Sometimes at night she wakes to their small screams. At least, what she construes to be screams. Squeaking that has echoed and reechoed down the tubes, amplified by a system of microphones and speakers. She unlatches the tiny gate and puts her ear to the entrance. It's like a music box of squeals, moans, whispers—strange mouse whispers of generations still circulating, recorded on tapes and played continually throughout the maze for any clues they might provide the current batch of mice. An almost familiar effluvium floats down from the tunnels: of excreta, of disinfectant, of decomposing corpses, of the maze itself. She puts her eye to the opening and peers down the gleaming corridor. It leads to a Y-shaped intersection. She rolls her eye, peering first down one wing, then the other. They both diverge into honeycombed passageways, all empty. The mice are far beyond. She goes to the monitor, turns the dials, scanning the corridors littered with dried pellets, shriveled claws, and cannibalized skeletons, trying to pick up their trails. He's seldom there now at night as he once was, pouring over genetic files. It's lonely when she wakes like this, though the sleeping pill is always there beside the Dixie cup of water.

She has begun to recognize the mice as distinct from one another. It seems the longer the experiment continues the less they look alike. Perhaps that's because they're larger—easily the size of rats. Except they don't look like rats. They've changed gradually, so no matter what they look like she still thinks of them as mice. Mice with swollen, misshapen heads, mice nearly erect like kangaroos, mice that stare back into your eyes.

It was the females in the nursery she first came to know, something in their eyes as they stared back at her when she'd watch them nursing their litters. The baby mice bald, pink, and sucking, resembling piglets. She gave the mamas names: Sweet Rosalie Fang, Monkey Jane, Tillie the Thumb. She saves pieces from her grilled-cheese sandwiches, even though she knows feeding them these little crumbs interferes with the carefully programmed nutrients of their control groups. He's never there to catch her anyway. Nobody's there. They don't even remember she's in here. They've stopped bringing a change of uniforms. Her clothes are turning grey. They don't lower their voices when they talk outside the door. She's heard rumors, unbelievable snatches of conversation about experiments that go on at night. She recognizes the names of those involved—his friends: the famous one who works on radioactive mutation, and the other, the biochemist from Taiwan.

It didn't matter feeding them the cheese bits. After a while they wouldn't eat them anyway. And they left the pieces lying at the bottom of the cage, and he found them and doesn't even bring the cheese sandwich anymore. That's punishment. And all the work and all those years. Where's the reward?

Now that new mice are brought into the lab every day, the differences between them and the maze mice are staggering! Were their ancestors really that tiny and mindless? The maze mice have evolved metabolisms that require the corrupting flesh of other mice. So that's what he brings in. Bushel baskets full of dead mice crawling with maggots. They have to sit on the radiators and rot. He had the lab insulated so the smell wouldn't escape, and comes to work wearing a gas mask, surgical gloves, and waders. —You're used to the stench, he says. One gets used to anything if they have to, she thinks. Like the maze mice eating each other's bodies in order to survive their maze treks, till now they relish it, leaping up and snapping their huge tusks as he dangles a rotting carcass above them by the tail, his gas mask somehow suggesting a heartless smile.

The rumors were true. She finally checked the other night. It was as much boredom as curiosity driving her to it. And hunger

more than either. Ever since he's stopped bringing her lunch, her only meal, she's had to scavenge at night for food. Luckily, they left the grain which the mice used to eat. That and an occasional mouse spitted on a pipette and roasted over a Bunsen burner—one of the freshly dead ones before they're too rotten. Hardly enough to keep body and soul together: a few dried kernels and a mouse. But never a maze mouse—too close a count on those. Not that she'd eat them anyway. One doesn't eat one's friends. Why go on living if they drive you to that? Sometimes she feels she can actually communicate with them, that they keep each other from going insane. Watching them on the TV during the day is better than a lot of women sitting home watching actors on soap operas. They have their problems and conflicting personalities just like people, once you know what to look for. Besides, she couldn't catch them if she wanted to. They're too smart and quick for the likes of her. Still slick from birth and already crawling toward the maze like they were born to it. Reminding her of a movie she saw once about baby turtles trying to get to the sea as soon as they broke out of their eggs. There she was sneaking through the corridors, following the sounds. Strange sounds for this place, music and laughter and swearing. One of the orderlies was mopping, and when he saw her he fainted. She crept down past Brain Surgery. They had a dog in there with his brain floating in an illuminated bubbling jar still attached to his empty skull by wires, and when she passed the jar his head began to whimper. They were in the operating room, behind locked doors, but they'd forgotten to cover the little windows. Just like the rumors had it! They'd crossed some kind of big monkey, maybe an orangutan, with an ocelot and God knows what else! There were five of them in there. Strange creatures with hypnotic gold-green eyes. So beautiful that even her old heart began to race like a hamster inside a wheel. They were almost the size of women, but more delicate—like pubescent girls, but girls don't have curves like that! And covered with a fine golden fur. But their eyes! And their hands with long nails tapering out of their fingers and their graceful long tails like feathered fans they were using to stroke over their bodies, and the men's bodies, to curl

about their necks, poke in their ears, brush across their faces, and all of them sitting there with wine bottles drinking and laughing. And he was there too. At first she didn't recognize him without his clothes on, but it was him all right.

Another winter? Or last year's still not ended? Icicles like stalactites. The generations seem to change faster than the seasons. This latest group won't eat the rotten flesh. All they'll take is bones. It's evolved, of course, from maze conditions. They're so deep now that by the time one generation comes upon the remains of its forebears, bones are all that's left. He's given her the job of boiling the meat off the bones. All the soup she can eat. Huge vats always bubbling and boiling, steaming up the windows, and her stirring away with a big wooden spoon.

Just when she thought he was making up, giving her little tasks again, he kicks her out of her stupor, yelling —What have you done to the video! What have you done to the video! But she hadn't done it. The mice had figured out how to interfere with the video transmission. Some mutation they hadn't even conceived of had occurred, giving the mice the ability to use the electrowaves of their brains to jam the frequency. Not that it wasn't possible to predict once they inexplicably developed a sonar-like beep akin to a bat's. Instead of having to go down each passageway, they beep, and if it bounces back off a dead end, they avoid it. They use a variation of the beep to communicate with each other, too, like a school of porpoises chattering away, squeaking and beeping and whistling. Ever since the beep they haven't been burning their lives out going berserk, either. Some of them have been around quite a while, actually. And grown quite large. It's fortunate the tunnels were designed to expand. She could almost climb in there herself now. Perhaps, she allows herself to hope, the little buggers will solve it after all. She thinks of them as "little buggers" because of what's going on in there. She saw it on the TV before they knocked it out. It's a result of his being partial to males from the start, using them as explorers, and keeping the females back to breed. He wanted the males driven on with horniness, battering their constant erections against blind alleys. And then, in the old days when they did have

litters in there a few times, the others ate the babies. Though certainly that wouldn't happen now. The young are well taken care of. After reaching a certain point in the maze they're welcomed, initiated into the group, an actual *rite de passage,* rather dionysian in character. Probably that's why they blocked the transmission. There's things they don't want to be spied on doing. Things he doesn't know about, and she's not going to tell him either.

Bastard! Dirty son of a bitch! She almost says it. But it's been so long since she's used her voice, all she can do is croak. Just when the mice looked like they had the maze beat, thanks to their sonar, he hooks up a device to "recondition" them. It's a sonar detector that triggers an electroshock. Whenever one of them beeps, the waves activate the current, electrifying the entire maze. Not enough of a jolt to kill them, but enough to have them writhing and jerking. Without the sonar they're back to nosing up blind alleys, going nuts again in corners. It wasn't part of the original concept to match wits with the subjects. The idea was to build the most complex maze mankind had ever devised, and if they solved it, fine, that was a measure of their evolution, but it wasn't supposed to have become a contest. This isn't the first time he's done it, either. The mice would have defeated it years ago if he hadn't kept enlarging it constantly. He's added over a hundred stories since the original, and spokes of corridors winding off in all directions. She wonders what they think in the city when they see it sprouting out of the dome of the Institute and twisting off toward the horizon like some runaway roller coaster. Some of the new passageways go straight up, with stainless-steel sides, and others plunge suddenly like elevator shafts. They'd have to sprout wings to solve those. And there's exits with doors like safes with intricate combination locks on them, and when they finally solve the locks and the door opens, a wall of water is waiting on the other side to flood the passages, and there's other doors booby-trapped with explosives, or emitting cyanide, and passages lined with razor blades, and stretches where the floor heats red hot, wind tunnels, miles that twist through a deep freeze . . .

He's losing his hair and reeks like he hasn't bathed in months

—the stink of nervous sweats mingled with the peculiar musk those golden creatures spray him with. Maybe they're a little too much for a man his age, she chuckles. What does he see through the greasy lenses of those glasses? The hairs sprouting out of that mole by his nose have turned white. His scraggly beard is clotted with bits of food and snot he doesn't bother wiping away when he comes in huffing and stamping his galoshes from the cold. It doubles her over thinking about it, him—Dr. Fastidious with his gas mask, rubber gloves, and waders. Heh-heh. Slobbering as he mumbles to himself, spitting into the receiver as he phones all over the world, each conversation ending the same, with him beet-faced and raving, cursing his colleagues, and in between trying to explain how the mice have nearly evolved the "ultimate mutation"—the ability to determine future mutations by harnessing the collective energy of their brains.

At night, when he goes to his golden paramours, she opens the maze door and crawls inside. Sits right in the doorway with her legs bunched up against the wall. The sounds well up from deep inside her. She's come to understand how a rooster crows, a coyote howls. She cups her hands over her mouth, her thumbs jammed up her nose to produce the right nasal accent, and calls out the new plans he's spent the day concocting against them, her warnings reverberating down the shining hallways, echo after echo of their oboe-like language.

Screams from the nursery! The biochemist with a meat cleaver, the famous mutation expert wearing a welder's mask and blasting with a blowtorch, and him with a German Luger firing point-blank, furry wedges of skull splattered across the walls. She wakes. The lab empty and dark, only the machines humming, the computer winking through its circuits. Inside the nursery everything is quiet: the mamas sleeping in their caged steel cribs, the little ones cradled in glass incubators. Without hesitation she raises the lid off her favorite, cooing mouse sounds in his ear, lifts him gently out. He clutches her shriveled breasts with his small leathery hands. She can feel his heart beating what seems like twice the rate of hers, and hers is pounding. She shuts the door to the nursery without looking back and they huddle together on the floor beneath the vivisec-

tion table. They close their eyes. He is trembling. The lab door bursts open. Cursing and shouting, the three of them stumble past into the screaming nursery.

To say "love" correctly it's not necessary to put your fingers up your nose. It's a sound that comes from deep inside, like a cat's purr, a dove's coo. She can't really make it, only approximate it by vibrating her tongue against her alveolar ridge while a high-pitched *r* sound wells up from her heart. Nor does it really mean love in the way Man uses it—it means being together and knowing that wherever you are will lead somewhere else.

He lived like a prisoner in this cramped storeroom no bigger than a closet. She named him Theseus, explained his name to him, told and retold the old myths. But after a while she got to calling him Theo. If one whistles as it's said: *Tee-ooo,* then it almost sounds like a name out of *their* language. Once he asked her what her old name was, what her life was like before she came here, was she a child? But when she tried to think back, her mind got lost in the coils of her brain, she felt her blood staggering around in the darkness, blind, trying to distinguish memories from nightmares by their feel. He helped her sit down, held her till the dizziness passed, brushed away her tears. —I'll just keep calling you Mother, he said.

TIPTON. Wayne Miller reported his silo has been incorporated into a construction with "a lot of corners" emerging from the well and rambling in numerous directions across the 200-acre tundra, which had previously been his alfalfa field, before disappearing into a storm drain off Interstate 80.

—*North Liberty Gazette*

How long was he here, she wonders. Time's been gone for a long time. It disappears before space leaving endless rooms, filling even the smallest cupboard with eternity. She tried to make his little room homey. As if such a space could be home, with Death always compressing it further, its enormous weight always just the other side of the door. She tries to count the years, but

it's all become one winter. She sits alone in the closet now just to feel the old minutes pass. The same room they'd stored all the materials from the original maze in so long ago—rolls of blueprints, stacks of manuscripts, files, partially disassembled scale models that Theo played with to kill the time of his childhood. He slept through the days. At night, they'd prowl the hallways, planning an escape. But right at dawn she'd always find him transfixed before the entrance of the maze, antennae perked up. He wasn't a happy child. And now he's gone leaving only a little pellet behind she'd sweep away except it helps her to believe he was really here.

TUKWILA. Authorities are still trying to explain the disappearance of a fifty-car freight train. It was last seen by motorists entering the tunnel near Midway.

—*Puyallup Herald*

The second quake in the last few days. This one cracked the ceiling and buckled the walls. She's heard rumors that part of the east wing has collapsed, allowing packs of half-starved dogs to escape into the city. Now the three of them, wearing hard hats and football helmets, are in the lab squabbling on how to program the computer. —It's the maze, he's yelling, don't you see they're extending the maze themselves! building it from inside out . . . these quakes . . . look here! He's arranged a series of back-page clippings from obscure newspapers into a pattern connected by red lines and superimposed against a wall map. She reads through the clippings: reports of miners in West Virginia and Montana refusing to enter "haunted" mines, fishermen off the Carolina coast complaining about nets snagged on "underwater obstructions," almost identical articles from several different states regarding the mysterious disappearance of sewer workers. —They've probably linked up with a natural system of underground caves, he says, I think we did research on that once. Before she can intercept him he's opened the door to the closet, standing there gaping at Theo's burlap bed, the books, and little decorations she'd fixed up and hadn't been able to discard. He

picks up the last dried pellet, shriveled and darkened now, in his handkerchief, holding it out, his eyes narrowed with suspicion, then bugging out in rage. —What's this! he shouts, waving it in her face. —What in the hell is this!

Light. Who opened the door? She squints. —Is it you, she mumbles. All she can see are those bloodshot lenses, eyebrows like white spiders, a closeup of gums gnashing in her face. —Ha, ha, I can't hear your blathering, she giggles, ever since you've jammed those corks in my ears. But the next second she's groveling at his shoes. —Don't beat me, don't beat me again . . . I can't talk if I wanted to . . . my tongue has shriveled to a raisin . . . don't, please don't use the acid, oh god no! not that, not the mouth-stretcher . . .

The door opens again. She pretends to be unconscious. He drags her out by her hair, across the cold laboratory floor. She thought it was just the closet that felt like a refrigerator, another punishment, but the entire lab is freezing. He's wearing a parka fringed in wolf's fur. —Wake up, you crazy old bitch, I want you to see how it ends! She can see his breath as he talks, gesticulating wildly, explaining how he's set the computer the task of destructing the maze, an atomic chain reaction, blasting it out of the entire country, the entire hemisphere, perhaps the entire planet, like a tapeworm. He's laughing as the clock counts down: 30, 29, 28 . . . turns to see her staggering to her feet and moves to knock her down, still laughing. She smashes her foot down on his toes, the foot with the Spanish Boot. While he's hopping and yelping she tries to finish him off with a cast-iron kick to the groin, but can't swing her leg high enough. It cracks into his kneecap, carrying her off balance, and they both go down. He drags himself toward her across the floor. She tries to crawl away. He rips her rags off. Breathing hard, eyes magnified behind his lenses, an expression she's never seen before. He drops his trousers and rolls on top of her, grunting and biting, prying her legs apart, licking in her ear, "So ugly, so ugly," he's almost cooing, their faces staring into each other, straining only inches apart, then suddenly his jaw unhinging in a scream. She sees his eyes roll up into his head as he's lifted off her, Theo pumping into him from

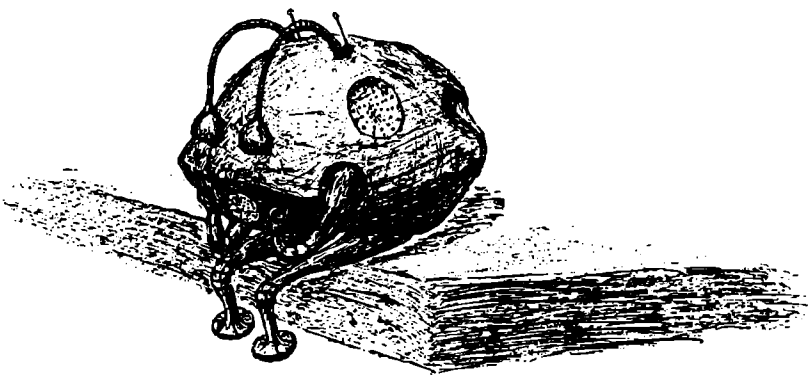
behind like a piston and him screaming again and again with each thrust. She can hear Theo's antennae sending her thought waves as he drives it in over and over: Mother, Mother, are you all right? The computer, she thinks, the computer, and Theo has already dumped him and is lunging for the control panel.

She watches as he rolls over, trousers still around his ankles, a stream of blood running down his legs, then realizes his arms are outstretched and shaking because of the weight of the Luger he's holding with both hands, taking careful aim at Theo's back, and before she can scream the golden tails lash around his wrists, cinch mercilessly around his throat.

She watches the golden mutants file into the maze. A long line, she had no idea there were so many, smiles pouting their lips, their exotic flashing eyes. The last two enter, the ones who saved Theo, one of them obviously pregnant. —My mate, he says, as they disappear into the maze. —Theo, we can escape now . . . through the east wing . . . bring your wife . . . your children will be able to walk the earth free, to know the fields, flowers . . . sun . . . stars. He's smiling. The words sound all wrong to her. He steps into the entrance and extends his hand. She looks at the laboratory, the scattered files, the shattered beakers, buzzing video screen, snow drifting in, blowing through the cracks in the walls, coating everything like dust, his body on the floor, already a little mound of snow, and out the window the icicles like bars across a landscaped white, duned like a desert. She steps in and he slams the door. It fuses behind them. —The last instructions I gave the computer, he says. The corridors are warm, silver tinged with a faint infrared glow. The tunnels so streamlined she seems to glide by their volition, clanking softly with her Spanish Boot. They come to the first intersection. —Turn left, he says.

QUITE LATE ONE SPRING NIGHT

"I think, at times, that I would like to possess,
or at least to understand, emotions."



John M. Curlovich

Quite late one spring night, the three of us, Jiggory, Soribus and I, intoxicated quite with our success in the tech school and free, for once, of Melcanno (having painted his eyes with a dark, thick paint), sallied into the great city of Starport, in whose shadow we had lived all our lives, to prove that we were men. There were, you see, certain places where we knew certain women could be found, and it was to these dark regions, lustfully monied, perversely innocent, corrupt to the very toes with the vague knowledge of what we must do, it was to these nether realms that we

headed. We drained all the cunning of our thirty-nine years to become one—or three—with the shadows, to skulk our way ominously through this the night's first adventure, to initiate ourselves into the moods of vice that we might fully enjoy the night's spoils when they came.

We talked.

"Suppose they kidnap us and sell us into slavery?"

"In the cinny they always have bad teeth. I hope mine has nice teeth."

"It's not her teeth you're supposed to worry about, Jiggory."

"I can't help it. Rotten teeth are so . . ."

"I wonder if they'll understand what we want. I mean, to have to tell them everything that . . . I'm not sure I could."

Soribus was a thinker, almost to the exclusion of all else. It was for him to probe, to question, and he saw no reason why being thirteen, alive and quick-limbed, possessed of blood and semen, bound by obligations and imaginings—he saw no reason why these things should interrupt, for even a moment, the function of his questing young mind. And everywhere that Soribus traveled, he was accompanied by the sound of his own voice, hiding at the lowest levels of his breath, giving vent to the thousand problems that worried his overworked mind. "Melcanno is not one of the psioids—how does he know what I am thinking? How do I, for that matter?" "Why is the water always colder in the bathroom?" "Is living in a mune really the best way? Then why didn't all the philosophers [for he knew of philosophers, and many other dark things] live in them?" It was a fine, mellow thing, this voice of his, and we'd grown nearly as fond of it as we had of him; we felt lost when we could not hear it (for the three of us, of all the people in the mune, were truly inseparable). Like the whistle of a teakettle, his voice assured us that there was important matter brewing within. It made the streets of Starport that much less ominous, stark and cold. Our nickname for Soribus, for reasons of which we were never quite certain, was the Dane.

If Soribus was Intellect (or such intellect as can be housed in a brain a mere thirteen springs old), then Jiggory was Energy,

mad and inchoate, seeking vent without sense. There was not a tree in miles had not known the indignity of his boots and fingers; not a cat but had been stalked by him, and stoned. Jiggory said little, and when he spoke, no one listened very hard. For it was with his body, not merely his vocal cords, that he expressed himself. Wherever we went, he removed his clothing and became one with the landscape: swimming, so lithe as to shame the eels; running, swift as birds, through the wheat and the elders, so that even Melcanno was hard put to capture him; masturbating in the forest, to my amazement and the Dane's embarrassment and irritation; jumping from, crawling through, dancing with, laughing like . . .

These two, then, were my brothers, friends and accomplices as I stole through the city's umbra. Allegro and Penseroso, art and philosophy, transport and melancholy, Jiggory and Soribus.

And I.

I am not sure, even now, what I was then. My principal activity —all that I can ever recall doing—was tormenting Melcanno. Why? I was, I suppose, even then, straining for freedom, resentful of constraints.

"Can you help me, boys?" an old man said. "I need a drink."

"No money!" cried Jiggory. "Runaways from Lunaport!" And he ran off down the street, armed with pebbles, searching for cats. But the cats knew of him, and were elsewhere.

They had gone to the heart of the city, perhaps, to the great steel castle of Ombrindoth, built a thousand years and more ago by the great Quindrillon, first King of Earth, architect of Starport, follower of science. Or perhaps they had departed to those sections of the city where dwelt the tramp robots who, alone, unowned and unwanted, jealous of their freedom, were said to trust only the cats.

Or the cats might be following spacemen—such spacemen as might be found—in the quarters of the city they had made their own. The true spacefolk, the dwellers on the Forgotten Worlds, did not care for the mothering planet even now, when they were once again thriving in the wake of her technology. They had never forgiven her for abandoning them in the ill-remembered

past. And the cats, like the starships, had mysteriously gone elsewhere.

The percolating hum that was the voice of Soribus grew louder. He was reciting things he had found in a book, lest he forget what to do tonight.

We were entering the regions of the women now. Alluring, indifferent, they watched us, we thought, their exotic eyes followed us (though their heads never moved), mildly curious, perhaps.

We were entering the regions of the women, and time was to act; to choose a woman, having inspected them all; to come with her to terms; and then to transpire with her into the bowels of her dark yet promising building. Soribus was the first of us to do so, strolling along with what seemed to us a devil-take-it attitude, though we heard giggles. Soribus, the philosopher-boy, the last of us who might have been imagined to take action in a situation as foreign as this, had advanced upon his intended. And, even greater wonder, his voice, the thrum and teakettle voice that lived below his breath, had stopped! He sauntered through this incalculable silence, free, it seemed, for the first time of bookdust and syllogisms, into the presence of his chosen, a sad, odd-eyed girl with dirty red hair and a scar on her cheek and, perched upon her shoulder, a pure white cockatoo. The Dane walked to her and began to speak, hesitated; began again and could not; and so he said nothing at all to her. For the outré silence with which the Dane had cloaked himself had proved stronger than he, and having turned off his voice, he found himself unable to start it up again, and he was standing dumbly there before her, timidly extending his hand as if to touch her breast. But her hand reached out, soft and swift, to meet his in the air, and, "Come," she said. And soon there was only the bleak brick and pavement where a moment before the three of them, boy, bird and woman, had stood regarding one another in the warm spring night.

Jiggory touched my arm, smiled at me, and sat down to remove his clothing. He rose, his thin, tanned, quick boy's body at once taut and relaxed; and he walked, proud and shimmering as a colt, into the night's street and out of my sight.

I found myself alone, hesitant, but aware: aware of the city's night sounds; of gold Arcturus high above me; aware of my limbs and organs, of my pulse; of women about me; of what Jiggory and Soribus must, even now, be commencing; of life but never death. From behind me, from the dim, crepuscular spaces between the buildings of Starport, I then grew aware of one other thing—of the heavy, ferric scraping that heralds the approach of a robot. Melcanno! He had found turpentine! Or he had had spare eyeballs! Not thinking why, I tore my clothing from my body and, throwing it to the street, I ran to a fair-haired woman, grabbed her by the hand and pulled her indoors. "Time grows short!" I cried; and she, sensing my distress and alarm—sensing, perhaps, more than this—led me up the stairs to her room.

From behind the door came a dim, metallic voice: "Fear not. I am not Melcanno." Did he think I could not guess his tricks, anticipate them, even?

Her room was dark, filled with candles, lined with books. Books, standing like paper soldiers in shelves along the walls; formed into rows on desk and table, on windowsill; piled in great precarious stacks on the floor; tied into bundles, some, as if to make furniture (for of this there was none, save the bed); books, books filled the room. And candles were everywhere that books were not: along the bed's headboard; on the shelves, in front of the books; in an old and rusted chandelier, pendant from the ghost-lit ceiling; in corners, on pipes, and one, even, fixed to the doorknob—such were the candles that lit us, that burned even as we entered the room's dark confines. The bed, the bed was a huge wooden thing, rough-hewn and crudely put together; the mattress was large and soft, a fit mattress for me, I thought; there was a patch-quilt.

From the street, from below the window, I heard: "Do not doubt me. I am not Melcanno."

Maren, she said, was her name, and she was tall and thin and full-breasted, with thick, unruly tow-hair that flowed and pale grey eyes that jumped in the glow of the candles, with skin the deep, deep tan of space, darker even than I, and I knew that she

was the most ravishing beauty in Starport. I saw the robot standing in the street below—he would not dare enter the house unbidden—staring up at the window, peering at it as if, somehow, he could perceive what was happening behind it. Maren came behind me and put her arms about me and stroked my breast and said, "I know what it is to be pursued. But here, with me, you are safe—from him at least." She led me to the bed and laid me down. Softly she touched my thigh. And we kissed.

I do not remember beginning, do not, really, remember what we did at all in the soft, warmly lit bed. Only impressions: her hand, her hand as soft and pink as mine, and sure; her arm, it seemed, was made of ivory; her lips, her mouth, her lips and I within; her throat; her breasts, her breasts, her womanhood, her passion; the strength with which she clung to me, the grace with which she made love; and I, all tongue and penis, fiercely bent; the night! the night! the robot at the door! candles, and the bookshelves, and Maren and I . . . and he waiting outside.

And again: "Melcanno is not near; I am called Morundissimis. You have shared much with me," said the sad and ferric voice, "much of what I desire. Come and talk with me; I would not betray you."

Though I was in her arms, passionate, at peace, time was to confront him. I made settlement with Maren and went down to the street to do the same with the robot.

I could not tell from the window, through the darkness, whether it was Melcanno. That he was capable of tricks I knew well, and I walked to the street cloaked in suspicion, fearful lest the great black hulk rob me of yet another pleasure, another of youth's noble, quiet conquests. He sat on the curb, his shoulders hunched low, and slowly his head pivoted toward me. "I am Morundissimis," he said, "and I am psioid." His name and his type, the two things robots are inexorably bound to declare to all humans with whom they might have dealings. But now I could see him, I did not need even this; I need no longer fear Melcanno this night.

Still uneasy, I asked, "What do you want?" and started looking for my clothes.

"A tramp stole them," he said, "yours and Jiggory's." I suddenly felt very conscious of my nakedness. "All except your trousers," he went on, "which are three feet behind you, to the left." I found them and crawled into them; the seat was torn open. Morundissimis arose and stared fixedly again at Maren's window. "As for what I want here," he said, his voice lowered to a confidential rasp, "I think that should be rather obvious."

"I . . . What!" I squawked, realization dawning. "You had no right! You filthy, lecherous, perverted *thing!*" I screamed, my voice growing shriller with each word.

"Let's watch that anthropomorphism, if you please." He leaned against a building and picked specks of dust from his chest.

I was so angry at him I was shaking. But I controlled myself as I repeated through my teeth, "You. Had. No. Right."

And, "I had every right," he snapped. "You know, you people really get me. You give a fellow psychic powers—and damn good ones, too, don't get me wrong—and you put no restrictions on how he can use them—because he's 'only a machine' after all—and then every time he uses them you start screaming about 'privacy' and 'decency' and 'a man's rights.' Well, for Christ's sake, what about *my* rights!" He had gotten quite loud; faces appeared at windowframes. He cried, "Ulp!" and jumped into the shadow with me. As well as I could judge from his bearing and from the silence he now assumed, he was genuinely embarrassed.

I regarded him coldly. "You might at least have asked permission, or something . . ."

"What, and have it ruined by your knowing there was a third party involved?"—this as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world. "And besides, you'd only have said no." A brief pause, in which I waited for him to go on. Then, "She is sorry that you left." All the flippancy left his voice and bearing. "Do not be angry with me; I only do what I must. The force that drives your green body, gives it urgings and anger, impulse and imaginings —this force drives me also."

Jiggory came up to us softly through the night, touched my arm, and smiled. The robot's head pivoted toward him, and, "My

name is Morundissimis," he said. "I am psioid."

Jiggory looked at him a moment, smiled again, and told him, "Take what you want." He never noticed that his clothing was missing; or if he did, he did not care.

The Dane's undervoice came to us from somewhere in the folds of the night, muttering of persistence, sounding relaxed and agitated and nonplussed all at once. Morundissimis said, "He would feel badly if I spied on his evening's pleasures. I shall not." When I started to protest that he had not afforded me this privilege, he merely said, "You know better than to mind. Soribus, though . . ." It seemed unlike him to want for words. "He thinks I am Melcanno. Please, introduce me to him. One grows so weary doing it one's self all the time."

Soribus, his voice percolating in his lungs and his face looking perplexed, stepped into our now badly crowded shadow and looked to me for explanation. "This is Morundissimis," I said. "He is one of the psioids, and he has joined us."

"Come to my rooms," said Morundissimis, "and we will talk."

We followed him through the streets of Starport, past old men and occasional cats, through shadows and under arches, accompanied by the sounds of bare feet and of ferric scraping. "How do you earn your living?" asked Soribus. "Are you a tramp?"

The robot's head pivoted around to him. "I suppose that's what most people would call me," he said. "I live by playing poker with drunken old men. No," he added, "it isn't unlawful. I always identify myself; there's no way of getting around that. But these men are intoxicated—enough so that they think they can outplay me anyway. Knowing what I am, knowing that I am aware of every card they hold and every thought they think, they still play poker with me."

The Dane muttered something about "fools," and the robot snapped, "No! No," he went on in a milder, almost sentimental tone, "only human."

He lived in a basement, three rooms spare and ill-furnished (what needs has a robot?): paintings, one on each wall (six in the sitting room), greens dominant; a golden sculpture, abstract, suggestive of birds, on a pedestal in a corner; tables in the centers

of the two larger rooms; a huge stuffed pouf, of an uneasy brown shade, on which he perched; the walls were grey. The small room was a music room; from it came the sounds of low and mournful paranes, played on a lute.

Nine white cats moved liquidly through the rooms. As Morundissimis found his seat on the pouf, one of them leaped to his shoulder and sat there, imperious, staring at me. Three more of them found Jiggory, who'd crawled into a corner, and settled on and about him. (Having no pockets to carry them in, he had brought no pebbles.) Morundissimis pivoted his head at each of us in turn, thinking thoughts unguessable and, no doubt, positronic; and, by all that's telepathic, the movements of the cat's head matched his precisely, staring first at Soribus, who was examining a painting and talking of the primitive; then at me, staring back; and finally at Jiggory, who was stroking the fur of a cat and seemed delighted to find electricity in it.

"Tell me of yourselves," the robot said. And before any of us could speak, he added, with his metallic tones mildly suggesting sadness, "No, no, I do not know 'all about you.' I am a telepath, not an empath: I can pick up the thoughts on the surface of your minds, but nothing deeper. I can know that someone is happy without understanding why. And of course," he told us, "I can never really share in the happiness. I can derive a certain contentment from understanding what induced it. That is all."

We all sat silent for a moment, and then he said, hesitantly, as if he were unaccustomed to talking of himself as he had been doing, "Please, now, give me . . . something to react to. Tell me of your dreams."

As much as Soribus had shocked me when he had been first to act, Jiggory surprised me even more by speaking first. "Space! To be free in the great up-and-out!" he chimed. His three cats looked up at him, startled. "To be a trader—perhaps on the Taurus run. There is a song they sing on the Taurus run—a very old one, and I don't know if the spacemen ever really sing it anymore. But I like it. It's a bit flip and cynical, I guess, but it has in it all the things I feel about the tiredness of Earth and the beauty and aliveness of other parts of space." He was quiet for

a moment. Then, his voice forming an odd counterpoint to the music of the lute, he sang:

> Despite the hostile climes of Night,
> Our souls have their rebirth.
> Our ships fly fast through the darkness vast
> As we try our spirits' worth.
>
> From the worlds of blue Merope
> Around great Aldeb'ran's girth
> Our spirits roam. We need no home
> On the brown, bare hills of Earth.

"You see, staying here for me means endless repetition, evermore conflict with Melcanno and his kind. Space . . . space means to be free; to wear no clothes; to use my mind—and my emotions, for that matter—as I will."

Jiggory had been talking quite rapidly. Now he looked up at us, to see if he had made a fool of himself. He decided from our silence that he had not, and he went on. "There may be more Forgotten Worlds to be found in the deeps of space. Oh, the things that I could learn from them! More than I ever could if I remain here behind." He stopped, looked up at the robot as if in hope of having found, for the first time, someone who might understand. His voice turned low and whimsical and a bit sad. "And then there are the lost starships. I don't guess I could find them; I don't think anyone ever will, really. But if I could . . . If I could know where they went and why they left us, long ago. What prospect could Earth offer me half as exciting as that?"

"In the deeps of space," the Dane said suddenly, with a touch of whimsy in his voice. "In the heart of the Horsehead, obscured by dust and hydrogen, instinct with solitude, hangs the Abbey of Black St. Mark. There, unhampered by unwanted stimulus, there exists a colony of artists and philosophers; and it is there that I wish to go, to think and to write, to study, to ponder, to penetrate."

There came a low, ferric chuckle. "Did you not penetrate tonight?"

And Soribus, ever the puritan, blushed slightly, and laughed. "In the Abbey of Black St. Mark," he said through a smile greater

than ever he had worn, "I may be able to discern the answers to the problems that plague me. I am not one to act, not one to roam the spaceways seeking wealth, adventure, or experience. Such wisdom as I may need is, I think, somewhere within me. Perhaps among the Markists, free to question as I will, unbound by custom, superstition, or prejudice, perhaps there I will find it."

When the robot turned his head to me, his cat's head following, I, unable to speak of plans never made, of longings unborn, was still.

"Do you wish nothing," Morundissimis asked, "but to be free to wish? Do you expect never to be at peace, at one with the Earth? Even such unprepossessing goals as that, I fear, may never be fulfilled." He waited, but I remained silent.

"Very well, then," he said, "it has come my turn to speak, by all that's metallic, it has. I was built three hundred seventy-three years ago, born fully grown, to assist an Oriental geologist with the exploration of Antarctic volcanoes. He was thin, I remember, and had a chipped front tooth. He worked alone, wearing a pressurized suit, and so having a psioid to assist him was a great help. We explored many fires together, and learned much. And then one day he fell to his death in a lava pool. His death was for me unbearably hard to adjust to; I was left alone, without purpose. Having nothing else to do, I came to Starport, and learned poker. I have seen a great deal—seen, but not felt—in the years since Himate died in the flames. I know all the great buildings of Starport, know every street, every shadow. And here I remain, winning money and art from drunken old men; communicating with boys, and with cats; talking to the women, who are my only friends, and eavesdropping on their business transactions; working an occasional swindle with other tramps. This and more. It is enough, though. The present, despite what we think, is always sufficient.

"I think, at times, that I would like to possess, or at least to understand, emotions. But I hope, at my age, I know better than to pursue the impossible. And sometimes I think that I should try to unite the tramps, to lead them on some enterprise worthy of them. But then—" Something inside him clicked. "I am acting,

in my fashion, on my surroundings, and reacting to them. In the final analysis, all human endeavor amounts to no more than this. At least my motives are not frivolous."

Jiggory was involved in a game with one of the cats. The Dane was in another room; his voice came to us under the music. And so I alone heard how sad the robot sounded, how defeated, how very alive.

We left him soon, and left Starport, as we wended our way back to the mune. Arcturus had settled low in the west; Vega and the Milky Way dominated the sky now, and Pisces and Pegasus were climbing in the east. One of us naked, one fully clothed, and one wearing only his trousers (the seat torn open), we walked home through the forest which, for all its shadows, was not as dark as certain places in the city.

One of us ran ahead, from time to time, to climb trees. One of us talked to himself in the night, in tones much more somber than any thirteen-year-old had a right to use. One of us, pensive, walked behind.

Ah, youth! Ah, lust! Ah, life! We had known women that night! Were we not men?

UNDER THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN

They are here, they are beautiful and cold, we look
at them and don't see them . . . and they wait,
for what apocalypse?

Tom Reamy

I can't pinpoint the exact moment I noticed him. I suppose I had been subliminally aware of him for some time, though he was just standing there with the rest of the crowd. Anyway, I had other things on my mind: a Pinto and a Buick were wrapped around each other like lettuce leaves. The paramedics had two of them out, wrapped in plastic sheets waiting for the meat wagon, and were cutting out a third with a torch. He appeared to be in the Buick, but you couldn't really tell.

My partner Carnehan and I were holding back the crowd of gawkers. A couple of bike cops in their gestapo uniforms were keeping the traffic moving on Cahuenga, not letting any of them stop and get out. But there were still twenty or twenty-five of them standing there—eyes bright, noses crinkled, mouths disapproving.

All except him.

That's one of the reasons I noticed him in particular. He wasn't wearing that horrified, fascinated expression they all seem to

have. He might have been watching anything—or nothing. His face was smooth and placid. I think that's the first time I ever saw a face totally without expression. It wasn't dull or blank or lifeless. No, there was vitality there. It just simply wasn't doing anything at the moment.

And he was . . . Don't get the wrong idea—my crotch doesn't get tight at the sight of an attractive young man. But there's only one word to describe him—beautiful!

I've seen my share of pretty boys—the ones that flutter and the ones that don't. It seems the prettier they are, the more trouble they get into. But he wasn't that *kind* of beautiful.

Even though the word is used these days to describe practically everything, it was the only one that fitted. I thought at first he was very young: nineteen, twenty, not more than twenty-one. But then I got the impression he was much older, though I don't know why, because he still looked twenty. He was about five-ten, a hundred and sixty–seventy pounds—one of those bodies the hero of the book always has but that you never see in real life.

His hair was red, or it might have just been the light from the flashers. There were no peculiarities of feature; just a neutral perfection. I've heard it said that perfect beauty is dull, that it takes an imperfection to make a face interesting. Whoever said it had never seen this kid.

He was standing with his hands in his pockets, watching the guys with the torch, neither interested nor uninterested. I guess I was staring at him, because his head turned and he looked directly at me.

I could smell the rusty odor of the antifreeze dribbling from the busted radiators and the sharp ozone of the acetylene and the always remembered smell of blood. A coyote began yipping somewhere in the darkness.

Then a couple of kids got too close and I had to hustle them out of the way. When I looked back, he was no longer there.

They finally got the third one out of the Buick. When they pulled him out I could see the wet brown stain all over the seat of his pants where his bowels had relaxed in death. The ambulance picked up all three of them and the wrecker hauled off the

two cars still merged as one. Part of the mess was dragging on the street and I could hear the scraping for a long time. The bike cops did a few flashy turns and roared away. The crowd started to wander off, and Carnehan and I began sweeping the broken glass from the pavement.

But there was only one thing I could think of: I couldn't remember the color of his eyes.

Nothing much happened the rest of the night. We cruised the Boulevard a few times, but there wasn't anything going on. A few hustlers still lounged around the Gold Cup and the Egyptian, never giving up hope. There was no point in hassling them—they'd just say they were waiting for a bus, and we couldn't prove they weren't. It was a pretty scruffy-looking bunch this late in the morning. The presentable ones had scored a long time ago. You could probably get most of these with an offer of breakfast.

Carnehan reached behind the seat and pulled an apple from the paper sack he always kept back there. He took a bite that sounded like a rifle shot and then offered me one. "No, thanks."

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away." He grinned and took another bite.

"You're keeping the entire AMA at bay."

He laughed; partly chewed apple dribbled down his chin. He wiped it off with the back of his hand. I kept my eyes on the street. "Why don't you eat soft apples? They're quiet."

"I like hard ones."

We stopped a car with only one taillight and gave the guy a warning ticket.

Then the sun was coming up. It was hitting the tops of the Hollywood Hills and illuminating the Hollywood sign. It looked decent from this far away. You couldn't tell it was made of rotting timbers and sagging sheet metal clanging in the wind. From here you couldn't see the obscenities scrawled on it.

We went back to the station, reported, and then into the locker room. The rest of the graveyard shift were wandering in, showering, and changing out of their uniforms. Cunningham has the locker next to mine. He had been on the Pansy Patrol and was wearing a shirt unbuttoned to the waist, no underwear, and pants

so tight you could count every hair on his ass.

Wharton, one of the police psychiatrists, was leaning against the lockers talking to him. Doc was on his favorite theme again. He was telling Cunningham why he, Cunningham, was so successful on the Pansy Patrol. The fags recognized a kindred spirit; the fags always knew one of their own kind; if Cunningham would only stop fooling himself, just stop deluding himself that he was straight, just know himself, just start living a conscious life, he would be a happier, more fulfilled person.

I had been on the Pansy Patrol with Cunningham a few times and had seen him operate. I wasn't completely sure Doc was wrong. Cunningham was peeling off the tight pants and I watched in fascination, although I'd seen it before, as the sizable bulge in his crotch stayed with the pants.

Poor Cunningham.

He was standing there naked with a slight smile on his face, putting the pants neatly on a hanger, listening to Doc's clarinet voice. He looked a lot like the cop on "Adam-12," whatever his name is, the kid. The boys had even called him "Adam-12" for a while until they got tired of it. I couldn't keep from comparing him to the guy I had seen at the wreck, but Cunningham didn't compare at all. He was just a good-looking kid with a slim muscular body, and not much equipment. But it didn't seem to bother him. He always grinned and said it wasn't size that counted, it was technique.

I took off my own pants and looked at myself. I wasn't as young or as good-looking as Cunningham, but I did all right on the Pansy Patrol. I was bulkier and more heavily muscled and hairier; I guess I appealed to the rough trade crowd. I was never very comfortable without underwear, and thank God I didn't have to wear padding.

Wharton finished his catalogue of Cunningham's emotional failings. Cunningham looked at me and winked. "I don't really know anything about it, Doc, but maybe the reason I'm not interested in sex with another man is because I'm just *not interested* in sex with another man."

Doc's lips got a little tight and his face was slightly flushed. I

knew Cunningham had been reading Kingsley Amis again and had probably maneuvered Doc into the whole conversation—and Doc was eminently maneuverable. I'd heard most of it before, so I got a towel and started for the showers. Cunningham followed me and Wharton followed him.

"You're right, Cunningham, you don't know anything about it!"

I turned on the water and began soaping. Cunningham got next to me and Doc stood at the door, still talking. Cunningham looked at me and grinned and said loudly, "Sorry, Doc, I can't hear you with the water running!"

There were about ten other guys in the shower, grinning at each other. Cunningham leaned toward me. "Hey, Rankin, you notice how Doc always manages to look in the showers?"

I shrugged.

"According to him everyone is either a fag or a closet queen."

"What about himself?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes and laughed. "Getting him to talk about himself is like catching fairies in a saucepan."

Carnehan came in, pitching an apple core into the wastebasket. I could see why he had never been on the Pansy Patrol. Then . . . I don't know why I thought of it, but the thought crossed my mind. I wondered what the guy at the wreck looked like naked.

I left the station and got into my five-year-old Dart. It looked like a nice day. There was enough wind from the ocean to clear away the smog. Of course, the wind was packing it into the San Gabriel Valley, but that was their problem, not mine. I went straight home and went to bed.

I was scrambling some eggs and watching *The Price Is Right* when the phone rang. They were doing the one where the screaming dame has to zero in on the prices of two objects within thirty seconds. When she names a price, the MC says "Higher" or "Lower." This keeps up until she guesses the price. You can get it in ten guesses maximum. She started at a hundred on a color TV and worked up ten dollars at a time.

"Hundred and ten!"

"Higher!"

"Hundred and twenty!"

"Higher!"

"Hundred and thirty!"

"Higher!"

She got to three-seventy before her time ran out. Dumb dame!

It was Carnehan on the phone. "Hey, Lou, Margaret wants you to come over for dinner tonight."

"Hell, Carnehan. I wish you'd said something this morning. I've already made other plans." You stupid jerk! Don't you ever wonder why your wife is always inviting me to dinner?

"Got a heavy date, Lou?"

"Something like that. Some other time, Carnehan." No other time, Carnehan. Margaret's a pretty good-looking dame for her age, but not good enough to take chances with. You didn't even notice how her hand stayed under the table all through dinner last time.

"Margaret says how about Wednesday?"

"I'll have to let you know later." And you never even had a suspicion about what goes on after you fall asleep in front of the TV, Carnehan. If you ever found out . . .

"Okay, Lou. I'll remind you Tuesday night."

"You do that." And I'll have a good excuse ready. Not that I give a good goddamn if you do find out, but you could make a stink at the department. I don't want to lose my job, Carnehan. I like being a cop.

" 'Bye, Lou. See you later."

" 'Bye, Carnehan." I hung up the phone in time to see a granny-lady have an orgasm over winning a dune buggy.

I usually eat dinner about eight o'clock at David's. I know it's a fag hangout but the food's good and, since I let it be known I was a cop, the service is even better. I spotted him as I was leaving about nine. He went into the gay bar next to David's. It was called Goliath's, of course. I only glimpsed him from behind but I was sure of the red hair and body. Wouldn't you know he'd be a queer!

I paid my dollar and a quarter cover charge and went through the black curtains after him. I don't know what I was planning to

do, but I hadn't been able to get him out of my mind. I stood for a moment, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the gloom and my ears to the plaster-cracking music. There were three small stages with naked boys dancing on them, wiggling their little round butts for all they were worth. There were also five screens showing movies of naked boys doing everything it's physically possible for naked boys to do and a few things I would have thought impossible before I joined the force.

Then there were the customers. A few were at the bar and a few were scattered around but most of them were packed like Vienna sausages against one wall. There was plenty of room and no need for the press of bodies—no need but one, and the busy hands told what that was. A few watched the movies but mostly they watched each other. One of the dancers was waving around a hardon and was getting some attention but not much. A couple of dykes at the bar watched him. I guess this is the only chance they have to see one.

I spotted the back of the red head in the middle of the mass, so I waded in. There's no way to move through something like that. No one can move out of your way; they're just as trapped as you are. You just wait and move with the current because the pack is in constant eddy as they move from one body to the next, trying to touch everything.

It was no more than thirty seconds before I felt feathery touches on my ass. I thought about my wallet, but I knew that wasn't what they were after. I pushed away the first hand that closed on my crotch and saw a pout of disappointment flicker across a face in front of mine. I put my wallet in my shirt pocket anyway.

After five minutes and fifty gropes, I finally reached the redhead but he was turned the other way. I was pressed against him and could feel his hard body. By pushing with determination, I managed to get to the side of him. He was standing face to face with another guy. Both of them had their eyes closed and their mouths slightly open, occasionally coming together in a lazy kiss. Their hands were out of sight but I could feel the movement.

It wasn't him.

This was one of the pretty ones. I might even have said beautiful if I hadn't seen the other one. But, like Cunningham, he was ordinary in comparison.

He opened his eyes and saw me watching him and he smiled dreamily. I felt a hand massaging my crotch but I couldn't tell for sure if it was him. I was so disappointed I didn't push it away. Then my zipper went down and fingers expertly scooped everything out. The press was so tight I couldn't even get my arms down, much less move away. Whoever was working on me was very good and I couldn't help getting it up.

Jesus Christ!

I had a wild urge to take out my badge and shove it in every face in sight. I enjoyed my mental image of the panic it would create. But I didn't do it. I forced my arms down, pushed the clutching hands away, closed my pants, and got the hell out of there.

When I went into the locker room about eleven thirty, Carnehan already had his uniform on, sitting there reading a copy of the *Advocate* and eating an apple. He looked up when I rattled my locker.

"Hey, Lou! You missed a great dinner."

"It couldn't be helped, Carnehan."

"Don't forget about Wednesday."

"I won't."

I took off my shirt and remembered my wallet was still in the pocket. I put it on the shelf and took off my pants. I grabbed a towel and headed for the shower. I felt clammy. I must have sweated off a pound in that damn bar. Those groping bodies can generate a lot of heat.

Carnehan laughed out loud. He came toward me waving the newspaper. "Hey, Lou! Did you see this cartoon in the *Advocate*?"

"Why in hell would I be reading the *Advocate*?"

"Look, there's these two cops standing before a judge with a handcuffed fag and a hooker. One of the cops is saying, 'But Your Honor, you can get *hurt* chasing robbers and murderers.' Isn't that a scream?"

"Ha ha," I said and went on to the showers. He started rushing

around the room showing it to everyone else.

I was almost finished when Cunningham came in. He turned on the water and stood under it leaning against the wall with his eyes closed and a sappy grin on his face.

"You look like the cat that swallowed the aviary," I said.

He sighed. "I am *exhausted!*"

"Let me guess from what."

"I met the most fan*tas*tic girl! A waitress at the Hamburger Hamlet on the Strip. I'm gonna give it two weeks and, if I'm *still* alive, I'm gonna propose." He rubbed his hand between his legs. "I tell you, Rankin, I didn't know I had it in me. Boy, I'd like to see Wharton try to convince *her* I'm a repressed homosexual."

I laughed dutifully. He began soaping and glanced down at me.

"You look a little shriveled up yourself. Have a big night?" He grinned goodnaturedly, wanting to share his sexual excitement.

"Yeah. Some women are just as happy with size as they are with technique."

He looked a little wistful for a moment, then the grin returned. "Shit! If I had your size and my technique, I'd quit the force, put an ad in the *Free Press,* and open a screwing service!"

And I wondered about *him* again. With that face and that body, did he worry about size and technique? How did women react to him? Were they intimidated by his beauty? Was he as beautiful in bed?

I saw him going into the Vogue Record Shop on the Boulevard. This time there was no mistake. I told Carnehan to park the car and meet me at the entrance. When I went through the turnstiles, I saw him leaning against the end of the counter. I walked into the book department and watched him from behind a rack of paperbacks.

He had his back to me and it took me a moment to figure out what he was doing. The cashier was playing the *Symphonie Fantastique*—it was the passage where the two shepherds are calling to each other on their flutes and, at the end, one doesn't answer—and he was standing there listening to the music. Then he turned slightly and I could see his face.

I could feel the skin crawling on the back of my neck.

It wasn't the same one!

It was all there: the red hair, the magnificent body, the neutral beauty of the bland face. But the features were different. He had to be the other one's brother, they were so alike.

The lights in the store were very bright. No one else was in the place but the cashier and she had her nose in a paperback volume of Toynbee. His clothes were clean and neatly pressed but they were old and hadn't cost much when they were new. His hair was neat and not very long. His face was so smooth I doubted that he shaved. And his eyes were gray—just as beautiful and as neutral as the rest of him.

Finally the record ended and he left. I glanced at the book I had been holding. The cover was a photograph of Burt Reynolds standing with his back to the camera looking over his shoulder. He was wearing nothing but a football jersey, with his bare ass hanging out. I closed the book, put it back on the rack, and for some reason thought of Betty Grable.

The cashier never even looked up when he went out. Carnehan, standing on the sidewalk looking confused, never glanced at him as he walked by. The girl was watching me. She smiled but her eyes were guarded.

"Did you know the man who just went out?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

She glanced out the door, but he had turned left toward Las Palmas. She looked back at me. "I don't think so, officer. Did he do something?"

"No. I just thought I'd seen him before. Maybe in the movies or on television."

She shrugged. "Movie stars come in here all the time. Joanne Worley was in yesterday. Wendell Burton comes in every once in a while."

"Thanks." I left before she could give me a complete catalogue of the celebrities she'd seen. She raised her voice as I went out the door.

"Chad Everett was in a couple of weeks ago but I was off that day."

I looked down the Boulevard but didn't see him. I told Carnehan to wait for me and went after him. At Las Palmas I looked in every direction but there was no sign of him. The hustlers standing around the Gold Cup pretended to ignore me, but a couple of drag queens gave me defiant looks.

There was another bad one that night on the off-ramp at Western. Four cars were scattered half a block. There were seven dead and two others who probably wouldn't see morning. And there were two of *them* in the crowd. Two different ones.

I motioned Carnehan over.

"Yeah, Lou?"

"Carnehan. See those two guys over there, the ones with red hair?"

He looked confused. "Where?"

"You see the black dame in the yellow dress? The one with pigtails all over her head that make her look like an upside-down johnny brush?"

He snickered. "Sure."

"One of them is standing right beside her. On her left. You see him?"

Slowly: "Yeah."

"What does he look like?"

He looked up at me. "What d'ya mean?"

"No! Keep looking at him!" He looked back. "You still see him?"

"Yeah."

"Describe him to me."

He thought for a moment. "Don't forget. Tomorrow's Wednesday. Margaret's expecting you for dinner."

"*Carnehan!* Concentrate on the redheaded guy. Don't think about anything else. What does he look like?"

"I don't know. He's just a guy."

"How old is he?"

"It's hard to tell. The light's not too good."

"Is he under thirty?"

He considered. "Yeah."

"Under twenty-five?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'd say so."

"Under twenty?"

He was silent for a moment. Good old Carnehan. His little pea brain was doing its best. "Maybe . . . but probably not."

"What about his face?"

"What about it?"

"Is it an ugly face?"

"No."

"Is it a handsome face?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"How handsome?"

"Golly, Lou."

"Very handsome?"

"Yeah."

"Better-looking than Cunningham?"

"Yeah." His voice suddenly got excited. "Hey, Lou, is that a movie star or something?"

We went through the whole thing again with the other one. Carnehan finally saw them the same way I did, but he couldn't remember the one at the record shop. Later I asked him if he remembered the two good-looking redheaded guys.

"Sure. How could you forget somebody who looks like that? Especially when there's two of 'em. Hey, you suppose they're twins?"

"Are they still there?"

"Naw. They musta left," he said, looking right at them. "Don't forget about dinner Wednesday night."

Then they both turned and looked at me with their expressionless eyes. Or were they expressionless? I thought I saw recognition and speculation, but I wasn't sure. Carnehan was right. The light *was* bad.

They kept us hopping the rest of the night. We'd barely get through with one before we were sent to another.

An old hotel on Vermont burned to the ground. Half the department was there, keeping the curious out from underfoot, rerouting traffic. My eyes were burning and watery from the

smoke, but it didn't keep me from seeing them.

I counted seven. Seven beautiful redheaded young men with perfect bodies.

I leaned against my locker in pure exhaustion, wondering if I should take a shower. I was grimy from smoke and dust but I was so tired I only wanted to go to bed. Cunningham came in, looking as beat as I felt.

He looked at me and sighed, shaking his head.

"What are you doing in uniform?" I asked, not really caring. "You off the Pansy Patrol?"

He started undressing. "Yeah. They called us in about three. What got into people last night, anyway? Seems like everybody was trying to get themselves killed."

The same thought had crossed my mind, but not seriously. I had other things to think about.

Margaret called herself the next afternoon to remind me about dinner. But I'd already laid out my plan of action.

"I'm sorry, Margaret. I was just about to call you. I'm leaving for Texas in about two hours. My father is very ill and I've taken a leave of absence from the department."

"Oh, Lou, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, thank you, Margaret. Everything's taken care of."

"At least let me drive you to the airport."

"I'm not flying. I'll need my car when I get there."

"How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. My father isn't expected to live. . . ." I let my voice break a little. "Say so long to Carnehan for me."

"Of course, Lou. You're sure there's nothing I can do?"

"No. Nothing. Good-bye, Margaret."

" 'Bye, Lou, dear."

Well, it wasn't *all* a lie. My father had taken three months to die seventeen years ago when I was in high school, but nobody out here knew that. The Lieutenant hadn't much liked the idea of giving me an indefinite leave of absence, but what could he do? I packed enough supplies in the Dart to last two people six weeks, paid my landlady two months in advance, drove up La Brea to the

Boulevard, and put my car in the underground garage near Graumann's Chinese. I walked down to the Vogue and caught a double feature.

It was dark when I came out. I could hear sirens in several directions. I got in the car and drove to David's for something to eat. All I had to do was get in one place and wait, no driving around, no taking extra chances of being seen.

I had almost finished eating when I heard the sirens. I didn't pay much attention because there would be plenty of time and plenty of sirens, if tonight was anything like last night. When I came out of the restaurant there were little bunches of people standing on the corners looking south down La Brea. I walked over and saw a crowd around the Gordon, standing in that tense way they do when somebody's had it. This was going to be a lot easier than I'd thought.

I crossed over Melrose past the camera store, and eased my way through the press of bodies. The colored neon of the marquee made the blood look black. The guy was under a blanket, flat on his back on the sidewalk, one brown hand poking out from under the edge. The hand had blood on it and a spot had soaked through the blanket. More of it was smeared around on the concrete.

One of the cops talking to a couple of people was named Henderson. I only knew him vaguely, so he probably wouldn't know I was supposed to be on my way to Texas. I began sorting through a number of excuses for my delay just in case.

He saw me and waved. The patrol car was behind him at the curb, the flashers turning hypnotically, but losing out to the bright marquee. A young Chicano sat in the back seat looking dazed and surly. He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand and I saw the glint of cuffs. A girl was hunched in the front seat weeping.

Henderson finished with his witnesses and started toward me. "Hello, Rankin. Don't you get enough of this on duty?"

"Just passing by. What happened?"

He groaned and shook his head. "Couple of kids in a knife fight over a señorita. Wonder if she was worth it."

"The way she's carrying on, the wrong one musta lost."

"Yeah." Another siren approached. "Here's the ambulance. See you around, Rankin." He walked away, being very official, moving the onlookers back another inch.

I looked over the crowd and saw him almost immediately. He was about twelve feet from me, his eyes on the blanket. As usual no one was paying him the slightest attention. I edged toward him as they put the body in the ambulance. The crowd began drifting away but I kept my eyes on that beautiful boy. I wasn't sure if I had seen him before, they all looked so much alike.

He turned and walked north on La Brea. I followed him across Melrose. A few people were still milling around the intersection, but I couldn't let him get too far away from my car.

I overtook him, touched his arm, and said, "Excuse me." I had my badge in my hand when he turned with a startled look.

My face was only a foot from his. I saw the clear, healthy skin and the bewildered gray eyes that looked at me with recognition. All the artists for the last thousand years have been trying to paint that face on angels, but their poor fumbling attempts never came close. It was only for an instant but I had to look away or be overwhelmed.

The traffic on La Brea moved by us silently, like a movie with the sound turned off. But, oddly enough, I could hear the hum and click of the traffic lights as they changed. I realized I was still stupidly holding my badge in my hand, and put it away. I forced myself to look at him again.

"Will you please come down to the station with me . . ." My voice cracked. Come on, Rankin, get hold of yourself! "It's purely a routine matter."

"What do you want?"

It was only four words, but I realized I'd never heard one of them speak. How can you describe music to a deaf person? Any actor in the world would trade his prick for that voice. My own words stopped and we looked at each other. Get your shit together! You're acting like some poor fairy who's just been propositioned by Robert Redford.

"I can make . . . make this official if you refuse to cooperate."

His shoulders sagged slightly. He nodded.

He followed me to the Dart without protest. I had been a little worried because I wasn't in uniform and wasn't in a squad car, but he didn't seem to notice. I had my revolver handy when I handcuffed him to the door handle, but he sat slumped in the seat looking at nothing.

I took the Hollywood Freeway to the Pasadena Freeway. I was going down Colorado Boulevard when he said, "Why are you doing this to me?"

I glanced at him but he was still looking at nothing. I almost turned the car around. I wish I had, but I didn't.

He didn't say anything else as I got on the Foothill Freeway and headed east through the San Gabriel Valley. It was almost dawn when I pulled off the pavement winding up Mt. Baldy. I opened the gate to the gravel road down the canyon. I drove through and put on the padlock I had brought with me. I drove up the canyon a couple of miles until the road ended at a cabin. It belonged to a director friend of mine who was on location in Jamaica and would be for several more months. He'd let me use it before. Besides, what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

I had to break a window to get in, but that could be fixed. I'd brought a pane of glass and a cutter. I turned on the electricity at the meter box and took him in. I took the chain I had brought, handcuffed one end to his ankle and the other end around the commode. Now he could use the bathroom and the bed, but the chain wasn't long enough to reach the bedroom door or the window. He didn't complain through any of this. He acted as if he didn't even know I was there.

I unloaded the car, put on a pot of coffee, scrambled some eggs, and tried to get him to eat something but he wouldn't. I finished eating, unpacked my clothes, took a shower in the other bathroom and went to sleep in the other bedroom.

He still wouldn't eat when I woke up. I took another shower and shaved. I moved a chair just out of the limit of the chain—he hadn't given me any trouble but I wasn't taking chances—and sat down to watch him.

He was still sitting on the side of the bed, where he'd been

when I put on the chain, his magnificent body relaxed and his beautiful face calm. His cheeks were as smooth as ever. I knew for sure he didn't have to shave. His hands were folded in his lap and his eyes seemed to be on them. For two hours he didn't move except for gentle breathing. I didn't realize so much time had passed until the room began to get dark.

I turned on the lights and went to him, holding out my hand. "Give me your wallet." He acted as if he hadn't heard me. "Give me your wallet," I said again, louder.

He looked up at me then, puzzlement in his eyes. "I don't have one."

"Stand up," I said. He hesitated for a moment, then stood. I went over him quickly. He was telling the truth. He had no wallet; nothing but empty pockets.

I returned to my chair and sat, watching him. He stood where I had left him, stood as calmly as he had sat. "How many of you are there?" I said. He didn't seem to hear. "Look, we might as well get a few things straight. You're gonna tell me everything I want to know. We can do it easy or we can do it hard. It's up to you."

He stood for a moment in the same position, then looked at me. "I don't know." His voice still made the hair on my arms stand up.

"You must have some idea. A hundred? A thousand? Ten thousand? A million?" He shook his head. Maybe he wasn't going to let it be easy after all. I let it go; there was plenty of time. "I can fix you something to eat if you want. I'm not trying to starve you to death. Aren't you hungry?"

He said nothing.

"Look! It won't do any good to go on a hunger strike. Not one damn bit of good!" No response. I used my buddy voice. "You can have anything you want. Just name it."

He looked at me quickly. "I want to leave."

I laughed. "Anything but that."

He looked back at his hands. "I would like to bathe."

"Sure. Go ahead."

He moved his foot; the chain rattled. I dug the key out of my

pocket and pitched it to him. "Unlock the cuff and throw the key back." I picked up the revolver. He unlocked the chain and tossed me the key. He started for the bathroom.

"Wait!" My heart was beating too hard. "Undress in here and leave the clothes." My mouth was dry and I swallowed. He took off his shirt and hung it on the back of a chair. He took off the shoes and socks and the pants and jockey shorts. His back was toward me but it wasn't modesty. He just happened to be standing that way. Michelangelo, you bumbling incompetent! If you could see this, you'd take a hammer to all those misshapen pieces of rock you spent so much time on.

He took a step toward the bathroom. I made a croaking sound in my throat. I tried again.

"Stop!" He stopped. "Turn around." He turned. I felt the blood singing in my ears. I don't know how long I looked at him. He stood unselfconsciously, totally unconcerned by my staring or his own nakedness. There wasn't a blemish on him. Light reddish-gold hair was scattered on his arms, legs, and chest. You could hardly see it until it caught the light. There was a darker, thicker patch of pubic hair, and he was uncircumcised. He wasn't as large as me, or as small as Cunningham. Either way would have been wrong, out of proportion, a staggering flaw. My own that I'd always been so proud of—it seemed now gross and mutilated. I felt the pressure of it and realized I had a hardon.

The gun was pointing at him. What would he look like with a bullet there? Nothing between those perfect thighs but blood. Would he writhe screaming? Would that inhumanly placid face show human agony? "Get out of here," I said.

While he showered, I put the clothes in a grocery sack and stuck them in the closet of my bedroom. When he came out of the bathroom, he looked at the empty chair, then at me.

"You won't need them. Put the cuff back on." He sat in the chair, snapped the cuff around his ankle. I could take it only for an hour. I got my bathrobe and tossed it to him. He put it on but only because I told him to. It didn't seem to matter to him one way or the other.

I wondered if he had ever smiled. What would those perfect

lips look like with a big happy grin on them? I could feel goosebumps popping out on my arms.

For three weeks I watched him do nothing. He sat in the chair and sometimes lay on the bed, but I never saw him sleep. I watched him and asked him questions, but the only things I learned for sure were: he didn't eat or use the toilet. He ignored me except when I forced him to answer a question. And the answers were usually meaningless.

Some days neither of us said a word. I would just watch his face and never tire of it, the way you never tire of looking at a perfect piece of art. Then, suddenly, it would be night again. He bathed every day, but I never let him remove the robe until he was in the bathroom. I didn't want to go through that again.

Sometimes I would force him to speak—not because I expected to learn anything, but because I wanted to hear his voice again. I was trying to find out what he did when he wasn't siren-chasing. I said something inane like: "Why aren't you in the movies? You wouldn't even need talent; with your looks you could make a fortune. The movies or television would eat you up."

He turned his head toward me. "My looks?"

"Don't you know how beautiful you are?"

"I'm ugly." His fantastic voice colored the words with subtle shades of despair. "Everything is ugly."

I studied him closely. I think he believed what he said. "Don't you want to be rich? Don't you want the luxuries of life?"

"There's no point."

"Why not?"

"We're here such a short time. There's no point in gathering possessions. There's no point in anything. And there's not enough time."

"Not enough time?"

He had drifted off in a reverie. "A very short time—but it seems like forever." Impatience, hope, futility, expectation, anticipation; the voice showed it all.

"But how do you pass the time? What do you do?"

I think he sighed. "We wait," he said. "We wait."

"What are you waiting for?" I yelled in exasperation. He didn't answer. I knew better than to continue with a frontal attack. I backed up and started in at a different angle. "You said, '*We* wait.' Are the others like you?"

"Yes."

A thought occurred to me. "Do they know you're here?"

"Yes."

"Why don't they try to rescue you?"

"They're afraid."

"Afraid? Of me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You're dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes. They would do anything to prevent premature interruption of the cycle."

I started to ask what the hell he was talking about, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. "How am I dangerous?"

"You can see us."

"Do you know why I can see you?

"No."

"Am I the only one?"

"The only one we know of now."

"Now?"

"It's happened before."

I changed directions again. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Yes."

"Why? I haven't hurt you."

"There is danger that you will interrupt the cycle."

"Why did you come with me so passively?"

"I couldn't believe you would do this to me." Again subtle shadings of accusation, hopelessness, and sadness in the beautiful voice. He turned his head to look at me. For an instant, the barest instant, I felt like a real son of a bitch. Then he looked away. He sat on the side of the bed, my bathrobe too big for him, the chain snaking into the bathroom.

Don't get the idea that he had become an unexpected chatter-

box. That conversation is a distillation of three weeks' questions and silences.

About a week later, I went during the night to check on him. I hadn't been sleeping very well. My mind was full of wild, impossible speculations. I won't go into them but they consisted of men from Mars and other equally incredible flights of fancy. I started to put on my bathrobe but remembered he was wearing it. I tiptoed down the hall stark naked hoping to catch him doing something—doing *anything.*

The door to his room was always left open. I looked in cautiously. I couldn't see him anywhere. I started toward the bathroom, then saw him against the wall. I turned on the light. He was pressed against the outside wall of the room, my bathrobe crumpled at his feet. His arms were outstretched to bring as much of him against the wall as possible. He didn't seem to notice me, but then, he never did. I went to him and saw his face, the side of it flat against the wall. It was no longer expressionless. It was filled with the most overpowering hopelessness I had ever seen. I felt my throat constrict.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

He didn't answer for a moment—not because he was ignoring me as he usually did, but because he was preoccupied. Then he said, very softly, in a voice caressed by a cold, bleak wind: "The small creatures in the forest; their deaths are so tiny and insignificant. There's hardly any life energy at all."

Then he really was aware of me. I saw him retreat until the eyes and face were neutral. I bellowed and slapped him as hard as I could. I remembered them standing around the wrecks. He fell to his knees, the crimson print of my hand on his face. I pulled him up by his armpits and looked into his empty face.

"Stop hiding from me!" I screamed and slapped him again. He slumped against me and my arms were around him holding him up. Our naked bodies were together, exciting me. The blood rushed to my groin and my erection was painful. He was there, in the eyes, not completely, but there. I put my mouth over his. He neither drew away nor responded but his bruised lips were sweet and I didn't want to stop.

I had been looking at his placid face for a month. I knew he was

capable of emotion if he would let it show. He hadn't uttered a sound or responded in any way to physical blows. He had to have a breaking point somewhere. I pushed him onto the bed on his stomach. The chain rattled. I rammed into him, trying to hurt him. He was tight, very tight. It must have been painful, but he didn't cry out or even moan. It had been a long time since the last time—a month—too long. It only took a dozen strokes, my pelvis pounding against the flawless flesh of his buttocks, before I came. I shouldn't have waited so long. It burned.

I lay on him for a moment, then reached and pulled his face around. It was vacant. I withdrew, still hard. I pulled him into a sitting position facing me. That beautiful face. That beautiful, bland, bruised face. I put my hands on either side of it.

"Don't hide from me. It doesn't do any good. I can see you. I can see you!" He swam to the surface and looked at me. "Did you enjoy it? Did you even feel it?"

"Yes."

"Did it feel good? Did it hurt?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you groan? Why didn't you scream? Why didn't you beg me to stop? Why don't you get mad? Why don't you curse me? What's inside you?" I put my hand on his breast and felt the hard nipple against my palm. "Do you have a heart? I can feel something in there. Is it a heart? What would I find if I got a knife and slit you open? Do you have sexual feelings at all?" I grabbed his penis and squeezed. It was soft but firm. "Has it ever been hard? You don't piss with it. What do you use it for?"

I put his hand on my tingling erection. He didn't pull it away. It just lay there. "That's what it's for. That's how a human uses it!" He started going away again. I slapped him. "Stay with me. Stay with me every second." I pushed him on his back. The chain clattered on the floor. I hooked his knees over my shoulders, watching his eyes the whole time. He tried to go away a few times but I slapped him back. I took a very long, slow time and I enjoyed the hell out of it.

The next morning I drove down the mountain to the village and phoned the Department. With direct dialing you can't tell where a long-distance call is coming from. My father was worse

and not expected to live much longer. Yeah, too bad. I shouldn't be away much longer. Good-bye.

I started going to him every night. I hadn't meant to but I couldn't sleep without him. He didn't go away anymore and I didn't have to slap him. The bruises on his face faded finally. He was there all right, but that was all. I never succeeded in bringing emotion to his face.

Finally I began sleeping in the same bed with him, touching him all night, feeling his hard nipples under the palms of my hands.

He woke me one morning, moaning. The window was gray with light and I could see his mouth moving. I touched his face. It was hot and dry. He spoke and the music in his voice was muted. "Why have you done this to me? I never harmed you. I've never harmed anyone. All we ever want is to survive until the birth."

"What's wrong with you?"

"It's time. The end of the cycle. The birth."

"Isn't that what you've been waiting for?"

"I'm not strong enough. I haven't collected enough life energy."

"I'll let you go. I'll take you back to L.A."

"It's too late. Too late."

He never said anything again. I watched him for three days. His fever got worse and the life went from his vibrant flesh. His skin flaked away in gray scales. He was struggling with all his might against something. I don't know what. But in the end he failed. His moans were so piteous that I had to put my hands over my ears. But I couldn't take my eyes off the disintegration of that magnificent creature.

And that's all he was, wasn't he? A creature. Something not human. It wasn't my fault that, by some fluke, I could see them. I didn't know this would happen. He never told me.

On the second day a hump began forming on his back. He was curling more and more into a fetal position as the hump forced him over. He began bleeding at the mouth. I put the shower curtain under him. When I rolled him over, my hands got covered with something like ashes.

On the third day he began to quieten and I knew it was almost over. He hadn't moved in several hours except for ragged breathing. There was a sharp cracking sound, like Carnehan biting into a new apple, only louder. The now ugly body trembled violently for a few moments, and then nothing. He lay facing me, his eyes open, the color of clay.

The breathing stopped.

It was finished.

I got out of the chair and walked around to the other side of the bed. The hump on his back had split and something white was sticking out. I reached down and pulled on it. It was a wing, a large, white wing covered with feathers. No, not feathers. Soft, white, silky hair.

There was a second wing but it was twisted and not properly developed. I pulled away all of the body and exposed what was inside it.

I cleaned up the cabin so no one would know it had been occupied. I packed everything back in the Dart. I buried them both in the woods, the body of the dead winged thing, and the husk that had held it. I drove back to Hollywood. It seemed as if I passed a wreck every half mile. I went into my apartment without noticing the apple cores in the yard. I unlocked the door, went straight to the toilet, and vomited.

I was splashing cold water on my face when I heard her.

"Lou? Is that you?" She walked in wearing a slip, her eyes red from sleep, and her hair sticking out on one side where she'd been lying on it.

"Margaret! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Oh, Lou!" She pressed against me. "It's been *awful!* Alfred found out about us!"

My head was spinning. "Who the shit is Alfred?"

She looked puzzled. "My husband!"

Jesus Christ! I'd forgotten Carnehan's first name. She was right. It was awful. "What'd he do? Do they know at the Department?"

"He hit me!" She began to blubber on my shoulder. "I was afraid. I've been hiding here for three *days!* He keeps pounding on the door but I stay quiet. He doesn't know for sure I'm here."

"How did he find out?"

"I don't *know!* He came home from work three days ago, screaming at me and hitting me. Oh, Lou. I was so frightened." She kissed me and her breath was bad. *His* breath had had no odor at all. "Come to bed with me, Lou. It's been so long," she whined.

I felt her doughy flesh through the thin slip. But it was woman flesh and I had to forget about him. I led her to the bed and began undressing. I was sticky. I hadn't bathed or shaved since he started . . . Stop it!

She pulled the slip over her head, unhooked her bra, and peeled down her pantyhose. Her tits were beginning to sag, her thighs were puffy, and there was a small roll of fat around her waist. Her skin looked muddy, not clear like . . . Stop it!

She walked toward me, smiling coyly. I wish I had been able to see . . . Stop it!

I pushed her roughly onto the bed and she squealed. Margaret liked it rough. I was about to make her very happy. She gasped deep in her throat every time my pelvis slammed against her flabby flesh. It was good—but . . . Stop it!

I lay on my back, half asleep. Margaret lay on top of me, licking my nipples and trying to coax it back up again. It hadn't lasted long enough for her, but she was wasting her time and she was heavy. I closed my eyes, trying to stay awake. I felt her hair on my face. There was a noise and her head hit mine. Her breath rushed out in one stale puff and I felt something dripping on my cheek.

I focused my eyes. Carnehan was standing over us, his nightstick raised. I couldn't move Margaret's dead weight. "Carnehan! Don't!" I yelled. The stick came down. I remembered I hadn't locked the door.

When I came out of it, it was dark. I was in a moving car. My head hurt and the car sounded as if it were driving in the bottom of a well. I could feel dried blood in my left eye; maybe mine or maybe Margaret's. I tried to wipe it away but my hands wouldn't move. I heard the clink of handcuffs and felt the door handle. My head was leaning against the glass. It felt cool. I opened my eyes and saw brush going past and a sea of lights spread out below.

I could see a dozen fires burning. We must be somewhere in the Hollywood Hills.

I turned my head and looked at Carnehan driving the car. He stared straight ahead. "Carnehan, what do you think you're doing?" The words didn't come out as forcefully as I had intended. He ignored me. "Carnehan, Margaret doesn't mean anything to me." That was the wrong thing to say. Think straight! "She's not worth it, Carnehan. I'm not worth it. Neither of us is worth destroying yourself!"

He wasn't listening. "You can't hope to get away with this." Of course he didn't. "Why don't you just write it off as a mistake?"

The car had been bouncing around for a while. We must not have been on a main road. I couldn't raise myself high enough to see ahead. After a bit Carnehan stopped the car and got out. He opened the back door on my side and began dragging out Margaret's naked body. She must have been already dead, the way she flopped around like a rubber dummy. He dragged her a few feet from the car and rolled her down a hill. I could hear her crackling the brush, then silence.

Carnehan opened my door and the handcuffs pulled me out. I felt sharp rocks digging into my butt and realized I was naked too. He pulled out his revolver.

"Carnehan! Don't be a fool!"

He shot me in the stomach. Good old Carnehan. He remembered what we'd been taught: always aim for the gut.

He unlocked the handcuffs and pulled me to the edge. All I had to do was overpower him and get away, but I decided to wait because I was very tired. I rolled down the hill like a sack of potatoes. I didn't feel the prickly pears and sharp brush. The pain in my belly was too fierce. I hit something hard and I think my shoulder broke.

I was lying on my back, my head leaning against whatever I'd hit, looking back up the hill. The car drove away. Carnehan, you bungler! I'm not dead! You wasted it all!

The sound of the car died away. It was very quiet, just crickets and the faroff rumble of traffic. You couldn't get away from that sound anywhere in Los Angeles County. A slight wind was blow-

ing, making some loose sheet metal creak and groan somewhere near by.

I couldn't just lie here. I was bound to die if I didn't get help. I tried to move and looked up. An immense "Y" loomed over me. I was under the Hollywood sign. I couldn't see Margaret anywhere. Let me rest a moment more and get my breath back. Damn fuckin' Carnehan. Are you gonna be surprised when they haul you in and I'm there to point the finger. I looked down at my stomach. A mistake. But it doesn't hurt so much anymore. I must be in shock. I've heard that happens.

I can see my prick. It looks wrinkled and shrunken, even smaller than Cunningham's. This is a hell of a time to be thinking about pricks! My shoulder hurts worse than my gut. I can feel blood on the ground under my back. I've rested long enough.

What's that noise? Sounded like a twig cracking somewhere in the darkness. What if it's a coyote? I wonder if it will attack me. Probably not. Do coyotes react to the smell of blood the way sharks do?

Footsteps. Not a coyote. People. More than one. I'm saved! Up yours, Carnehan!

There are four of them: four redheaded young men who don't look a day over twenty. Four perfect faces that I used to think were overwhelmingly beautiful—until I saw the face of that dead winged thing. But I did see it. And I had to cover it because the beauty was too painful to look at.

Four magnificent bodies that only a few days ago would have sent the blood rushing to my penis—if I hadn't seen the pale body of the winged creature, all the more beautiful because it was sexless. A body I knew would have gleamed had it been alive.

Now these four faces seem drab and plain and the four bodies might belong to trolls.

But the eyes! They stand around me, watching me with eyes I still think beautiful because the winged creature's eyes were closed in death.

Those four pairs of beautiful, bland eyes look at me the same way Carnehan looks at an apple he's been saving for a special occasion.

KATHLEEN M. SIDNEY ("The Anthropologist") teaches retarded children in New Jersey, but doesn't like it there and plans to move to Oregon. "My father was born in Poland and spent most of his childhood and early adult years wandering around Europe. My mother was raised in an orphanage in Montreal. If this were about either of them it would be much more interesting." This is her first published story.

GARDNER DOZOIS wrote in October, "I've just finished going through all the papers I'm lending to Temple [University], an odd and unsettling experience which makes me feel simultaneously very young and a million years old. Can it really have been six years ago that I stumbled and gawked into the Anchorage for the first time? Can I really have been corresponding with you for seven years? Good Lord. And suddenly I'm not a promising new writer anymore, I'm a crunched-awkwardly-in-the-middle-and-mildewing-not-so-young-anymore writer, watching with dismay the approach of the young turks and muttering about 'barbarians.' Move Over Dad, they honk, but I wave my cane at them anyway as I go down, just to be pettish."

FELIX C. GOTSCHALK ("The Man With the Golden Reticulates") is a clinical psychologist who lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. "At one time or another, I have been expert at Mercedes and Porsche matters, pre-Castro cigars, Himalayan cats, baroque organs, WWI aircraft, and musicology. After 16 years of retirement from the music business, I am fighting my way

through the Chopin Polonaises again, and playing for small groups of friends. Artur Rubinstein is twice my age, so I figure there is plenty of time left."

A contributor who had better remain anonymous wrote in November:

"How would you feel about buying a story that began: 'Under the rather insipid pale-green sky the late afternoon sun laid its bars of umber and orange across the backs of the violet-hued leaves, veined red, that topped the jungle spreading, far as the eye could see, each side of the narrow road, little better than an unmetalled track. / Like great wild-grown cabbages the cumbersome leaves clumped themselves at the top of the ribbed and pulpy spineless trunks, each different variety of tree little differentiated from the rest in the overall blue-greenness and made still more inconspicuous by the uniform pallid red-blueness caused by the light of the drooping sun striking across and through the exhaled haze of the trees' once-daily breath. / Beneath the lowering of clusters the orange light lit fitfully the dried yellow grasses and bright shiny fever green shrubs, the stalks' shadows tiger-striping the low and gloomy tunnels of stillness.'

"Got that? The first three lines (and paragraphs) of the novel *Dunes of Pradai* by Tony Russell Wayman (Curtis Books). I ripped out the first page and use it above my typewriter as a reminder that anyone can make a living from writing SF."

JEFF DUNTEMANN ("The Steel Sonnets"), now in his early twenties, started writing when he was fifteen and has turned out a story every eight weeks ever since. He describes himself as "utterly middle-middle-middle class suburban normal"; he has never worked on a shrimp boat, played the guitar or driven a bulldozer. "I do, however, have a collection of about 3500 Chicago bus transfers in old detergent boxes."

We wrote to a Clarion student in December, "The basic idea of the story is unacceptably grungy (blech, blech!) and also unbe-

lievable. If you were starved for decent food, you might want to eat people (although they are full of chemical additives too), but surely you wouldn't start with the guts. What about a nice ham or chop?"

JEFF MILLAR ("Toto, I Have a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore"), a young Texas newspaperman, is the author of the syndicated comic strip "Tank McNamara."

As we write this, it is January 10, a sunny day in Florida, and the back yard is full of robins scoffing up insects. They have drunk a gallon of water out of the bird bath since this morning. (Probably to keep the bugs from wriggling.) Birds are among the most easily observable of the aliens with whom we share this planet. They are irascible, absurd, and hopeful, like the rest of us.

STEVE CHAPMAN ("Autopsy in Transit") lives in the back of a forest-green pickup truck, mostly around Arizona. He welcomes correspondence, c/o 925 Ravine Road, Winnetka, Illinois 60093.

JOHN BARFOOT ("House") was born in Southall, London, and now lives in Stoke Newington. He works as a civil servant in the headquarters of the Department of Health and Social Security, but, *ceteris paribus,* would rather be a bootblack, short order cook, or lumberjack.

RAYLYN MOORE ("Fun Palace") lives in Pacific Grove, California, which she considers the very last outpost of civilization. Her latest book is *Wonderful Wizard, Marvelous Land,* a critical biography of L. Frank Baum, published by Bowling Green University Popular Press in 1974.

A writer we know got a rejection note, forwarded by her agent, from an editor who complained that "some of her sentances are cunberson."

DAVE SKAL ("When We Were Good") sent us a clipping from the *Washington Post* about a TV executive who was complaining

about the sameness of television dramas: "There are only so many times Dracula can have a stake driven through his head," she said.

MURRAY YACO ("The Winning of the Great American Greening Revolution," *Orbit 14*) wrote to thank us for a copy of a newspaper review of the book. "It helped cheer an otherwise solemn Christmas. I broke my leg under circumstances much too embarrassing to report in detail."

SETH MCEVOY ("Which in the Wood Decays"), fresh out of high school, aided the successful congressional campaign of Don Riegle, Jr., and later worked in his office as a congressional intern. He was one of the chief executives of a spoof organization, the National Hamiltonian Party: it offered a return to aristocratic rule, under which only the educated landowning gentry would be allowed to vote. He recently finished a novel, *Willie the Worm.*

R. A. LAFFERTY ("Great Day in the Morning") wrote a long time ago, "We'll meet somewhere one of these years. Then you'll say or think what many of the kids met at conventions say in disappointment: 'Ah hell, you're not Lafferty.' No, I'm not really: I always intended to be but it didn't work out."

STUART DYBEK ("The Maze") teaches writing at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo; he also teaches a science fiction course there. Before he became a teacher, he spent two years as a social worker in Chicago, and another two years scuba diving and teaching scuba in the Virgin Islands.

JOHN M. CURLOVICH ("Quite Late One Spring Night") trained to be an English teacher, but found when he graduated in 1970 that the bottom had fallen out of the market. He now works for the Pennsylvania State Unemployment Bureau, finding jobs for other people. His pets are two Australian chameleons named Amram and Yoshidel. (Australian chameleons are larger than other kinds; the male has three huge dinosaurish horns.) This is his first story.

TOM REAMY ("Under the Hollywood Sign") has worked as a movie projectionist, collector for a finance company, bank teller, dispatcher at a concrete plant, technical illustrator in aerospace, screenwriter, etc., but he says the only way to make all this interesting would be to have it played by George Maharis. "Under the Hollywood Sign" was the second story he sold, by three minutes —because he opened a letter from Harry Harrison first.