



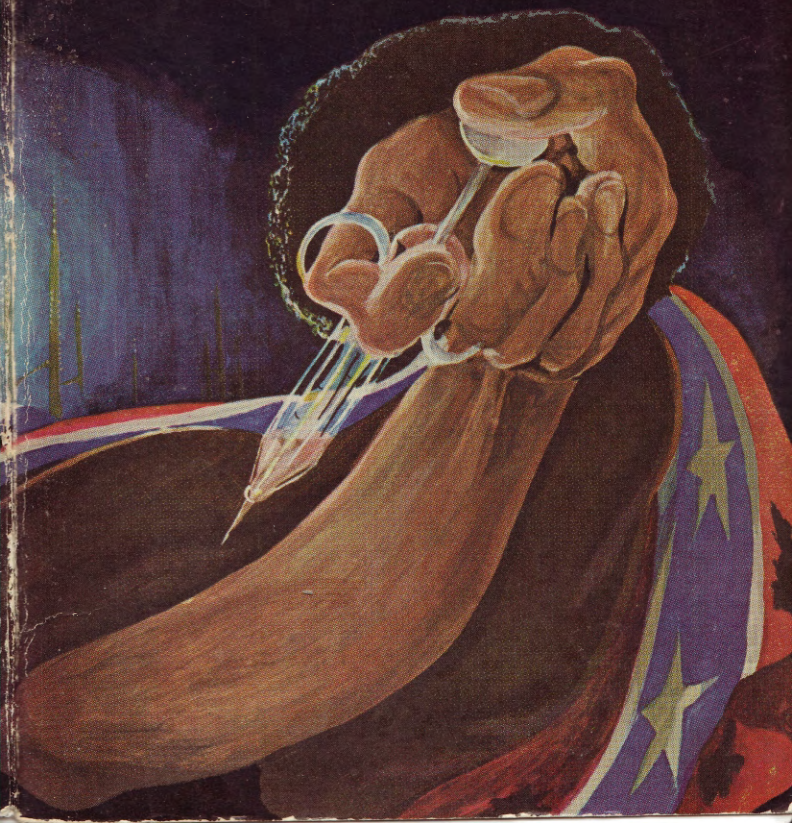
a paperback library original review

\$1.25 66-480

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a quarterly of speculative fiction

adam bailey benford bernott boucher
bryant delany disch dozois eklund
fitzgerald gilden hickey lafferty
le guin link priest russ stanley
van vogt



QUARK/1

is the first issue of a new quarterly of speculative literature and graphics, selected and edited by Samuel R. Delany and Marilyn Hacker. The editors have tried to display the finest work of both new and established authors, whatever its imaginative substance, structure, or texture.

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edited

by

Samuel R. Delany and Marilyn Hacker

PAPERBACK LIBRARY

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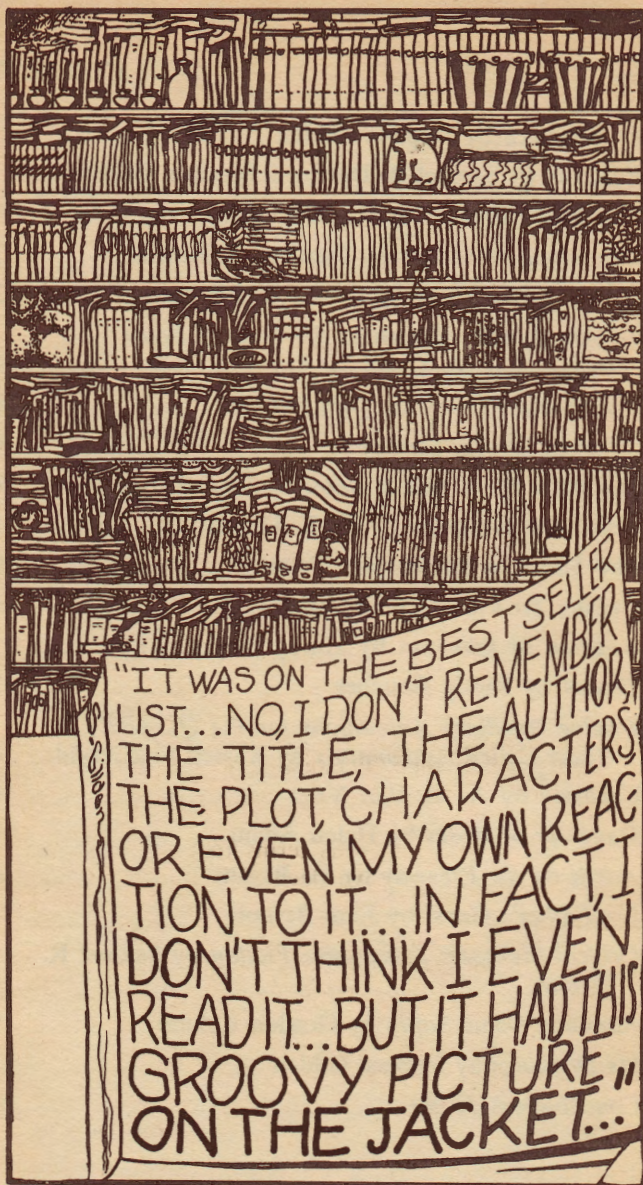
First Printing: November, 1970

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"IT WAS ON THE BEST SELLER LIST . . ."

EDITORIAL

SF?

Speculative-fiction?

It's a term first used by Robert Heinlein in 1936 during a Science Fiction Convention guest-of-honor speech, as a suggested replacement for *Science Fiction*. It better described, he felt, what he was interested in writing.

Today it is the term used by those SF writers (and I am sure Heinlein saw the convenient ambiguity) who, if they share nothing else, have balked before the particular parameters Heinlein's S-f has established, primarily in the minds of editors, secondarily in the minds of other writers, and finally in the minds of readers.

"Who," someone asked Cocteau, "is the greatest poet of the French language?"

Always civilized, Cocteau replied: "Victor Hugo, alas!"

And that is Heinlein's position in modern (post-Gernsback) S-f to date.

A bit of the balking has been articulate, most has been emotional; some has taken place with respect, and some has transpired in rage. Personally, we are delighted that we have let him name us—the enemy.

Speculative fiction?

It is one of the numerous terms that numerous critics for numerous reasons have decided is inadequate for the numerous things that fall under it. What do we have, then?

QUARK/ four times a year will present stories, articles, poetry, and graphics that demonstrate the strengths, the range, and the resonances of that acronym in search of a read-out.

Through the search for quality, QUARK/ hopes to add new resonance to those initials.

—Samuel R. Delany
& Marilyn Hacker,
editors

THE CLIFF CLIMBERS

The cliff faced south and was rough and sheer. It faced off against a mesa world, but it was not a mesa; it was a vagrant spire standing up alone. As you came to it from the south it was easy to go on either side. There was no necessity to climb it, and it could not be climbed to the top. But there was a kind of game to see how high it could be climbed.

A long time ago (but not as long ago as these first cliff-climbers) we played a game in the second grade. There was a little cemented area that was closed at one end by a concrete wall. The game was to run at it and to see how far you could run up it, and to leave a chalk mark there as high as you could reach. The ultimate was nearly achieved, the very apex beyond which it was not possible to go, nor to leave a higher chalk mark. Then some of the big boys from the third grade tried it and made a shambles of the game; for naturally they could run up farther and reach higher and leave chalk marks above all the old ones.

The game on the cliff was about the same. The first chalk-mark was made by Little Fish-Head, and at a dizzy height. He wrote:

"My name is Little Fish-Head and I climbed this cliff in the thirty-sixth year of the thirty-sixth period. I can see the river from here and it cannot be seen from any lower point. I have climbed nearer to the sun than any man who ever lived. And now may God watch over me on my long hard journey."

This translation is by Professor Potter, who climbed the cliff at a later period. What Little Fish-Head did was to scratch the picture of a fish high on the cliff wall, or a stylized object that might have been a fish, and was anyway longer than it was wide. There was a triangle at one

end of it which the professor said was a fish-head. And there was a small triangle or wedge mark apart and just beyond which the professor said was the signature, Little Fish-Head. On the side of the fish (if it was a fish) were six scratches of which one was longer than the rest. Speculatively this meant *by* six, which is to say thirty-six; and as one side of the fish was so marked, the other side of the fish which can no more be seen than the other side of the moon was doubtless intended to be marked that way also. This meaning, the thirty-sixth year of the thirty-sixth period, would date the sketch accurately as being 1296 years after the beginning of the first period, and would make it (the professor said) the earliest absolutely certain date in history if we only knew when the first period started.

He really could have seen the river from there, a striking view, and it could not be seen from any lower point. There was a circle scratched above which was the sun, that is God, and there was a jagged line going to the right which meant a rough journey ahead, and a long old journey it was.

It was translations like this that earned the professor the reputation for brilliance far beyond the call of duty.

But I will tell you the true story of Little Fish-Head. I have attained to it by ways as brilliant and fantastic as those of the professor, but they sound sillier and you'd hoot at me if you knew my methods.

Little Fish-Head was the last of the horse thieves under the old recension. After him there were eleven thousand years when there were no horse thieves. This corresponded to the period when the horses had disappeared from the continent. As the last of the old horse thieves, he stole the last of the old horses.

Professor Potter and the other professors have puzzled over the disappearance of these first horses. But it was no mystery. They disappeared, as have so many other of the vital things, because they were over-regulated. The first regulation went out in the thirteenth period to the effect that men of the Horse Fly Totem could not ride horses. Some of them quit their totem (there are always a few

who will apostasize at the initiation of unjust laws), some of them quit riding horses, and some of them continued to ride till they were hunted down and executed.

Then it was enacted that only those of settled estate and tangible property could ride horses; and they were absolutely forbidden to vagabonds and beggars, who had the most use for them. Then a very high horse tax was enacted which discouraged all but the very wealthy from keeping up. After this it was decreed that only kings, caciques, and tax collectors could own them. And finally there were only nine horses in all the Western world and they were all in one royal keep.

It was then that Little Fish-Head—that is not his real name, that is only a stupid mistranslation of Professor Potter—that Little Fish-Head did some serious thinking.

“If I kill the eight and ride away on the ninth, then nobody in the world can catch me. I will be as fleet as the storm and will tower over all the footmen of the world.”

So he killed the eight horses and rode away on the ninth. There was a great outcry, but an outcry of footmen cannot bring a man down from his horse. He rode away on the last great stallion, and goaded it all day long, as he was in a state of exaltation.

At evening when it had run all day it fell dead at the foot of the cliff. This surprised Little Fish-Head, who knew very little about horses and thought they would run forever. It was then that he climbed the cliff to a dizzy height and scratched a dirge as tall as he could reach. This was the inscription that the professor in his pride had misread. It was not a stylized fish at all. It was a stylized horse without any legs, for it was lying down dead. And the little triangle was not the signature of Little Fish-Head, but the soul of the horse leaving his body, triangular rather than square or round to indicate the incompleteness of the soul of a noble but irrational animal.

What the inscription really said was this:

“Oh my horse,

All the swiftness is now gone out of the world.

No man again can go higher than his own height,

Nor more fleeting than he was born to go.
The last man has ridden on the last wind,
And only the dust can ride on the whirlwind now.
I have climbed to this height
To write that the high aspiration was only a dream.
And if even a horse dies
How can a man live forever?"

The next chalk-mark was made about nine thousand years later and was nearly a foot higher. There had been no improvement in the art of climbing meanwhile, but it had been scratched by a taller man.

It was a double wavy mark like a snake or a river, followed by an abrupt despairing downstroke. Professor Potter had made nine tentative translations of this. The seventh of the nine has now been proved by a miracle of scholarship too intricate to explain to be the correct one. This is it:

"There is no water and I have traveled for days in agony. I have climbed this cliff to look for the river. I see it, but I will die before I can go that far; it would take me three days to reach it. I had thought I could climb as high as the cloud and wring it out, but the little cloud has passed and there is no other. The sun has become my friend now, but he is as much at a loss as I what to do. But at least I have seen the river before I die."

After that it was only nine hundred years before the next climber achieved. And he carved these letters:

"Pasó por aquí A-Dmo 1519 Mayo 19 José Ramíres Castillo y Sanches."

His message is too definite and leaves little to the imagination. He was not thirsty, for he did not carve like a thirsty man. He was not overly weary, so perhaps he had come on one of the new horses. Nor had he (the professor said) come alone. There were drill holes in the rock where rope hooks had been placed, and he must have had at least two assistants. But we cannot picture him more clearly than this.

And oddly the next chalk-mark was made exactly four hundred years later. And it read:

"Piñon Gap High School Seniors 1919 Clement Kincaid, Freddy Stockton, Manuel Cervantes We Are The Tops."

And in the high school annual of that year there were their three pictures on a page by themselves entitled "The Topper Club, The Most Exclusive in the World."

And to continue the spate of climbers in the very next decade was a higher entry:

"Bo McCoy. I am the Real. I am a Bo. 1925 June Tenth."

Quite a bit could be made from this. The railway was twenty miles away, and there was no stop. He had rolled off it and crossed the desert to make his mark. He might have been a lonesome hobo as colored men are likely to be on that run. And he had a long old walk to the next stop. And he made what was then the highest chalk-mark on the cliff. And he had climbed alone nine feet higher than it was possible to climb to make it.

That was all until the professor came. The professor was G.A.D. Potter, for his name was Gamiel Audlich Dago-
bert, all of which he hated. But he liked to be called Gad.

"Gad, Gad," his associates would say, "you could rope down from the top or use a 'copter to read the scratches. There is no reason to waste a summer on the Tor. There are better things' found digging in the ground than you ever will find on the side of a cliff."

But the professor was a cliff-climber and a chalk-marker, and he had an exaltation to go the highest.

We will not tell what he carved on the cliff, for it was pedantic and stilted, and he had prepared many drafts of it before he went up the cliff the last time.

He spent six weeks in his tent at the foot of the cliff with his wife, Aurora, and they prepared as though it were Everest. They drilled holes and set lead shields in the rock with eyelets for the ropes. They spun webs of lines and hauled and pulled and rappelled, and did all the things that cliff-climbers do. They cut hand holes and foot

holes, and even established a camp "A" two thirds of the way up. And to it they went up and down on a rope ladder where Little Fish-Head and Bo McCoy had climbed like monkeys.

But maximum effort is required for maximum achievement, and the professor was remarkably persevering, as all professors are, and Aurora was remarkably good natured, as all professors' wives must be.

Early in the morning of the last day of spring they went up their ropes and scoop holes till Aurora stood firmly on a newly hewn ledge where Bo McCoy had hung on air. Then the professor climbed onto her shoulders and made the highest chalk-mark.

We will not record what he carved, as he has already done so, and besides, as we said, it was too stilted and stylish. But yet like all the other marks it was capable of variant and fuller translation. In a later time by another professor who might not have the key to the precise letters themselves, it would be more correctly translated as follows:

"I have slain the nightmare and set down the terror. I have climbed beyond dizziness on a cliff that once hung down from the sky before there was a world below it. Even the eagles when they were new would not fly this high. And this above all, while others have ridden on the wind, I only have ridden on the daughter of the wind. This is a red-haired goddess, a strong slight amazon, a magic anemonead with hair like a red sea and shoulders soft and sweet as the night itself. She sways beneath me but will not break, and the early sun is on her and she is silver and flame. Her neck is of living ivory."

And the rest of it would be very hard to translate even by the best paleocalligraphist. But he would know that this was the hand of an ancient poet who had climbed a dizzy cliff to write a hymn to the dawn.

—*R. A. Lafferty*

THE SOUND OF MUZAK

March 3

Started our shift underground today. Goodbye to the world again for a while, I guess. They woke me up before dawn. I was having another of those anxiety dreams, and for a while I got my dreams mixed up with the CQ shaking me, woke up scared, thought that this was It. But it wasn't: just a rumpled sergeant with five o'clock shadow and a sexy paperback tucked in his hip pocket. Wonder if it will be It one of these mornings: wonder if I'll be around, if I'd want to be. Probably be a bitchy Wednesday morning like this, gritty rain spattering the windowpane, still dark, me sitting on the edge of the bunk in my shorts, squinting at the bedraggled CQ, foul taste in my mouth, damn room cold as a damn icebox, idiot bird throbbing somewhere outside as if it was happy about the prospect of another day spent grubbing for worms. You'll have to hurry, sir: always that, hurry to spend a month sitting on your ass and playing with yourself. More of a rush than ever this time. Just had time to phone Jane before boarding the chopper, couldn't even get a cup of coffee. Air of strain in the chopper crew; nobody said anything, as usual, damn zombies. They're shortening the time between shifts because of the Malaysian crisis. Blindfolded me; I get sick of the security shit involved in this, but I suppose it serves a purpose. None of us really know where we are, except that we're part of the communications net of the North-AmCom shield guarding the East Coast and are probably within about 50 miles of Albany—

Ten paces from the 'fresher cubicle to the Seal, turn on your heel sharp, past the mad Major mumbling over his ribbons, and sixty paces back across the bay to the bunks.

There are two padded easy chairs (one piss green, one

muddy tan; fabric ripped, springs dangling and squeaking from the frame beneath) and a long couch with a broken leg that lists drunkenly when you sit down on it. There is a gash in the cushion, and it leaks spongy stuffing.

The walls, floor, and ceiling are concrete.

There is a patriotic poster on the wall, but it has become too faded to read.

There is a war on.

Everything has happened before.

There are people here, too, but they always seem much less important than the furniture. They are transient, they fade, they are optional accessories. The furniture *belongs*.

The pacing (ten paces; sixty; sixty; ten) helps, establishing a comforting rhythm and order, regulating my pulse, translating pressure into motion. When I'm walking I can't see the people anymore. It's as if the universe has suddenly been shifted into a higher and better gear, just as the transmission begins to threaten to burn out under the strain. Everything becomes quiet and very calm, the scream of overworked gears translated instantly into the purr of blessed forward motion. And there are no more people, the room as serenely and mysteriously empty as a deserted stage. It's as if the universe has been burned clear of all nonessentials, all frilleries, everything that doesn't count.

When I walk, the people all disappear, but I can still see the furniture.

Furniture is more important than people.

I was the first to arrive this morning, except for the Major, who gave me a sour greeting, an unenthusiastic salute, and a soggy handshake; I think the little bastard lives down here all the time. Wherever here is. God knows—I hope. Somewhere deep underground. They never take our blindfolds off until the bottom of the elevator shaft, after a drop that takes forever. The Major told me to stow my stuff and check out the communications equipment. Busywork; just killing time until the others get here. Knew it would end up as "hurry up and wait." We've got a lot of waiting to do. Once they close the Seal, we'll be com-

pletely self-contained, our life support system's adapted from NASA. We could stay down here indefinitely. It's quiet, anyway, kind of nice for a change; things are so tense and chaotic topside these days. We don't really have much to do except monitor the dials, collate the data, and telemeter it out. A bennie assignment actually.

Sixty paces from the bunks to the 'fresher cubicle. Ten paces from the 'fresher cubicle to the Seal, turn on your heel sharp, past the mad Major mumbling over his ribbons, and sixty paces back across the bay to the bunks.

Then sixty back to the 'fresher.

And then it's only ten paces from the 'fresher to the Seal.

But what do we do for excitement?

Mostly nothing. I sit on my bunk, or pace. Harry listens to the Muzak on the radio. Fred plays his guitar. Ron is dying, which absorbs most of his time. Mark and Charlie are dead; that occupies them completely. The Major plays with his ribbons; he's a little further gone than the rest of us. A little.

Sometimes I'll read old entries in my journal. That can be a gas. Some of them are pretty funny in retrospect. Everything is.

When I get tired of reading, when the print begins to blur together because I know every word by heart, I roll over onto my stomach. I used to think about sex at this point, and try to remember women I'd fumbled with, but now that's all too distant. Now I just watch Fred, who will usually be hammering with mechanical intensity at his guitar, without talking, without moving. He only knows seven or eight chord progressions, and he plays them over and over again in monotonous succession. If the pressure is low, if it's a good night, I enjoy watching his fingers drum and pluck at the vibrating strings, always moving exactly the same way at exactly the same time. The light glinting from his finger-picks and from the steel strings make a lulling, rhythmical pattern that is very soothing to the eyes.

But if it's a bad night, the droning rhythm will slowly

begin to work the muscles that clench my fists, and I will open and close my hands, feeling the long flat fingers curl and unfold, and I will begin to think about strangling him, but I know that would be bad for morale. Then I'll begin to feel the pressure, pulling up from my crotch through my stomach to yank my eyes taut against their sockets until they begin to feel grainy and raw, until they begin to burn.

And then I will begin to look over at Ron's bunk, which is bad, because Ron hasn't said anything for a long time, and lately he hasn't been eating anything, either. And I will watch Ron lying on his back on his bunk—which he will not leave now—hairy arms crossed over his face, and I will watch the soiled T-shirt that covers his stomach rise and fall in time to his fitful breathing, and I will listen to the soft stream of jumbled words and animal noises that squeeze by his clenched teeth, and I will feel the pressure build up in flat bands across my thighs and back and chest, and I will have to look away.

Usually I look at the Major's bunk, which is a little set apart from the others. The Major's bed is always empty, but that isn't too bad because I know he sleeps on the floor by the Seal. But in order to turn my head away from the Major's bunk, I have to look at Mark's bunk, and Charlie's. I have to look, no matter how fast I try to slide my eyes by. Their bunks are empty, too—mattresses properly rolled into a tight ball at one end of the bunk, shoes still neatly stacked beneath the metal frame, although covered now with a thick layer of dust—but it's a different sort of emptiness somehow, and I begin to have difficulty breathing.

And then if it's a *very* bad night, everything will become terribly clear and precise, every crack and dust fleck thrown into razor-sharp focus, and I will not be able to breathe at all because my lungs and throat are filling up with suffocating dust, and then the walls and ceiling begin to press slowly closer, squeeze slowly tighter without moving at all.

And then it will be up and walking; sixty paces to the 'fresher cubicle, ten more to the Seal.

March 4

The Seal was closed at 2100 hrs. Charlie was the last in; late as usual. I asked him if he'd heard anything new about Malaysia, and he said no, but the negotiators would fumble around as usual until they'd gotten all the extra pay they could cushion into their budgets and then divide up the pie behind the scenes and settle everything. The Major frowned at him; he tries to discourage disparaging talk. Mark said, you got it Charlie, if they don't screw around a little too long and blow everybody's ass off. The Major frowned even more: a scowly midget, like Grumpy. Charlie laughed and took a long take around at the place, and said Christ, trapped in a hole with this bunch, and slapped his forehead. Mark laughed and the Major looked prim and disapproving and called us all over for a meeting. They're not really that bad a group, although you get a little tired of them after a few weeks. Putting Mark in as second-in-command under the Major is a mistake, though. They hate each other's guts, and they get into those dreadfully cold and formal and polite arguments that higher-ranking officers have when they know there are shavetails within earshot. Last shift they hardly spoke to each other at all. The Major gave us his regular pompous pep talk about morale and security. Afterward Mark leaned over and whispered that if the balloon ever did go up, it would be because of frightened little bastards like that, and he nodded his head at the Major. That kind of talk makes me uneasy. We've got to live with each other down here, after all.

Something breaks the trip-trap rhythm of my pacing, and I come to a hesitant stop in front of the Seal. The universe drops back into a lower gear and the mad Major blurs into visibility, sitting cross-legged on the floor before the Seal, playing with his tattered ribbons. The flesh of my stomach stirs and flutters uneasily, but the pressure is less now, so I sway back on my heel and study the Major.

He is a bandy-legged, pot-bellied dwarf, incongruous in his ragged dress uniform, his neglected military brush cut

grown into a shaggy sprawl of dirt-matted hair that buries his ears. I smile at this, feeling lips pull back too tautly from wet and rotting teeth, touching the sharp cutting edges of my incisors with a wistful tongue. The Major had always been such a stickler for military spit and polish. Now his uniform is torn and incredibly dirty, collar and shirt front splattered with crusted blood, the decorations he constantly plays with finger-worn into shapeless strips of faded ribbon. He wears black-rimmed eyeglasses—one lens completely gone, the other cracked. His face seems ridiculously young, until you look at the eyes, which are usually carefully focused on nothing. The face was pudgy once, but now empty flesh hangs in limp, drooping folds around the jowls. It is scored with deep lines: baby fat burned by stress into gauntness.

The Major stirs, my presence registering on some level of consciousness. His right hand stops fondling the tangled decorations on his chest and drops slowly to the .45-caliber revolver that rests in his lap. He touches the pistol butt hesitantly, caresses the long barrel, his overgrown fingernails clicking against the blued steel.

I take a slow step back, shifting weight to the ball of one foot, then to the other heel. The Major can get touchy sometimes. During his last coherent period he made us take down the curtain in front of the 'fresher cubicle so he could keep an eye on us from his position while we went to the bathroom, make sure we weren't fermenting mutiny in the head. The pistol never gets far from his hand, and he sleeps sitting up, semiconscious all the time. Sometimes he eats—we bring him food because he doesn't like to move from his guard position in front of the Seal—although I can't remember when the last time was. When he has strength to get up and hobble to the 'fresher cubicle, he watches us carefully through the uncurtained door. Most of the time, though, he forgets that he's supposed to get up and use the 'fresher.

The Major wraps his hand around the pistol butt and hefts it, cradling it, seeming to draw comfort from its weight and solidarity. His left hand creeps up from his lap and across his chest, and he tucks it carefully under his

right armpit, hugging it to his body. His left hand is mangled: fingers broken and never set, stripped bare of flesh at the tips, caked together by congealed blood and scabby scar-tissue.

I shift my weight cautiously, and the motion triggers some response, a vegetable tropism limping through the higher levels of consciousness. His bloodshot eyes swivel up, turn in my direction, focus about a foot in front of me. He coughs, phlegm gargling in his throat. "Security," he says. His voice is hoarse, cracked, rusty with disuse. It wavers, rising and falling in tone and volume like a warped record. "Security," he says again, tipping his head to one side like a fat squirrel, flashing a toothy, tight smile. He giggles, a shrill, too-quick, choking giggle.

"Security is an operational necessity," he says in a rehearsed tone. A muscle tics in his cheek. "Whenever I get a question like that, boys, I have to think of a funny thing that happened to me once. Perhaps it'd help you boys to adjust to the necessities of the present situation if I relate it. It was earlier in my career, and I'd been sent out as a courier on a flight carrying some classified equipment. Well, I was just a young, snot-nosed second looie then, fresh out of OCS, but I'd been well briefed on security, and I knew my job better than a lot of fat-assed bureaucrats I've met." He smiles in mechanical reminiscence, waiting for the compulsory chuckling of his non-existent audience to subside, continuing, "Well, everything was going A-OK until we landed at London Airport. It was foggy as hell, and I'm sitting down in the cargo hold with all this classified equipment. I can't see anything outside because of this goddamn fog, and I'm getting jumpy. I'm under arms, carrying a .45—" He smiles conspiratorially, stroking the pistol "—and it felt good, let me tell *you*, boys. Who knows who might have been after that equipment? Well, along about then, this fat airport official, customs, comes up and wants to get into our plane to check the cargo." He shakes his head. "I *tell* him that our cargo is classified and *explain* about security—" He sighs "—but you know *civilians*, boys. 'I'm afraid, sir, that I'm going to have to insist on inspecting your cargo,' this idiot

tells me. Well—" Winks "—I showed him good, boys. I called his bluff cold. I drew my .45 and cocked it and pointed it at this civilian. 'In that case,' I say real slow, 'I'm very much afraid that I'm going to have to shoot you dead.' *Well*, then He thinks about it, says, 'I'm sure that won't be necessary, sir,' and hauls out of there. Good thing, because I *would* have shot him, too. The point is that security is an operational necessity. You've got to follow the rules, whether you understand the reasons for them or not. I didn't even *know* what was in those classified crates. It could have been candy bars, and I would have shot him anyway. You've got to have absolute faith that those higher up the chain of command have a good reason for what they're doing, and that it's a reason you don't necessarily need to know. The Army doesn't pay you to think, boys. Why, I'm not even quite sure myself exactly where we are—" His voice slowly fades to a whisper, whistles softly out of hearing. His head bobs, droops.

I take two slow steps backwards and to the side.

The motion triggers the Major again. His head comes sluggishly up, and he turns his unfocused eyes toward my new position. "Security is an operational necessity," he says, smiling smoothly at the floor. "Whenever I get a question like that, boys, I have to think of a funny thing that happened to me once—"

I turn on my heel and stride away, the pacing rhythm taking me again, the Major fading away, the universe changing gears.

Everything has happened before; that's the only reason why it's tolerable.

March 22

Went on Red Alert at 1735: we're still on now at 2000. It's the first time it's ever really happened. Red Alert came down once before on another shift, but that time it only stayed on for a couple of minutes while SAC made up its mind whether a reading was bombers or a flock of

geese. This has a different feel to it. The red light blazes out of the control panel like a smouldering eye, striking freaky highlights from the polished metal and glass faces of the dials. It's been on now for almost two and a half hours. Fred and Ron are technically the only ones on duty, but the rest of us cluster around, anyway. The air is heavy with sweat, a burnt smell like onions. The red light washes the details from everybody's faces, turning them into monster masks with gleaming eyes. We're on radio silence of course, procedure, but HQ makes a check-in broadcast every hour. That doesn't give Fred and Ron much to do but sit there. Fred, the youngest of us, looks really scared; he's sweating and his shirt is soaked to his body.

Shit, I'm scared, too, trying not to think about Jane. The Major took me aside a while ago, told me to discourage any talking among the boys that might rev them up; being third-in-command has disadvantages of responsibility. I saw him talking to Mark later, probably saying the same thing, Mark looking sour. Charlie was trying to get some news from the commercial stations on the auxiliary set, but he said there wasn't any, just music. Ron, looking drawn and gloomy, said that they'd probably break in with a bulletin if anything serious happened. Mark said that he doubted it, that they'd probably try to cover up until the very end. The Major looked shocked and said that Mark was forgetting himself. Mark said that he wished he could, and gave the Major the slowest, meanest grin I've even seen. The Major got irritated and chased the off-duty personnel away from the equipment back to the living section, but Mark just stood there with one hand on the back of Ron's chair and stared at the Major smiling that mean half-smile. His face was ugly in the smoky red light.

Returning to the bunks, I slow up, circle warily around the couch and the easy chairs, walking just fast enough to keep the universe in high gear. The auxiliary radio murmurs softly to itself in its niche as I pass. I circle wider, trying not to provoke it into flight or attack. The radio warbles at me suspiciously—a sibilant wordless hiss—but

remains motionless. I see its knobs turning slowly as I pace toward the rear wall.

A sudden wave of hate and hurt beats against me from the phosphorescent light fixtures overhead. I speed up, pass the last of the bunks without looking at them, and fetch up against the rear wall.

I beat back and forth helplessly along the wall, frustrated, unable to pace any farther. There is no place left to go. I have sailed up to the edge of my world, and the edge is a solid concrete wall, streaked with powdered plaster. There is no Terra Incognita left on the map, and no way past the Edge to the Indies. Let no seagulls appear, no lying doves bearing olive branches. The world is not flat: it's a thing of interlocking verticals and horizontals, with walls like puckered flesh.

I reach the dusty corner, spin furiously and pace back the other way, paralleling the wall, grinding a fist into the concrete and rasping it along as I walk. White dust stirs and puffs from the wall under my dragging touch, and my knuckles begin to bleed. I grin at the pain and grind my fist harder against the wall, yanking it back and forth, grinning desperately. Ragged streaks of blood appear against the rough stone. There is no place left to go.

March 26

Lost contact with HQ at 1125 hrs. Now over 20 min. late for their check-in broadcast. Maybe next hour? Red Alert signal went out at approx. same time; nobody knows what that means. Major saying nothing. Miss glare of red light, strangely, all look pale, bloodless now, things under rocks. Umbilical cord cut? Next checktime soon, sweat on back Fred's hands. Pray for rain . . .

March 28

Nothing but static for two days now. No word at all from HQ, missed over 50 check-in broadcasts. The Major

is pretending that nothing has happened. I can't decide if that's wise or obstinate. Commercial radio is shot, too. Can't get anything but one station that plays the same five-hour program of uninterrupted Muzak over and over again. No commentary, just the same program cycling endlessly. Must be one of the new automated stations, tape-cartridge that keeps recycling. You'd think somebody'd have noticed it by now, though, if everything was all right topside. The Major insists that it is, that there's an explanation for everything. Sunspots, he says, dumping charged particles down from the ionosphere, destroying the radio horizon. Why didn't it bother the one station with the Muzak, though? Mark proposed a while ago that we break radio silence, try to contact HQ. The Major turned this down angrily, saying that this was only a temporary breakdown in communications, and that we weren't going to disgrace ourselves by panicking and violating iron-clad regulations. What if the War's come? Mark asked, monotonic, and the silence rang like bronze. Nobody had actually said it before, though everybody'd thought it. I disliked Mark for having said it, for giving it power. In that case, the Major replied, it would be more vital than ever for us to follow orders explicitly. Mark made a sardonic, mock-formal bow. Naturally, he said. What else could we do? the Major demanded, angry, defensive. Nothing, Mark replied. Naturally.

March 31

Had a nightmare, drowning slowly in glue, try to keep my mouth above the surface, feel it trickling in at the edges. Being buried, the clots of dirt piling up over my face, pushing me deeper into the security of the grave. Dignity. Procedures and mazes, congealing blood. Woke up screaming. Fred shaking me. Wake up, he said, you're having a dream. His eyes were wide, scared, the whites gleaming wetly. Yeah, I said. Still groggy, not sure which reality to accept. I clutched at his shoulder for support, then snatched my hand away. His flesh was ice. There was

nothing in there. Just a shell, like a bronze statue. A zombie. Like me. I shook my head to drive away shadows. I was still scared. Christ, I said. Yeah, Fred said. His eyes were very wide.

My knuckles scuff against paper, sliding smoothly along its surface, the slickness surprising after the gnawing drag of concrete. The sudden change in textures is amazing, and I stop, breaking my intense concentration on the pain in my knuckles. I have dragged my fist across the patriotic poster taped to the wall, leaving a multiple streak of blood that is vivid against the drab inked colors.

I wait, fist pressed against the soothing paper, breathing carefully.

The poster has become too faded to read, but I can make out the illustration, which is of a soldier crouched in a muddy foxhole with shells bursting around him, his rifle clutched grimly in his hands while his blue eyes stare resolutely ahead. Above him, gazing down on him benignly, are a wide-eyed woman and child, a strong-jawed clergyman (priest? minister? rabbi?) and a rank of his fellow soldiers from various wars (Revolutionary, 1812, World War I, etc.) who are smiling in a comradely, conspiratorial fashion, perhaps thinking, "Now you're going to get yours." They—and the institutions they symbolize—are the reasons why he's in the foxhole, as the accompanying text would make clear if it wasn't too faded to read. I remember the day the Major tacked it up, fresh from the propaganda mill. The upper half of the carefully non-denominational church steeple visible behind the clergyman has been blotted out by a wet spot where the tiniest trickle of moisture sweats through the porous wall.

Unsteadily, I brush the wet spot, touch my fingertips to my lips, taste the dampness. It calms me, makes me think of the wet, warm earth locked beyond the walls, of grass and trees and flowers and lakes. I turn my face up, imagining that I can feel the caress of sunlight down through all the layers of concrete and earth, although our infallible 24-hour clock tells me that it is evening now on the surface. It is a clockwork oracle, endlessly ticking and

purring its song of measured seconds, but I prefer to think that it is wrong. I can *feel* the sun.

I take a ragged breath, pull my fist away from the wall. The paper sticks slightly to the bloody knuckles.

I turn away, allowing the universe to drop into low gear. I step very gingerly toward my bunk, like a man walking a tightrope. I need to rest.

The clock tells us that it is night, but we never see the sky.

April 4

Trouble this morning. Nothing much, but I'm afraid it may only be a foretaste. Ron and Harry were talking off-watch, got into a political argument over Malaysia. Suddenly there was a blur of motion, a meaty sound, and Harry was sitting on the floor, blood seeping from his nose. Ron was leaning back against the panel, looking more dazed than Harry, staring at his big furry fist as if it had turned into a spider. There was blood on his knuckles. We gathered around fast, like air rushing in to fill a vacuum, like water lapping over the edge of a floating bowl: one minute we were gone, next minute we were there. A circle of strained, pale faces, all scared, a ring of mirrors reflecting each other. For a while we just stood there and stared helplessly. Then Ron shook himself out of his daze and helped Harry to his feet, both apologizing profusely, both shamefaced, even getting a rueful laugh out of it. But you could feel everyone's guard go up, feel everyone retreat even further behind routine and cautious politeness, feel the fear of the potential explosion that clamped down a thousand safeguards against the self's own betrayal. You could feel us pull away from each other, the mirror-ring expanding equally outward from the center at a constant velocity until the faces had dwindled to the size of thumbnails.

Not satisfied with apologies, the Major dressed us down savagely, threatening court-martials in his snotty "more-in-sorrow-than" style. When he had run down, Mark asked him if we could break radio silence now, since some-

thing was obviously wrong. The Major refused, slyly suggesting that the whole thing might be a test, HQ giving us an emergency situation and waiting to see how we'd react, if we'd have enough guts to obey orders and continue to function, or if we'd be stampeded into panic. That idea was too freighted with neurosis for me; my mind floundered briefly on the outskirts of paranoia and then retched it out. Harry and Fred seemed partly convinced. Mark gave the Major an odd look.

Afterward, the Major withdrew sulkily to his bunk, and we talked hesitantly about what it might be like out there now. Most of us think that the War's come. Ron thinks everybody's dead, Harry holds out for some people being left here and there. Charlie, eternal optimist, agrees with the Major that everything's all right up there, although his voice sounds hollow lately. Fred goes along with Charlie and talks constantly about going home on leave and all the rest of that dumb hokey shit, his words falling into an embarrassed silence on our part. Mark is tenser than ever, carrying too much pain and too many problems from too many people with no way to put any of it down. We all unload on him, and he's being slowly crushed by the obligations of strength. He says little during these bull sessions, just shaking his head as if baffled by the varieties of pain, and occasionally looking intently at the Major.

The Major still tries to discourage our talking, but he doesn't dare push it too hard. We're riding on the ragged edge of mutiny already. Mark is openly insubordinate, now starting to urge that we abandon the post completely, open the Seal, in spite of the Major's efforts to shut him up. The Major wears his service pistol constantly now, and shouts a lot. The holster flap is usually unbuttoned, and once or twice he's placed his hand on the pistol butt when the continual argument between Mark and him has become heated. I'm waiting for him to draw it, threaten us with it. I'm afraid he may have slipped over the edge. Yet, I'm still not certain what I should do. The Major can be so damn convincing in his pompous, asshole way. And he does have the authority—and the responsibility—for the decisions made here.

I sit on my bunk, head bent almost to my knees, fighting the pressure urging me to shift gears.

I watch Harry slyly. He is hunched over the auxiliary radio, his thin fingers straining to make the microscopic adjustments necessary to bring the channel in a hair finer, his face drawn with concentration. He listens to the cycling Muzak constantly, especially at 'night,' weighing the nuances of tone and melody, savoring every scratch and skip and static-hiss on the tape, devouring everything with the fiercely-controlled gluttony of a connoisseur. His eyes are blank and unfocused as his fingers move in an endless, delicate dance over the control knobs.

I wonder if he can see the people?

When he's playing with the radio, I wonder if he sees furniture or people? Or Muzak?

I've never thought of that before. Surprised, I glance at Fred. He has not stopped playing in hours. Fred's eyes are never focused now. He never says anything at all, not even the ritual greetings and goodbyes Harry and I go through by rote.

I wonder if he ever sees the people? I wonder if he even knows where we are anymore? I wonder if he thought too much about not letting himself think?

I wonder if he's happy?

I am beginning to understand; that is my death sentence.

Fred's finger-picks sparkle in the phosphorescent glow. His guitar sounds slightly sour: the strings are wearing out again. How many sets of strings has he got left to replace them with? He must have already worked through most of his supply. What happens to him when he can't play the guitar anymore?

What happens to Harry when the tape finally wears out and the radio dies?

What happens to me when the pressure gets so great I can no longer shift things into high gear?

What happens to us when we're forced to live with ourselves?

I wonder.

I wait for something to happen, for us to break, for the inevitable degeneration into homosexuality, suicide, can-

nibalism. But nothing happens. That is even worse. We have adjusted, each in his own way. Nothing will happen. That is the horror. We have gotten used even to this. We have avoided realization by embracing tedium. Tedium is order; order is comforting, it gives us something to hide behind. If we ever came to the full realization of our situation, we would rush upon each other, tear each other to pieces, snuff consciousness in a single explosion of blood. But we won't, we will languish slowly, flickering out one by one. We will be candles guttered to extinction, strangling in their own wax. Either way leads down to death. But our way will be orderly, at least, and we will be able to play the game to the last. Perhaps we will tell ourselves that we are only falling asleep when the wax flows over our eyes and welds our eyelashes to our cheeks. Even death is preferable to realization. And habit knits up our raveled lives, sews them tight as the womb. The flesh of our lives has been boiled away, leaving us only the bare bones. And the bare bones themselves become the reason and prerequisite for living, just as the plaster shell of a clay mold becomes the statue itself under heat and pressure.

I wonder if any of us ever saw the people, even before, even topside? I wonder if anyone ever does?

I wonder what kind of society produces men like us?

April 13

Charlie died today. He didn't get up when the Major sounded work call. I went over to see, shook him, shook him. He was cold, like stone. He must have died some time during the night. He never made a sound. The Major was calling for us to get the lead out of our asses when I shook him, and his head lolled down over the side of the bed. His eyes were open; glass. All the voices stopped, the Major stopped shouting, breath chopped off sudden; the Muzak scratched in the background. I stepped backwards, holding my hand with the fingers stretched wide open. My fingers tingled, like I'd touched something that had sucked

the heat out of them. Charlie slipped down more; his arm dropped from the edge of the mattress, dangled, his knuckles brushing the concrete floor. I continued backing until I fetched up against the semicircle standing around the foot of the bunk. Charlie's arm swung slowly, spending momentum, tracing a diminishing spiral like one of those sand-picture machines, knuckles scraping lightly. I was holding my hand out at chest level, fingers still spread, making a warding gesture; away. Ron took hold of my wrist with both hands and forced it down, curling my hand into a fist. My fingers still tingled.

Nobody had to say it: He's dead. We all knew. Yesterday he'd seemed all right; much quieter than usual, but so what. He'd always been the easiest-going of us all, always joking and laughing, never worrying about anything; never letting anything get close enough to touch him. But he couldn't escape this. Our situation is like an anti-drug: a shot of iron reality. An overdose for Charlie; he couldn't take it—it killed him. There seems to be no other physical reason for his death. We have no facilities for an autopsy, and how do you dissect unavoidable despair anyway? He was the one everybody thought would hold up best, and this morning he dangled upside-down from his bunk and stared at us with agate eyes. It's shaken us. Morale is worse than ever. Nobody wanted to touch him; I refused, and Mark and Fred ended up lifting him from the bunk and carrying him to the reprocessing chamber for solid wastes, reluctantly, lashed along by the Major. That caused frenzied debate, but for once the Major was right. There's no place else to put him; all our wastes are recycled, we are self-contained. I tell myself intellectually that it will make no difference, but my guts are tied in a knot. Mark's face was cold, even more like stone than Charlie's: veined marble. He will explode soon, I can see it in the set of his eyes.

Afterward, I typed Charlie's name and number and personal information on a small white card, as per regulation, and added "Died in Line of Duty" on the proper line, and put the card in the file. I was careful not to think about what I was doing.

Even then, I was learning.

Those who can't stop thinking; those who see, don't survive.

Survival requires the development of selective blindness; the society mechanism grinds its component parts smooth for better functioning, and if it can't, it chews them up and spits them from the gears. This was true topside, and it's true here. But the sharper, intensified focus of the microcosm makes us gradually aware of it—gut-aware, on a level far deeper than mere intellectual acceptance—and we fight against that realization with any weapon, including death. This is why we keep up our monomania for the minutiae of normalcy, for to accept our situation is to admit that we've never been anything but cogs and zombies. Mark unwittingly showed us that, and we've been negating it ever since. He used to rage that we had escaped to a narcotized womb, but that was wrong; we couldn't escape the machine because the machine is in us, and the machine *is* us, even in the womb.

I'm beginning to see; better I were blind.

I don't think that the War has come at all. I think that everything is still the same up there, except that the machine has finally ground everybody to Ultimate Smooth, and no one talks anymore, no one sees anymore, no one is aware of anyone's existence, including his own. All cogs humming toward the optimum efficiency of stasis. No more moving parts.

The radio snarls, a particularly harsh gargle of static and swelling Muzak.

Two iron thumbs behind my eyeballs, pushing out.

At least it would be quiet up there. Good machines are always quiet.

The Muzak rasps again.

Ron muttering even over the Muzak. I watch the wrenching rise and fall of Ron's stomach, measuring his ragged breathing against the rhythm behind my eyes. Ron is muttering *Out, Get Out, Out*, over and over, slowly swelling in volume. He will not accept the lesson Mark taught us, is dying rather than face it.

I lie back on the bunk, tasting the red texture.

Harry adjusting the radio. Sometimes I hate all of them, washed in red, flat fingers curling.

Goddamn you, Mark, why couldn't you have left us to our indecision, Mark, left our dreams and fears perpetually in check, *Mark*, goddamn your eyes. Why did you have to make us aware that we were cogs? That wasn't very fair of you, Mark, to leave me here in guilt and knowledge, bloody guilt, Mark, goddamn your soul, *Mark*.

April 16

The Major and Mark had a violent argument this morning. They came close to blows. Charlie's death has revved everybody up, everybody jumping at shadows. Even the Major's been affected, looks harried and haggard. He tries to maintain an image as an authority-figure, blows it bad. Mark's hyped, all fire and brimstone, packed with jittery aggression against the Major. Which should I back? I empathize more with Mark, but the Major is my superior officer, and I don't know if I'm ready to face the consequences of mutiny. Why does everybody have to push it so hard? The Major finally told Mark that he was out of line and to shut the hell up. The Major's upset; he's usually much too prissy for profanity. Mark ignored him, lips white, demanded that we use the emergency controls on the Seal to open it up, go up and look around. The Major told him icily that we were supposed to use the emergency unsealing system only under the most extreme of conditions, and then only with the consent of HQ in the event their external unsealing system had failed. Mark snorted and said what if they never tell us to come up, would you sit here on your ass the rest of your life? But that's a command decision, the Major replied doggedly, and we aren't authorized to make command decisions. Mark started to hiss sit here on your ass, but the Major shouted, It's not our decision to make, and slapped his holster, and looked as if he were about to cry. Mark looked disgusted. The decision is HQ's responsibility, the Major said, let's

not panic and take things in our own hands; we've got plenty of time.

Mark got very cold, his eyes slitted up and ice seemed to form in the air around him. He scared me then, in his moment. Mark stared deliberately at the Major and said slowly, We've got plenty of time to die, unless we open the Seal and get out. Like Charlie. You murdered Charlie with your indecision. The Major jerked as if he'd been slapped, turned red. His fingers curled around the butt of his pistol. Christ, I thought, he's going to shoot him. But he didn't. He just snarled that he'd see Mark court-martialed, and stalked off, shouting back that Mark should consider himself under house arrest, which is kind of funny, considering.

Mark came over to me then, still fuming, tried to persuade me to join him in a mutiny against the Major, overpower him, relieve him of command. I was shocked, even though I'd known it was coming. He was persistent. He knows that as third ranking man, my support would probably bring over Ron and Harry, and Fred would follow the majority. I couldn't promise him anything; too confused. Mark got kind of pissed. He said that I was just as scared of responsibility as all the rest, that the Major would even be secretly glad if we took the decision out of his hands, that the Major didn't really want the responsibility, either. Presented with a fait accompli, Mark insisted, the Major will grumble and give in easily, glad somebody else has made up his mind for him. Then we go up and see what's happened; stay down here longer if necessary, sure, but it probably won't be, as we must be far from population centers and the radiation's probably low. Mark stopped for breath, face flushed and earnest. Christ, I don't know, I said. Mark gave me a contemptuous look. It's our responsibility, he said slowly, we've got an alternative, an option, let's take it. Mark put his hand on my shoulder as he said this, trying to draw a circle and include me inside. I felt trapped, backed to the wall. I couldn't think, I didn't want to think. I don't know, was all I could say, I don't know, leave me alone.

Mark took his hand away, stared for a moment, shook

his head, walked away. His shoulders were hunched, as if he were carrying a great weight; his face was sad and furious and tired and revved all at once—and scared. He looked curiously like the Major.

Ron screams.

It snaps me back to my bunk, mattress hard against buttocks, sweat starting on my forehead.

Ron screams again.

Once, long ago, I took a kitten to the veterinarian's. She was just a tiny thing, but she clawed like a tigress to get out of the cardboard box I carried her in. When we got to the vet's office—an antiseptic cave patinaed over with the stinks of animal sickness and pain—she became shiveringly quiet. And when the vet gently carried the kitten into the hot glare of the treatment room, she gave a wrenching, mortal scream of despair and horrible resignation.

Ron's scream is like this, carrying the rage and terror of a newborn baby.

He screams again: a raw calliope shrillness beyond sound.

He staggers up from his bunk, fingers clawing at his face, screaming, lurching across the bay, knocking over a chair, screaming *Get it off me, Jesus, get it off me*, running toward the Seal, continually screaming.

The world goes very slow for me; every motion sluggish, separate and distinct.

Ron screaming and staggering toward the Seal.

I remember waking up one night, getting up to go to the 'fresher, and seeing Mark standing next to the Seal, quietly working the restricted unsealing controls.

Ron falling over the couch, scrambling up, running forward.

The feel of the cold concrete against my bare feet and I shout: sudden, surprised, frightened, involuntary. Please involuntary.

The mad Major waking, triggered by the screaming, blinking as Ron rushes toward him. *The Major awakened by my shout, leaping out of bed, shouting You traitor, you damn traitor. Ron halfway to the Seal, bawling like a*

burning calf. *Mark, ignoring the Major, calmly continuing to flip the series of switches that would activate the unsealing mechanism. The Major digging his pistol from his wall locker, shouting threats. The Major sitting in tattered ribbons, fumbling for the .45 in his lap. Mark flipping the last switch, irreversibly starting the unsealing cycle, stepping back and rubbing his palms down his naked thighs with satisfaction, flashing a tight go-to-hell smile at the Major. Ron nearing the 'fresher cubicle, the mad Major, eyes an unseeing rheumy red, swinging the .45 up to bear. The Major slowly raising the pistol and aiming at Mark, face pale and grim and set. Ron screaming, stumbling, screaming. Mark grinning at the Major, contemptuous of the Major's bluff. The Major cocking the .45; slowly caressing the trigger. The Major shooting Mark carefully between the eyes.*

Echoes explode in the room.

Ron jerks, every muscle in his body convulsing, lifted off his feet by impact and thrown against the wall. Ron claws blindly at the concrete, sluggishly attempting to push himself fully erect. The Major fires again. The second shot wrenches Ron upright, splatters him hard against the wall. He slides down sideways along the wall to the floor, leaving a smeared red mark on the stone.

The Major puts his smoking pistol back in his lap and sits for a minute, swaying. Then his hand—his mangled left hand—goes out to paw blindly against the blank metal of the Seal, metal stained by old crusted blood, by the Major's blood: a stain that has been there since the Major pulped his hand by beating it against the Seal, ten minutes after he had killed Mark, ten minutes after the Seal had failed to open in spite of the activated unsealing mechanism.

"Traitors," the Major mutters, rocking, weeping. "Locked from the outside. Traitors, it is not our decision to make. Locked from the outside—"

We turn back to our dying.

Security is an operational necessity.

—Gardner R. Dozois

A TRIP TO THE HEAD

"Is this Earth?" he cried, for things had changed abruptly.

"Yes, this is Earth," said the one beside him, "nor are you out of it. In Zambia men are rolling down hills inside barrels as training for space flight. Israel and Egypt have defoliated each other's deserts. The *Reader's Digest* has bought a controlling interest in the United States of America/General Mills combine. The population of the earth is increasing by thirty billion every Thursday. Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis will marry Mao Tse-tung on Saturday, in search of security, and Russia has contaminated Mars with breadmold."

"Why, then," said he, "nothing has changed."

"Nothing much," said the one beside him. "As Jean-Paul Sartre has said in his lovable way, Hell is other people."

"To Hell with Jean-Paul Sartre. I want to know where I am."

"Well, then," said the other, "tell me who you are."

"I'm."

"Well?"

"My name is."

"What?"

He stood, his eyes filling with tears and his knees with palsy, and knew he did not know his name. He was a blank, a cipher, an X. He had a body and all that, but he had no who.

They stood at the edge of a forest, he and the other one. It was a recognizable forest, though rather dingy in the leaf, and damaged at the fringes by weedkiller. A fawn was walking away from them into the forest, and as it went its name fell away from it. Something looked back at them with mild eyes from the darkness of the trees before it

vanished. "This is England!" cried blank, grasping the floating straw, but the other said, "England sank years ago."

"Sank?"

"Yes. Foundered. Nothing is left now but the topmost fourteen feet of Mt. Snowdon, known as the New Welsh Reef."

At this blank also sank. He was crushed. "Oh," he cried on his knees, intending to ask somebody's help, but he could not remember whose help it was one asked. It began with a T, he was almost certain. He began to weep.

The other sat down on the grass beside him and presently put a hand on his shoulder, saying, "Come on now, don't take it so hard."

The kindly voice gave blank some courage. He controlled himself, dried his face on his sleeve, and looked at the other. It was like him, roughly. It was another. However, it had no name, either. What good was it?

Shadow came into the eyes as the earth went round on its axis. Shadow slipped eastward and upward into the other's eyes.

"I think," blank said carefully, "that we should move out from the shadow of the . . . this, here." He gestured to the objects near them, large things, dark below and multitudinously green above, the names of which he could no longer remember. He wondered if each one had a name, or if they were all called by the same name. What about himself and the other, did they share a name in common, or did each have one of his own? "I have a feeling I'll remember better farther away from it, from them," he said.

"Certainly," said the other. "But it won't make as much difference as it used to."

When they came clear away from it into the sunlight, he at once remembered that it was called a forest and that they were called trees. However, he could not recall whether or not each tree had a name of its own. If they did, he did not remember any of them. Perhaps he did not know these trees personally.

"What shall I do," he said, "what shall I do?"

"Well, look here, you can call yourself whatever you please, you know. Why not?"

"But I want to know my *real* name."

"That isn't always easy. But meanwhile you could just take a label, as it were, for ease of reference and conversational purposes. Pick a name, any name!" said the other, and held out a blue box named DISPOSABLE.

"No," said blank proudly, "I'll choose my own."

"Right. But don't you want a kleenex?"

Blank took a kleenex, blew his nose, and said, "I shall call myself . . ." He halted in terror.

The other watched him, mild-eyed.

"How can I say who I am when I can't say what I am?"

"How would you find out what you are?"

"If I had anything . . . If I did something . . ."

"That would make you be?"

"Of course it would."

"I never thought of that. Well, then, it doesn't matter what name you're called by; any one will do; it's what you do that counts."

Blank stood up. "I will exist," he stated firmly. "I will call myself Ralph."

Whipcord breeches fitted close on his powerful thighs, the stock rose high on his neck, sweat clung in his thick, curly hair. He tapped his boots with his riding-crop, his back to Amanda, who sat in her old gray dress in the deep shade of the pecan tree. He stood in full sunlight, hot with anger. "You're a fool," he said.

"Why, Mr. Ralph," came the soft lilting Southern voice, "Ah'm just a little bit stubborn."

"You realize, don't you, that Yankee as I am, I own all the land from here to Weevilville? I own this county! Your farm wouldn't make a peanut patch for one of my darkies' kitchen gardens!"

"Indeed not. Won't you come sit down in the shade, Mr. Ralph? Youah gettin' so hot out theah."

"You proud vixen," he murmured, turning. He saw her, white as a lily in her worn old dress, in the shade of the great old trees: the white lily of the garden. Suddenly he was at her feet, clasping her hands. She fluttered in his

powerful grasp. "Oh, Mr. Ralph," she cried faintly, "what does this mean?"

"I am a man, Amanda, and you are a woman. I never wanted your land. I never wanted anything but you, my white lily, my little rebel! I want you, I want you! Amanda! Say you will be my wife!"

"Ah will," she breathed faintly, bending toward him as a white flower stoops; and their lips met in a long, long kiss. But it did not seem to help at all.

Perhaps it ought to be moved up twenty or thirty years.

"You sick bitch," he muttered, turning. He saw her, stark naked there in the shade, her back against the pecan tree, her knees up. He strode toward her unbuttoning his fly. They coupled in the centipede-infested crabgrass. He bucked like a bronco, she cried ululatingly, *Oooh! Aaah!* Coming coming coming COME wow wow wow CLIMAX!

Now what?

Blank stood at a little distance from the forest and stared disconsolately at the other.

"Am I a man?" he inquired. "Are you a woman?"

"Don't ask me," the other said, morose.

"I thought surely that was the most important thing to establish!"

"Not so damned important."

"You mean it doesn't *matter* if I am a man or a woman?"

"Of course it matters. It matters to me, too. It also matters which man and which woman we are or, as the case may be, are not. For instance, what if Amanda was black?"

"But sex."

"Oh, Hell," said the other with a flare of temper, "bristleworms have sex, tree-sloths have sex, Jean-Paul Sartre has sex—what does it prove?"

"Why, sex is real, I mean really real—it's having and acting in its intensest form. When a man takes a woman he proves his being!"

"I see. But what if he's a woman?"

"I was Ralph."

"Try being Amanda," the other said sourly.

There was a pause. Shadows were coming on eastward and upward from the forest over the grass. Small birds cried *jug jug, tereu*. Blank sat hunched over his knees, The other lay stretched out, making patterns with fallen pine-needles, shadowed, sorrowful.

"I'm sorry," blank said.

"No harm done," the other said. "After all, it wasn't real."

"Listen," blank said, leaping up, "I know what's happened! I'm on some kind of trip. I took something, and I'm on a trip, that's it!"

It was. He was on a trip. A canoe trip. He was paddling a small canoe along a long, narrow, dark, shining stretch of water. The roof and walls were of concrete. It was pretty dark. The long lake, or stream, or sewer, slanted upward visibly. He was paddling against the current, uphill. It was hard work, but the canoe kept sliding forward upriver as silently as the black shining water moved back down. He kept his strokes quiet, the paddle entering the water silent as a knife in butter. His large black-and-pearl electric guitar lay on the forward seat. He knew there was somebody behind him, but he didn't say anything. He wasn't allowed to say anything or even look around, so if they didn't keep up that was their lookout, he couldn't be called responsible. He certainly couldn't slow down; the current might get hold of his canoe and pull it right out from under him and then where'd he be? He shut his eyes and kept paddling, silent entry, strong stroke. There was no sound behind him. The water made no sound. The cement made no sound. He wondered if he was actually going forward or only hanging still while the black water ran hell-bent beneath. He would never get out to daylight. Out, out—

out. The other didn't even seem to have noticed that Blank had been away on a trip, but just lay there making patterns with pine-needles, and presently said, "How is your memory?"

Blank searched it to see if it had improved while he was away. There was less in it than before. The cupboard was

bare. There was a lot of junk in the cellars and attics, old toys, nursery rhymes, myths, old wives' tales, but no nourishment for adults, no least scrap of possession, not a crumb of success. He searched and searched like a starving methodical rat. At last he said uncertainly, "I do remember England."

"Why, surely. I expect you can even remember Omaha."

"But I mean, I remember being in England."

"Do you?" The other sat up, scattering pine straw. "You do remember being, then! What a pity England sank."

They were silent again.

"I have lost everything."

There was a darkness in the other's eyes and on the eastern edge of the earth plunging down the steepening slopes of night.

"I'm nobody."

"At least," said the other, "you know you're human."

"Oh, what good's that—with no name, no sex, no nothing? I might as well be a bristleworm or a tree-sloth!"

"You might as well," the other agreed, "be Jean-Paul Sartre."

"I?" said blank, offended. Driven to denial by so nauseous a notion, he stood up and said, "I certainly am not Jean-Paul Sartre. I am myself." And so saying he found himself to be, in fact, himself; his name was Lewis D. Charles, and he knew it as well as he knew his own name. There he was.

The forest was there, root and branch.

The other was, however, gone.

Lewis D. Charles looked in the red eye of the west and the dark eye of the east. He shouted aloud, "Come back! Please come back!"

He had gone at it all wrong, backwards. He had found the wrong name. He turned, and without the least impulse of self-preservation plunged into the pathless forest, casting himself away so that he might find what he had cast away.

Under the trees he forgot his name again at once. He

also forgot what he was looking for. What was it he had lost? He went deeper and deeper into shadows, under leaves, eastward, in the forest where nameless tigers burned.

—*Ursula K. Le Guin*

LET US QUICKLY HASTEN TO THE GATE OF IVORY

The cemetery lay at some distance outside the city, but in such fine weather it was a pleasure to be able to escape into the country. The blue of the sky was emphasized by a few scattered clouds which obligingly kept well away from the sun. The morning warmth touched, but did not penetrate, the surfaces of the scene, the fields, the winding road, the muddy trenches on either side and the tall weeds. In such a landscape, on such a day, they (Mickey and Louise) figured only as decoration: one shepherd, one shepherdess. Louise, in her best pastoral mood, smiled and allowed her hair to be ruffled by the wind.

They parked the Volkswagen in a large lot of matt-black asphalt enlivened by a herringbone pattern of whitewash and authoritative traffic arrows, which (since the lot was empty) they ignored. She took the bouquet from the back seat, two dozen white and red roses. Three times during the drive out here Mickey had asked her how much she had paid for the flowers. Mickey wasted not and did not want.

"Aren't you taking your sweater?" he asked.

"On such a nice day?"

Mickey, the father now of two children, a man of responsibilities, frowned. "You never know."

"True, true." She took her sweater, draped it over her shoulder, stretched.

"Did you lock the door on your side?"

"I don't know."

Mickey went back and locked the right-hand door. Then he unlocked it, rolled up the window, and locked it again.

Just inside the brick gate, beside a bed of tulips, was a rack of flower vases—all of them, like so many empty

FROM THEIR LABOR
NOW THEY REST

milkbottles, of the same squat shape and tinny green color. Mickey paused a moment to select one.

The grounds of the cemetery swelled and dipped agreeably. The young leaves and the grass insisted, this early in the year, rather too much on their color, and even the pines had been caught up in this naive enthusiasm: their branches were tipped with that same vivid lime.

"I hope you know the way."

"Pretty well," Mickey said. "We go over that high hill there—" Pointing west. "From the top you can see a second little hill beyond, and it's on the other side of that, about halfway down. Between two fir trees."

"Is it very big?"

"Not very. About up to my knees. Mom chose it herself."

They started up the path. Louise was very conscious of the crunch of her heels on the gravel.

"Have you been here a lot?"

"No. Not since the funeral, in fact. We've had a rugged winter. And Joyce gets too depressed."

"I suppose it would be depressing in the fall, but it's lovely now. More like a golf course than a cemetery."

At these words the memory of their summer evening trespasses on the golf course returned to both of them and they exchanged shy smiles of complicity. In the winters they had gone sledding on those same illicit slopes.

With his smile as her sanction Louise caught hold of Mickey's free hand. Obediently his fingers curled around hers, but with the same gesture his smile vanished.

"Oh, we can, you know," she assured him. "Holding hands is permitted between brother and sister."

"It's just that . . . well, it's been so long."

"And that's the pleasure of it. Do you think Joyce would be jealous?"

SACRED
to the Memory of
CECELIA HAKE
Aug 15 1892-Dec 2 1955

"From Lesley. He was full of morbid knowledge."

"Oh." Mickey quickened his pace to avoid any larger response. Louise's divorce was still a sore point with the Mangans, staunch Catholics all, though (as she had pointed out to her other less-favored brother, Lawrence) her marriage could not have counted for much in the eyes of Mother Church, having never been consummated. Neither Louise nor four years of psychoanalysis had been of much benefit to Lesley.

"Oh, dear," Louise said. "It *won't* be a perfect day."

Mickey turned around. "Why?"

"The sun's gone under. Look."

* *

In
Loving Memory
of

MARJORIE EDNA
NOYES

who fell asleep May 6, 1911

Aged 5 years.

Also of Clement Hoffman

Uncle of the Above

who died Jan 24 1923, aged 41 years

* *

"Are you sure it's this hill?" Louise asked. "Didn't you say between two *fir* trees? These are all pines."

"To tell the truth, I'm not sure of anything now. It all looks so much alike. It never occurred to me how hard it would be to find again. Maybe it was the hill farther to the right."

"That one? Or would it be farther back by now? You'll have to keep playing Virgil, I'm afraid. You know me—I can get lost on my way to the Laundromat."

"Let's try it, anyhow. It's easier than going back to square one. Or would you rather rest for a moment?"

"Rest? I'm good for hours yet. Though I am glad I wore low heels. What does it look like, exactly, the stone?"

"Just a plain slab, like most of these, a rectangle with the edges rough and the face polished. Granite. Marble would have cost twice as much, and it doesn't last so well."

"Did you use his initials—or his full name?"

"Mom gave them the whole works—Edward Augustus Mangan. I argued with her about it. He never liked people to know his name, but she felt it wouldn't be Christian, just the initials. She's down as Patricia, Wife of the Above."

"It sums her up nicely."

Mickey always remained neutral in Louise's quarrels with her mother, and so (was it not the special purpose of this day that these misunderstandings should be patched up once and for all?) he steered the conversation toward safe pieties:

"Why *didn't* you come, Louise? If it had been only a question of money, I'd have been glad to pay for your ticket."

Louise saw no reason to express any doubt of this very doubtful statement. Ever since high school, Mickey had been touchy on the subject of

his stinginess. She replied in the same slightly unctuous spirit of reunion, "I wanted

**"HE GIVETH
HIS BELOVED SLEEP"**

to, of course, but it was so soon after the divorce, and I was only inches away from a breakdown. Besides," she went on, unable to repress her legitimate grievance, "except for the announcement, none of you had written to me. And in Dad's case, you know, I didn't even receive the announcement. It was almost by accident that I ever did find out."

"I'm sure we sent one. Perhaps it got lost in the mail. That was the time you were in England, or one of those places."

"Well, it doesn't matter—I'm here now. Let's hope *they* are."

At the base of the hill the path branched once more, both forks going off, by Mickey's calculations, in wrong ways. They left it and walked on the trim grass toward a

row of newly planted poplars. Bouquets of spring flowers, some withered, some still fresh, decorated the gravestones, which in this part of the cemetery seemed rather statelier and (she observed) older. She didn't point this out to Mickey, who was now visibly irritated at his failure to find their parents' grave. It would hardly do to tell him that it made no difference to her, that she'd come for his sake, not theirs.

Beyond the poplars there was an unexpected dip in the ground. Pink hawthorn filled the small valley from end to end. The shaded blossoms gave off a pallid glow, and she

STEPHEN BLYTHE
MARY BLYTHE

remembered how, only five days ago, the plane had risen above the cloudbanks into such a sudden pink luminescence as this.

"Loved by Everyone"

"Damn all!" Mickey said.

It was an admission of defeat: they were lost.

"Oh darling, what does it matter that we've come a bit out of the way? If we hadn't we would have never seen this. And it's lovely!"

Mickey looked at Louise strangely. "Darling" had possibly been the wrong thing to say: it exceeded the limits he assigned to a sisterly affection.

"We can't just turn our backs on this, you know. We *have* to go down there. It won't take five minutes."

Mickey looked at his watch. "We shouldn't be late for lunch."

"Just a sniff of those flowers. Then we'll go back to that first hill and start fresh."

"They are pretty, aren't they?" he conceded.

"It must be an accident. Cemeteries aren't supposed to be as pretty as all that. Who would bother going to heaven?"

That was rather overdoing it, she thought, but it seemed to work, for Mickey grinned and offered her his hand, quite voluntarily, as they stumbled down the slope zig-zagging between the marble angels and the elegant sarcophagi.

* *

In Dear & Honored Memory of
 GERALDINE
 Cherished Wife of Martin Sweiger
 who Departed this Life
 February 4, 1887
 Aged 54 years

“I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

* *

The view northward across level ground terminated at the distance of about a mile in a violet haze; in all other directions extended a depthless continuum of hills as tall as or taller than this on which they stood. Nowhere were roads or buildings to be seen, only the green hills pocked with white, the stands of pine and poplar, fir and willow. No other persons, and no sound but their own heavy breathing and, now and again, the caucusing of unseen jays.

“It’s impossible,” Mickey said in the same matter-of-fact tone in which he might have spoken of an unbalanced equation in one of his students’ exam papers.

“It’s silly,” Louise agreed. “It’s perfectly silly.”

“Cemeteries just aren’t this *big*.”

“Of course not.”

“Joyce is going to be furious.”

“Won’t she, though? Imagine trying to explain to her that we got *lost* in a cemetery. It’s impossible.”

This seemed to exhaust the possibilities of the topic. Once anything is firmly established in the category of the impossible it eludes further discussion or analysis. They had abandoned any pretense of looking for Mr. and Mrs. Mangan’s gravestone an hour ago, though Louise still clung to their commemorative bouquet as to some fragment, a Miraculous Medal or a scapular, of a discarded faith. The wax-paper wrapping had frayed, and she had to be careful not to be pricked by the thorny stems. And the flowers themselves. . . .

MIZPAH

With a grimace she threw them away as earlier, in his first fit of temper, Mickey had thrown away the squat tin vase.

Initially they had conceived of their project as finding their way back to the parking lot, simply that; now they were just trying to get out, by any exit, in any direction.

"There's no one here, have you noticed that?" Louise asked. "I mean, there aren't even gardeners around. *Someone* has to cut the grass. And someone comes around with these flowers. We keep seeing fresh flowers everywhere."

"Mm, yes."

Mickey's eyes avoided hers. Perhaps the same point had already occurred to him, but he had not spoken out of a sense of delicacy. He knew her too little to be able to gauge her susceptibility to panic. She, for her part, could not gauge his. The consequence was that they both remained remarkably cool.

"It would be all right, you know, if this were a *wood*. People do get lost in woods, brothers and sisters especially. But not in cemeteries!" She essayed a careful laugh, conscious, bounded, calm.

"Well, which way do you think?" he asked.

"For plunging on? East, I suppose. I'm still convinced that that's where the car should be. But which way is east?"

Mickey regarded the sun, now at its zenith, and consulted his wristwatch. "It's twelve-thirty, and we're on Daylight Saving Time. So I'd say *that* would be east, give or take fifteen degrees either way." He pointed to the crest of the highest hill that they could see, behind which gray clouds had begun massing.

"The question is—should we climb it or follow the low ground? It's a bit higher than this hill, we might see farther."

"Not another hill, Mickey, please! I really am a bit bushed. Not to speak of being hungry. I wish now that I could eat those farmhouse breakfasts that you do."

"Yeah. Jesus."

At the mention of food the thought of Joyce returned

more vividly to both of them, the dismal thought of the explanations that would have to be made, of the failure of those explanations.

TO DEAR
FLORRIE
FROM HER MOM
SEPT 18 1960

The moment they reached the bottom of the hill the quiet of the day was broken by a mechanical roar that seemed to come from all the hills at once. *A truck!* she thought. The highway! Then she recognized the sound and looked up. A jet flew past westward. It was unusually low. She wondered if the pilot could have seen them down here. Perhaps just barely, if he'd known where to look. She pictured herself stripped to her brassiere, waving her white blouse at the airplane: it would never do.

"Flying that low, he must be coming in for a landing," Mickey said. "But I didn't think the airport was so close. In any case, he should be flying east."

"Maybe he's taking off."

The jet passed out of sight, leaving behind only its white, precise tail that slowly feathered out into the blue. Louise giggled.

"Something amusing?"

"I was thinking—wouldn't it be funny if they sent out a rescue party for us? It would be in all the papers."

"Jesus!" Mickey said. "Don't make jokes like that."

★

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S. † P.

EUSTACHY TUSTANOWSKI
DOKTOR MEDYCYNY

18.5.1837—8.12.1918

★

★

The sprinkler revolved and jets of water arched up in two opposing spirals, fell with the sheen of dull silver.

They broke into a run down the grassy incline. Mickey

tripped and it was Louise who reached the sprinkler first. Grasping the brass tube she drank avidly at the pencil-thin stream of water. She had scarcely wet her clothes.

When she looked up, mouth numbed with cold, Mickey was still sitting where he had fallen.

"Oh, it tastes wonderful! I didn't realize how thirsty—What's wrong, darling?"

Mickey was swearing, with great seriousness and small invention. Louise dashed away from the sprinkler, which resumed its duties, and went to her brother. "What is it?"

He began to pull grass up around the half-submerged marker over which he'd tripped. The marker read, simply:

CLAESZ

"It's this son of a bitch that's the matter. He tripped me. I think I've sprained something, and it hurts like the devil."

"Shouldn't you try to walk on it now—before it starts to swell?"

Mickey stood up, swearing, and hobbled toward the sprinkler. Before he could catch hold of the revolving brass arm he had been drenched. When he'd had his fill he turned the sprinkler upside down in the grass.

"You know what I want to do?" he said, seating himself on the nearest gravestone and removing his right shoe and sock. "I want to smash something. I'd like to take a big sledgehammer and start smashing in all these goddamn tombs."

TO OUR
DARLING
MOTHER
AND FATHER
"IN GOD'S KEEPING"

"Mickey, it can't be *very* much farther to one of the gates. We've been walking for miles, I'm sure we have. It's three o'clock by my watch. *Miles!*"

"I'll bet we've been walking in circles. People are supposed to do that when they're lost in the snow. It's the only explanation."

"But we took our direction from the sun," Louise objected.

"The sun! And what direction would that be? There is no sun. And indeed the light now issued from the clouds with such perfect uniformity that this was not any longer a viable strategy. There were a few areas of somewhat more intense brightness, but these seemed to be distributed at random through the prevailing gray.

"Do you know what it's going to do? It's going to start raining, *that's* what it's going to do!" He smiled, a melancholy but triumphant prophet. The sprained ankle had triggered the latent melodramatist in Mickey, whose talents usually had no larger scope than family bickering and the bloodless victories of the classroom. Now, like Lear, he had all nature ranged against him.

"We'll wait it out under a pine tree if it does."

"Wait it out! Jesus, Louise! It's three o'clock. Joyce has probably telephoned everyone we know, asking for us. Maybe she'll even drive out here and see the car parked in the lot."

"Fine. Then someone can start looking for us."

"You don't think they're going to believe us when we tell them we were lost, do you? Lost—in a cemetery!"

"What *will* they think, then?" Louise asked angrily. She knew he wouldn't dare put it in so many words, and he didn't.

"Jesus," he said.

"Besides, your ankle is a perfect alibi. Anyone can get lost in a cemetery for a *little* while. We got lost, and then you sprained your ankle and couldn't walk. It'll tell you what—I'll go on ahead and find the way out and then I'll come back here for you. I'll be very careful to memorize the way, I'll blaze a trail. What is it you have to do—drop breadcrumbs, or something like that? And with luck I'll find someone to help you back. How's that?"

Mickey nodded glumly.

She set off up the nearest hill to take her bearings. In this part of the cemetery there seemed to be no paths at all, and the lawn was not so well cared for. Though someone, surely, had set that sprinkler going—and not too long

ago, either, or the ground about it would have been muddy. Really, they had been behaving quite irrationally about the whole thing.

Every ten or twelve yards she would glance back at Mickey, who was resting his face in his hands. His pose reminded her vaguely of some painting she had seen. Her year in Europe with Lesley had melted into a single conglomerate blur of churches and paintings and heavy meals. All afternoon, as her hunger had grown, she had chattered on compulsively about restaurants in Paris, in Amsterdam, in Genoa; German sausages, curried chicken, English puddings, the sweet heavy wines of Spain, and the hopeless inadequacy of all European coffees.

GARDENS
OF MEMORY AND
PEACE

At the top of the hill she rested, out of breath, against a tall oak. The close horizon of placid, swelling lawns, this endless unvarying cyclorama, filled her now with a subdued, almost meditative, horror. The ring of hills seemed to tighten more closely around her with each new prospect.

No, she would not be able to journey off into that blankness alone. Through the unacknowledged panic of the afternoon it had been Mickey's presence that had buoyed her up, and even this brief moment away from him, not even out of his sight, she could sense the encroachment of those thoughts she had so far been able to evade. Even if they could not be evaded much longer, she did not want to have to face them on her own.

"Nothing?" he asked when she returned.

"Nothing. Those hills—they were the same hills we've seen all day. And I just couldn't . . . not by myself."

"You don't have to explain. I was feeling much the same thing as soon as you left. It was like . . . I don't know, like being left alone in the dark."

She squeezed his hand, grateful for his understanding. He no longer seemed embarrassed at her touch.

"It's so absurd, isn't it?"

"Absurd? It's supernatural, kid."

She had to laugh at that.

"Oh, Jesus, it's starting to rain."

"Let me help you as far as that pine. We'll be dry there."

They waited out the rainstorm under the pine, telling each other stories about Europe and the high school where Mickey taught physics and algebra and coached the basketball team, about the whole sick mess with Lesley and about Joyce's hundreds of spiteful, sponging relations. It was the best talk they'd managed to have since Louise had come to town.

And after the rain the sky began to clear, though because of the wind that had sprung up the day remained, permanently, chillier.

★

★

ALDRIDGE

LOUIS
1868-
1927

ANN
1882-
1939

JAMES
1905-

"To live in the hearts of those
we love is not to die."

★

★

After so many hours of silence the birds came as a relief. They arrived in a great whirling flock that passed beyond the westward slopes, returning a minute later from the north to settle in the elms on both sides of the hollow. Their clamor had the reassuring quality that can sometimes be found found in a noisy bar or a busy street, a pledge of the continuity of exterior event.

During their talk under the pine, Mickey's right foot had swollen so badly that he could no longer squeeze into his shoe, which now dangled by its laces from his belt. He walked with the help of a branch stripped from the same accommodating pine.

They did not talk, for what could they have spoken of but their improbable dilemma? There comes a point when

analysis, a too-conscious awareness, becomes a liability and hindrance to action, and Louise feared that they had overstepped that point already. Their talk had suggested to her, at least, the central problem in this business of being lost: whether it had its source in the nature of the woods or in the nature of the orphans lost in those woods? In other words, could they be in any sense, perhaps without their knowing it, malingering? Each sequent hour seemed to argue for this hypothesis. The alternative—that

SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN
TO COME UNTO ME

the cemetery itself was responsible for their plight, that it was quite as big as it seemed to

be—was intolerable and, in the most literal sense, unthinkable. Therefore (because it was unthinkable) they would not speak of it.

When they came upon the brook, it was a complete surprise. Had they been walking at a faster pace they might have tumbled right into it. The longer grass concealed the brink, just as the chattering of the birds had masked the sound.

"The stream!" Mickey said.

They looked up with one accord, as though expecting to see the parking lot just a few yards on. The brook curved out of sight around the base of a hill.

"It can't be much farther on," Louise argued. "The *only* time we saw the stream today was from that first hill."

"Oh, Jesus," Mickey said with relief.

"And it proves one thing—it proves we haven't been walking in circles, not entirely."

Mickey put his hand in the water. "It's flowing that way." He nodded to the east-lying hill, where tesserae of marble and granite flared in the afternoon's declining light. "Do we follow it upstream or downstream? What do you think? Louise, are you listening?"

This problem had occurred to Louise at the first sight of the brook, and she had been staring in the other direction, against the sun, while Mickey spoke.

"Look," she said.

A crumpled mass of green paper was floating toward them. She stooped and picked it dripping from the water. She smoothed it on the grass.

"Is it the same?" he asked.

"I'm sure it is. See, where the stems have torn it. Do you believe in portents, Mickey?"

"I don't follow you."

"The trouble is, even if one believes in them, how are they to be interpreted?"

"Hey, let's get into gear, sister dear. Which way—upstream or down?"

"Downstream? I'm not a very experienced druid."

"Then downstream it is."

They followed the winding course of the brook for an hour. Louise figured that in the space of an hour they could not accomplish more than a mile at Mickey's best pace.

Though they both believed they had found the thread that would lead them from the labyrinth, they remained chary of talk. Only once did Mickey break the hopeful silence:

"You know, Joyce will be talking about this for the rest of her life."

Louise smiled. "She won't be the only one."

The brook emptied into a small pool that drained into two culverts. The culverts took their course thence under a hill. They climbed the hill, from which they were able to see other hills. The western horizon was an intense violet, veined with pink. The sun had set.

"I think I'm going to scream," Louise said.

Instead, she sat down and began to cry. Mickey put his arm around her, but he couldn't think of anything reassuring to say.

They stayed on the hilltop until it was quite dark, hoping to see electric lights or at least the nimbus that would hover above a large congregation of lights, but they saw only the stars and the blackness behind the stars. When the mosquitoes discovered them, they started off once again, following the probable course of the culverts.

At night the cemetery reminded them even more of the

golf course of their youth. They held hands as they walked along, and sang, together, all the songs they could remember from *Oklahoma* and *The King and I*.



Here lies
the mortal body
of

LT. JOHN FRANCIS KNYE

only son of
FELIX & LORRAINE KNYE
Who was killed in action
Aug. 7, 1943, Aged 20 years.

"Taken to his Eternal Home"



Because the grounds were so well kept up, it was hard to gather an adequate supply of dry wood. Mickey built up the fire while Louise scouted about the neighboring slopes, foraging. As long as she kept in sight of the flames she didn't feel uneasy. On her third excursion she came upon a veritable windfall—two large fir branches that had come down in a storm some time before and were fairly dry by now, the fir tree itself having acted as an umbrella during subsequent downpours. They were so heavy she had to make a separate trip for each branch. With these broken up and stockpiled they decided they were well ahead of the game.

"With any luck," Mickey said, "someone will notice the glow of the fire and report it. I'm sure fires are illegal in a cemetery."

"Oh, I'm sure."

"I've reached the point where I'd be happy to be arrested. Anything to get out of this place."

"Ditto me. Though let's hope they don't come *too* soon

—I'd hate to think I'd gathered all this wood to no purpose. It's a nice fire."

REQUIESCAT I guess. We've managed to have our
IN PACE family reunion after all. Though it
may have cost you an extra day."

"As long as I have an excuse that satisfies my conscience, I don't mind the time lost. It's your ankle I worry about. How is it now?"

"All right if I keep still."

"I keep having the funny feeling that the parking lot is probably only a hundred yards away, just out of sight."

"I've had that feeling all day. Warm?"

"The front of me is toasting to a crisp, but my back is a little chilly. What saint was it said, 'I'm done on this side—you can turn me over'?"

"St. Lawrence."

"Lawrence, of course. I'll bet Joyce has been phoning him all day. My God, the thought of facing them . . ."

Most of the time they watched the fire in silence. Mickey lay on his left side, so that he could prop his bad foot on a low marker. Louise sat with her arms about her legs, her chin resting on her knees. Whenever the fire grew low she added another branch and the flames would leap up to double or treble their height until the brittle foliage had been consumed. At regular intervals white moths would flutter into the flames to achieve a final metamorphosis.

"The one thing I *don't* understand," Mickey said, resuming the talk they had begun under the pine tree, "is why you married him in the first place. You can't blame him for deceiving you."

"Well, he *was* handsome. And very personable. Everyone agreed that we would make a dazzling couple, and they were right, in a way. Then, I suppose a woman likes to think that she can *redeem* that kind of man."

"It doesn't sound as though he wanted redeeming."

GOD IS LOVE

"Oh, he did and he didn't. In his own way he was quite fond of me. Besides, you forget—he was famous. In the set we moved in, most women would

have done the same dumb thing. It's a different world."

"And you say that you knew from the first how it would turn out."

"When I thought about it. Perhaps *that* was the determining reason. Maybe it was just the kind of marriage I wanted, a kind of pantomime. It was the kind *he* wanted. Please, let's not talk about it now?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to upset you."

"Oh, I'm very hard to upset. Today has proved that. I'm just tired. Mickey, do you still know the names of all the stars?"

"Some. I've forgotten a lot."

"Teach me."

Mickey pointed out the brighter constellations that could be seen despite the glare from the fire. Afterwards she laid her head in his lap to see if she could sleep. Untended, the fire began to die out, but they were resigned to this. Eventually they would have used up all the wood in any case. Where their bodies touched they kept warm.

"Mickey? Are you awake?"

"Yes. I didn't think you were."

"When you told me, this morning, to take my sweater—how could you possibly have *known*?"

"Strange, isn't it? I was thinking almost the same thing a little while ago."

Sometimes she stared up at the constellations, murmuring drowsily their renascent names; sometimes her eyes were closed. Mickey's hand was twined comfortingly in her hair.

Tomorrow she would have to fly back and it would all return to the way it had been. Mickey would write, once

or twice, letters about his children's health, the terrible winters, his basketball team. And she would eat expensive lunches at hotels, and talk, for hours, with the same people, or with new people who would too quickly become the same people. She would go to their parties, their shows . . .

Tomorrow.

No. That was over. Tomorrow would find them in the

cemetery still. They would walk across the same perpetual lawns. They were lost. They would continue to be lost. The cemetery would stretch on and on like—what had he said before?—like a Moebius strip. The same hills speckled with white rectangles of stone, striped with gravel paths. The same blue sky. In an almost perfect silence they would walk through the cemetery, lost. They would learn to eat tubers and roots and pine nuts. Perhaps they would find a way to catch small birds. Quite possibly. She fell asleep in her brother's arms, smiling: it was just like old times.



In Remembrance of
EDWARD AUGUSTUS MANGAN
1886—1967

and of
PATRICIA, Wife of the Above
1900—1968

“Let us quickly hasten to the Gate of Ivory”

—*Thomas M. Disch*

INALIENABLE RITE

He tried to be inconspicuous. Around him the crowd murmured with anticipation, and John Burrows did the same, muttering something under his breath, straining for a better view of the hospital entrance.

Snow drifted down in the still air and suddenly became city slush beneath the tires of passing traffic. John looked over the crowd that lined the walkway and found the faces of Gring and Harris on the opposite side. They were far back, almost in the shadows. They blended into the anonymous mob that chattered and shoved and mugged for the videotape remote unit set up at the curb. The TV men had already gotten their interview with Samuelson inside, out of the biting cold, so the camera crew was just waiting to get a filler shot of him leaving. They looked bored.

There were a few flashes from strobe cameras, the crowd noises rose, and the big doors of the hospital opened. Out came a burly, tanned man of about fifty, escorted by some faceless officials. John looked at Samuelson's expensive coat and perfect set of teeth and felt a spasm of rage so powerful that his knees trembled with weakness.

The bastard even has the nerve to do that, he thought as Samuelson waved at the crowd, giving the two-fingered V sign.

John kept his face a frozen mask. They were to do nothing here, make no move to tip their hand. Instead, he memorized Samuelson's face and movements, watching the man carefully as he walked with a slight swagger to the waiting limousine. There was a pause while the 3D men staged a little ceremony of Samuelson shaking hands with the director of the Project, and then with one last

wave to the commoners he bent and stepped into the limousine.

John worked his way out of the crowd, which was breaking up. He passed a man who was saying to his wife, "Well, I'll be able to say I saw the first one, right when he first came out . . ."

Gring fell into step beside him as he reached the curb a half-block away from the hospital. Harris circled away, so all three wouldn't be seen together. A battered Rambler nosed out of the slow lane and stopped. John nodded to the old man at the wheel, Turner, and he and Gring got in. Harris came a moment later. No one said anything for a full minute as the car pulled away, following the red glow of the limousine tail lights.

Harris, in the front seat, coughed and said, "Looked real good, didn't he?"

Gring nodded slowly. It was clear he was taking it easy, trying to pace himself to what he knew lay ahead. "Yeah," he said, "almost think he's been to Florida instead of lyin' up in a bottle for three months."

Turner looked back from his driving. "It's not a bottle," he said. "It's a tank. Got lots of chemicals and nutrients and air hoses in it."

"Papers said he didn't even know it was three months," Gring said quietly. "Said he thought he'd just been asleep overnight or somethin'."

"The *News* said it was like being back in the womb," John said. He was watching the tail lights ahead and didn't notice that Gring and Harris turned to give him a long, steady look.

"Yeah," Harris said at last. The conversation was ended.

"He's going left," John said to Turner. The old man nodded and slowed to make the turn. John watched the neon lights play on Turner's skin as they passed, heightening the yellow pigmentation. Turner's hands were rough and closed awkwardly on the wheel, like a bulky pair of gloves. He had been a manual laborer all his life and had no savings or medical insurance; he couldn't afford the kidney treatments that would save him and so had been

reduced to taking the stopgap help the public clinics would give him for nothing.

"He was supposed to go to the Hilton, wasn't he?" Harris said suddenly. He broke into a fit of coughing with the last word, almost retching.

"Yeah, that's what the papers said. He's supposed to go to a party put on by those jet set people, welcoming him back. Why?" Gring said.

"If Samuelson's going by the most direct route, he shouldn't have made that last turn," Harris said weakly. He was still recovering from the coughing.

"Maybe the chauffeur doesn't know the best way," John said.

"Doesn't seem likely," Turner said, hunching over the wheel to peer out the front window.

John's bowels loosened in fear. He had to clutch inwardly to stop them from moving, and his feet suddenly grew numb.

"If Samuelson's plans have changed—" Gring said.

"Then we'll change ours with him," John said. In an instant the spasm of weakness had swept away, leaving only a slight trembling of his hands.

The other men nodded silently. The Rambler stayed a block behind the limousine, tires hissing on wet streets. The warm, musty smell of the car's heater gradually seeped into the back seat.

"We'd better be ready," John said after a while. He bent over and opened the lid of a long box sitting on the floor of the car.

"Right," Harris said. "He's going away from the Hilton now. Might stop anywhere."

Together John and Gring lifted out two rifles, war surplus, wrapped in cloth. Gring took one, and John passed the other to Harris. Both men checked the bolts, clicked the clips in and out to be sure they were properly lodged, and worked a round into the chamber.

John took two .38 revolvers out of the box and closed it. He leaned over the front seat and put one on the seat next to Turner, and kept the other for himself.

"You okay?" he said to Gring. The other man was gaz-

ing distantly out the window at the gaily lit shops which were passing by, cradling the rifle in his lap.

"Sure," Gring said. "Got a few butterflies, but the ticker isn't actin' up on me. I'll be—"

"Hey!" Harris said. And coughed.

The tail lights ahead flared red.

"Get ready," John said.

"He's turning again," Turner said. "Slowing down, too."

"What's in this part of town?" John said.

"Apartment houses, mostly," Harris said. He was wheezing with excitement, and his words came out as whispers.

Turner reached over and patted the gun next to him to be sure it was there. They followed the limousine another block at twenty miles an hour. Thin snow swirled under metallic blue street lights.

The tail lights blazed again.

"This is the middle of the block," John said. "Where's he going to—"

"See that driveway?" Harris said weakly. "Back drive to an apartment house. Maybe he owns one here."

"Yeah, they're going up it," Turner said.

"Perfect," John said. "It'll be almost a blind alley, nobody to see."

Turner turned and they went down the drive, picking up speed. Ahead the limousine was slowing in front of the brilliant white entranceway to an apartment house. There was no one else in sight.

The limousine pulled over to the left and stopped. John saw that when he opened his door he would have the clearest shot when Samuelson came out.

"Time it right," he said rapidly to Turner.

The chauffeur got out and bent over to open the back door. Turner hit the brakes just as the door was opening. The screech made Samuelson turn his head just as he stepped out.

John opened his door and was out and on his feet before the Rambler stopped. He brought his hand up, turning sideways to the target, just the way he'd practiced the

week before on the firing range. Over the sights he could see a sudden surprise wash over Samuelson's face, his mouth start to open, and . . .

John fired. The gun bucked in his hand, someone cried out, and one of the rifles boomed in his right ear.

Samuelson was down, gargling blood onto the gray sidewalk. Gring fired, and John could see the bullet hit and twist the body, pitching one of Samuelson's elegant Italian shoes into the gutter. Then John was scrambling back into the Rambler, barely noticing the chauffeur as he ran through the apartment house doors, watching Harris vault back in, turning to see an open door where Gring should have been.

"Gring!" he said. John tumbled across the seat, still holding the .38, and saw the rifle lying beside the crumpled body. He scrambled out.

"Nobody shot at us," Harris said next to him. "How—"

"His heart," John said, picking up the rifle. "The excitement, I guess." He shivered, and his bowels threatened to turn to water again. *We got him*, he suddenly thought, *we got the son of a bitch! The one death they couldn't protect him from.* And in one instant he knew he would not allow his body to beat him this time, he would not go limp on the pavement and mess himself, nor surrender to the moist leukemia death that was waiting for him.

"Hey!" Turner cried. John and Harris turned to look. Three men were coming out the doors of the apartment house. One of them carried a pistol.

John leaned over to pick up Gring and Harris said, "Leave him go. No time."

"You're right," John said, and dived back into the Rambler. Turner stepped on the gas and they swerved around the limousine. The man with the pistol fired once and didn't hit anything important, and then they were around the curve and out of sight.

John lay on the back seat and let the waves of relief wash over him. He felt infinitely tired, weak beyond tolerance, and yet he was happy. They had gotten the bastard. Samuelson was one of the world's first immortals,

a man who had bought eternal life with his millions. And Samuelson was dead.

They were all revenged. Turner and his failing kidneys, Harris with cancer of the lungs, Gring dead of a heart spasm. Every dying man who despised the Samuelsons, the rich who could afford the new treatments. Every one would be revenged.

Gring was lying back there, but the police wouldn't learn much from his body. He was just another man without money or relatives or hope. There was nothing on the body to lead the police back to the other men.

The only unusual thing about Gring was his heart disease. It was rarer than most, but not much. Gring was a nobody with a worsening aortic tremor. Another sick man. And there were millions of sick men, everywhere.

—*Gregory Benford*

ORION

Betelgeuse and Bellatrix are the shoulders; Saiph and Rigel the knees. The three stars of the belt that seem perfectly matched for brightness are at different distances from Sol ranging, I think, from 300 to 500 l.y.

Betelgeuse is Alpha Orionis; in the 19th Century it was the brightest star in Orion, but it faded; now Rigel is.

Bill said, "Aren't those the Pleiades in that area where his cock is?" (The sword.) Seeing that area like a painter, the muddy brightness highlighting a bulge in the material. Catullus: "Pertundo tunicamque palliumque." The Pleiades were out over Fillmore St.

He was loved by Artemis and she killed him. Either because he loved Merope, or, because he was beloved of the Dawn for his beauty . . . she did it for all the gods. Or Apollo was jealous—he asked her to take aim at "a distant point . . . in the sea." Or he was stung by a scorpion. She lifted him up, bodily, into the sky. (She put the scorpion in the sky too, but on the other side, so they'd never be above the horizon together, again.)

The cock area is muddy even on clear nights. It is a brightness, a contour—not sharp and starlike. This is because of the Great Nebula, 26 light years across and 12 to 1600 l.y. away, roiling, hot clouds of hydrogen, nearly vacuum. Of two photographs taken of a sector of the nebula at Lick (Mt. Hamilton), 1947 and 54, the later shows two new "objects." The process is thought to begin because of minute disparities of gravitational attraction—hydrogen atoms come, flock together—and continue till fusion starts—and energy streams from the center. Baby stars.

Camille Flammarion called Orion "the California of the skies."

—George Stanley

THE VIEW FROM THIS WINDOW

Whoever I am and wherever I came from, I am certainly not going to tell you.

I really spring from a people who embed sapphires surgically in their foreheads, whose lips are set with metal foil, who have no teeth, no hands, and no eyelids, and who yet exclaim over the lost treasures of the past, "How beautiful!"

On the other hand, I materialized in a laboratory rented from the Harvard Special Researches Project and had to be taught the words for bed, table, chair, while they took my knife away from me, and looking warily in each other's eyes, we wondered which was the less civilized.

Both the past and the future are fairly comfortable.

With the advent of the cold weather this University shrinks into itself, with only a few hardy atoms like myself still darting past the bunches of people peering doubtfully from the windows of the warmest buildings. I'm not naturally used to the cold, but I've found there's no harm in it, and I purchased a motor scooter from a former student. This is the joy that only an amphibian can know: waving to the windows of faculty offices in the cold, dark-blue evening as I quit work, indicating by my grin and the clatter of internal combustion engine that I could do as well as they could if I wanted to. But (as I always say) I've given all that up. I do not think they could stand my bedroom, either; I've schooled myself to live at sixty-two degrees in surroundings I'm afraid some of my faculty friends would consider rather bleak. And I get paid more than they do for talents that amount—after all—to very small potatoes indeed.

It is delightful to ride home on a winter's evening—better still, to ride somewhere else, past the lights burning

in office buildings and the cathedral-like windows of the library, past students straggling home to supper in twos and threes, bundled so against the cold that they can hardly recognize each other, past windows where the sound of singing issues with the lights, perhaps to pass the track field or the tented gardens of the School of Agriculture, or to end up with a quick walk around the artificial lake, freezing in the fruitful dusk, and down into the Student Union.

This is an L-shaped box of glass and steel built over a waterfall; it lights up like an aerodrome at night, and you can even sit in a glassed-in patio and watch the waterfall go by at the level of your knees, but there is no other place so close to the night: a vast hall of black mirrors. Nobody pays the slightest attention. The furniture is plastic. It's even a little chilly. There is, as in every building, a winter barricade of choked closets, melting galoshes, books, boots, cigarettes, dirty linoleum; then there is a Reading Room, a room for listening to music, offices upstairs, a small library, the Student Theater (downstairs) and, extended out over the lake, the cafeteria. And nobody knows—nobody knows!—there is nothing like this in the world outside. But I'll still be here in four years.

The food is abominable. I took my tray into the patio, where the spill makes it possible to read or play cards. There at the glass wall was Bill Beam, so I joined him: a thin, eager, effusive fellow, already a little bald at thirty, hates student actors, an increasingly bad director. We watched the waterfall slide past us into the darkness, making the kind of conversation that sounds terribly witty when you overhear it at eighteen; behind us a couple was kissing in the darkest corner of the patio. Bill put his hand on my knee and I took it off, all as usual; he looked for a moment a little older than he was. He is trying to get a permanent appointment and probably won't make it. The water slid past.

"Ah, I've got a miracle now," he said. "A good actor. How's the alumni business?"

"Well, better than the drama business," and I smiled. He leaned over the table.

"Be a good girl."

I shook my head.

"Well, goodbye," he said, sighed, stared for a moment out where the lights lit up the bank and the pool below, and then got up and left. They do things like this in a luxury hotel: the lights make the scenery outside seem part of the building, but go outside and all you see is a building with lights attached to it. From the outside it is very clear what belongs to what. The boy and girl in the corner had left off their passionate and virginal embraces, so inconclusive as to be almost embarrassing, and now he put on his glasses and led out a little girl with long hair. *Celeste Aida* came from the cafeteria jukebox. Soon I will have to go, too; first back to the room to get my music books and then to a rehearsal of the faculty group for medieval music: an empty classroom, smelling of chalk-dust and steam, familiar faces delicately reddened with the cold and (blossoming unbelievably between the ceiling and floor!) the music—of which I have two solos, each more than six hundred years old.

Where else can one do such things?

I work from ten to four, with excursions. In an isolated university like this there is always something new: new books at the store, new records, plays, concerts, readings, films, special groups, and when anything comes, everybody goes; I pick myself up in my room, throw on my coat (the smallest of necessities), turn out the lights, and take off. One never knows whom one will meet on jaunts. This one took me to the library for Robert Chambers's *King in Yellow*; there a girl who works part-time in my office stopped to tell me about a new film group. We lingered, staring drugged over the prospect that opens beyond the library, winter and summer: a steep slide down to the frozen lake and then beyond, hill upon hill, endlessly ranging to the last remains of an early sunset. An evening looks like this, layer upon layer, while it is still new; she sighed in her youth while I only looked at it and laughed—"in my wicked old age," I said. She was very polite. "You'll like the films," she said. I went on without my bad literature; she turned in to study; across

the quadrangle lights were springing into existence in unused classrooms as earnest young bands of partisans prepared to remake the age. But student society is the only society, for all that.

I dropped my coat with the others (half in the closet, half on the floor), dodged under the projector, and settled in a back seat. On my left was the boy I had seen the night before in the Student Union. It was a mole-colored, bundled-up, utilitarian crowd, on the whole, with a few pink cashmere sweaters and one girl—only one—in an avant-garde black vinyl dress that crackled violently as she moved, with a sound like pistol shots. Most students dress down. The films were short: taken through cheese-cloth, or upside down, or out of focus. All silent except for the ripples of an intent and reverent audience. Michelangelo's *David* upside down. The Parthenon. A corps of ballet dancers leaping silently. Worse things than heart may bethink. The boy next to me stirred and coughed. On the screen a girl in a raincoat came down the library steps and walked off with a young man. Gibbons and chimpanzees swung from branch to branch dreamily, perfectly, silently, as if on prearranged, oiled hinges. The movies were over.

The room turned white—I mean light; I blinked a little. People were getting up. I hesitated, holding back, half afraid (the evening is now over) until I saw Bill Beam outside the door, trying to look over people's heads. He waved when he saw me, wriggled between the perverse human objects that slowly moved this way and that, trying ineffectively to clear the entrance, and took my arm.

"That's my actor," he said, pointing to the boy who had sat next to me, "and here's my love," and he kissed me on the cheek out of sheer good humor.

The three of us, like the three men who looked for death under a tree (and found it) in Chaucer's story, went to a little place just outside the campus and I watched the specimens of life go by outside the window. The regular *little place* between the arty photographer's and the drugstore-laundry: one street, almost too steep to be

walked, hooked onto the University like a vermiform appendix. Bill talked against the administration and so did I, with Bill's young friend keenly watching the both of us as if we were revealing to him the Manual of Arms or the recipe for gunpowder, storing it all away. I assume he thought we knew what we were saying.

Bill put both hands on his temples and pulled at the skin on either side as if he wanted to ventilate his head.

"I cannot," said Bill, "stand this light."

And he went off into a long digression, comparing it to the light used in train stations, bus stop waiting rooms and other graveyard places, calling the circlets of neon on the ceiling the lights of Hell, the letter that killeth and the garland of the bride of the future.

"You won't be able to wear your glasses on the stage," he added suddenly, to his child discovery.

"I won't," said the boy.

"How will you see where you're going?" I asked.

"Mr. Beam will install some neon arrows on the stage floor," he said, smiling and coloring slightly with his own joke. Bill laughed. The boy took off his perfectly round-lensed steel-rimmed spectacles, the spectacles of a revolutionary idealist who carries radishes in his pocket when visiting rich friends at dinner, and showed us his naked face.

"I've got to go," said Bill suddenly. He stared absently across the room for a moment, over our heads. I half got up; then he said, "No, no, you stay," and marched down the aisle between the booths, getting smaller and smaller in perspective until he was only a dot on the horizon. The linoleum between the booths shone wickedly, like a sea. I said, "I suppose I must go, too," and then remained, playing with the spoon of my coffee cup, making coffee trails on the inside of the saucer, laughing suddenly when the boy gave me a theatrical look, a myopic stare: radiant, deliquescent, and totally blind, instantaneously blooming and collapsing like the field of some arcane electromagnetic device. I said, "But I do have to go," and we discussed for a few minutes which way he was going and what he was going to do and which way I was going and

what I was going to do—the kind of idiotic conversation you get at four in the morning at the end of a party, when of six people left over one wants to go to sleep, one wants to see the sun come up, one wants to go on a ferry ride, and so on. He said, “I’ll walk you.”

We slid out of our seats and performed the Paying Money ritual at the door. Outside the moon had risen. He told me two things on the way home: his age and the name of his play. He also said quite candidly, “Mr. Beam is a failure, isn’t he?” and then he told me his name, but I didn’t remember it: Alan Something.

In the morning I burrow under the blankets, even my head; the first thing I see is my toy globe of the earth, lit up blue from the inside and revolving slowly in a forest of house plants. The cold is extraordinary. If I get up, I have to be slapped and drenched black and blue till I am dressed: every cranny mortared, neat, slick, and tight. I have a tilted, standing, full-length mirror, worn Persian carpet, pillows on the floor, old desk, odds and ends. I go out as soon as the exposed hot-water pipe begins to warm the room, eat out always, and walk to work uphill, either in a slamming wind or what we have half the winter: before the sunrise unnaturally light and still, with not a ruffle in the stone buildings anywhere, only the heat draining and draining out of you through four layers of clothes and the feeling that all the air has been collected and put away during the night. The noon sun shines on long, shiny sheets on my desk: galley proofs finished in caked clay, a nest of spaghetti snakes. In the afternoon there are stray irradiations; then, after centuries spent advancing over the rubber tile floor, the sun sinks, the clock strikes, and I am finished with *my job*.

I went to the student theater.

I said “It’s Alan—?” and he told me. He had on an overcoat with a velvet collar, very, very shabby, like a European, a young-old ballet master. He said, “For first nights, with my father.” I fancied for a moment telling Bill *I’m falling in love with your protégé* and how he would like that and laughed to myself. We walked around the

artificial lake on a path that sloped from both sides and froze in the middle, all gravel, ice, and benches turned upside down to avoid the snow. It was all bare now. The dusk came on gradually, showing up light across the lake and dissolving the sky, turning everything dim. I thought I saw someone coming to light the floods on the waterfall, and I asked the boy but he said, "No, no, I can only see you," touching his spectacles and then putting both hands in his pockets, glancing down brightly. It was getting very dark. We climbed out on the concrete wall opposite the Student Union, and at that moment the building lit up like a box and the scenic effects were turned on; my companion lost one of his gloves into the waterfall, said "Damn!" and threw in the other; and I watched them as they shot down, one catching up with the other, sticking up a thumb for a moment as they turned around, and disappearing. The thumb was only half there. "You need new ones!" I said. We could hardly see our way now. He leaned over the waterfall, lying along the concrete embankment, for a few minutes more; then he got to his feet and we started back. In front of the theater we met a little girl with long unruly hair, whom he introduced to me, saying gruffly, "I have to take her home." They stood before me, side by side like a couple from some other species: she bundled in her plaid coat and knee socks, her face barely showing, and he with his bare hands. He put one arm around her. I felt like saying—I had said—I almost said—don't be affected; get gloves. Then the wife of the Chairman of the English Department grabbed my arm and took me inside, talking the very devil about the play and seating us in the middle of twenty other women who were wearing the same little black dress. For the next quarter of an hour I felt on the back of my neck the same soundless, repeated, dissolving blow, over and over, as if I were remembering and forgetting something startling. The wife of the Chairman said to me, "Do you see it?" and pointed out a shocking person in purple velveteen and beads made of hemp or straw*or cobblestones. "Good Lord," she said humorously. The curtain went up, and I still could not remember it, except for something entirely mythological

that reminded me of Bill Beam: don't hurt your hands.

That night at a party held after the theater, right in front of the buffet table, I put my arms around Bill and said, "I'm falling in love with that little bby," and he said, "Come to our rehearsals."

But I didn't go.

I met him weeks later on a gray Sunday afternoon in back of the library, under a welter of leaden cloud and leaden sunshine, a sort of mixing bowl in the sky, like those furnaces where metals are heated and refined by induction currents only. He said "What've you got?" so I gave him the original play I had gotten from Alice Hen-nick, the Drama Department secretary, and he dropped onto the bench next to me and began reading it. I looked—I did not look at him, but down the dry slope to the lake and wondered anew what we had done to deserve living as we did, and seeing what we saw all around us on the plains of Heaven. I felt rather silly. He looked up, said candidly, "This is awful," and went back to reading. I laughed. I said, "Are you poor?" and then had to shake him lightly to get him out of that terrible play, repeating it and watching him look up again, blush slowly and deeply and shake his head. He frowned and hesitated, collecting himself, with his eyes on the manuscript; then he said—still looking at it—"I thought you might be at rehearsals."

"I've wanted to," I said, and then I added "Did Bill—" but he was riffling the pages of the play as if looking for something; he murmured "Bill?" abstractedly, and I said, "I think I *will* come." He looked through it some more, anxiously or angrily, and then seemed to give up on it with a short, sharp sigh. He handed it back to me. "I'll come tonight," I said. "And I'll watch you." He smiled, apparently delighted in spite of himself. "I've been wanting to," I said and held out my hand, to shake like good friends, manly fellows, et cetera, but he took my hand and—as they say in the romances—put it to his lips. I smiled and nodded, very friendly. After he had gone I sat on for a few minutes, drawing the edge of my glove between my teeth and wondering whether it was going to snow, how

long it took the lake to freeze, why an associate professor has no chance of tenure for three years. Real questions. His hands are slight, strong and square, which is totally idiotic, "oddly childish," as somebody once called mine; and we both belong to that race of neat people who grow up early and stay young for a long, long time, far beyond the age when the huge blooms of bone and muscle of which this place is so full will be saddened, fat and old. I believe he is seventeen.

If it were not so funny, I couldn't see how I will be able to bear this.

I dressed up before I went to the theater, looking at myself in the standing mirror in my room full of crazy things, but without the light on, for the sunset came in the windows. The cushions on the floor were blood-red. I dined at the Faculty Club with a friend and tried to read or talk in the lounge, but a fatality seemed to attend every topic we brought up or picked up; all the impressions of the University I had ever had kept presenting me, like the works of some gigantic and delicate clock, with the same thing, so that I finally said I had to go. But I sat there half an hour after she went, feeling one shock after another of lateness and telling myself I must get up; the girl in the vinyl dress passed through the lounge and I said I had to get up; and finally Bill Beam found me there and took me backstage. From the box office to the backstage entrance there is a sort of labyrinth, and in this passage he tried to kiss me, with all the *expertise* of a grown-up man, sliding his hand underneath the front of my dress; and I let him because I liked it. I stood still, pinned in a corner, with my heart pounding. I said, "No, no, that's enough; somebody'll come." He said, "Why are you so pretty tonight?" and I said—but I forget, something about giving him courage to face the little monsters. He shook his head. "Yes, I hate them, don't I!" "All but one," he said.

A group of girls was singing in a chorus in the stairwell, dressed in ribbons and aprons as if they were going to play a travelogue of the Balkan countries; we passed them. I saw legs folding and straightening like pocket rules

where the dancers went up and down in a corner, holding on to the banister. "This theater!" said Bill. The shop and greenroom were combined in one. At one end somebody had opened the double iron doors (the back wall was covered with old flats twenty, thirty feet high) and two students were carrying in long, swaying boards; outside it had begun to snow. Painted faces rushed past me, elongated, flattened, with white lines drawn under and above the eye to make eyes a foot long. Someone was sitting with her head thrown back at the long shelf that served for a make-up counter while someone else operated on her face. A gust of wind blew snow in through the iron doors and unsettled the singing girls; one stood up in her ribboned petticoats and looked over the banister while the operatee at the shelf sat up and waved to me. The whine of a circular saw began in the shop area. Under the writhing mulberry lips and the fright wig was an old friend with whom I chatted, in the middle of this hothouse, while the big iron doors opened and shut (someone was apparently unloading a truck) and snow blew in from outside. It was unpleasantly tropical by the mirrors. I went over to the doors and watched a set piece coming in, some kind of golden throne or wagon covered with gold and white crepe flowers. Outside the snow fell from a vast, dropping hush; I could see the edge of the wall and a few feet of courtyard, already white. The buildings would be half blotted out in the quadrangle. I turned back; I saw a section of colors, faces, backs, in a pie wedge like the corner of a garden full of blooms. There he was. One side of his face was painted blue, for some extraordinary reason.

"Do you—" I said, "Oh, do you—!"

But I didn't.

He apologized for not being all blue.

He sat down on a prop step under a high, skinny-Minny window; putting out one hand, he helped me to sit, too, and then he commenced staring at me severely, very severely indeed, as if it had come into his head that I needed correction. I wondered if I had unconsciously been telephoning him and then dumbly hanging on the

line, breathing hard, for he seemed to be getting that kind of call: nobly concentrated, frowning, having been interrupted in the middle of Western Philosophy 101—"What's that? What do you want? *Who is this?*" and the cozy rasping at the other end. Our heads were so close that anyone would have thought we were talking. I was just about to venture on a few commonplaces when the overture struck up outside—very Graustarkian, very gay—with relief he rocketed off his seat, with a mumble which I did not catch, and toward the stage door. I, carefully composing my face lest I should cry and somebody should see me, tingling with shame from head to foot, skirted the wall and made my way out into the house, standing for a moment in back of the heavy door and looking through the thick little submarine window, and then pushing at it and going in.

The curtain had just risen. The girls were picking daisies. Soon a mountaineer came in and began to sing; then they all ran off. I lost the thread after this. The orchestra was going rather badly. It seemed to be a folk play; there was a wedding in a village square and then a scene in a forest. A friend of Bill's assistant, a very nice girl, came up and whispered to me that somebody could give me a ride to town during the intermission; did I want to come? I said I would. On stage the University dancers were dancing amid the tree-trunks of a pine forest. There was thunder and lightning and the dancers vanished; through the tree-trunks appeared a spectral castle, bathed in green light. In front of this was Alan, advancing toward the audience. The castle was a projection; now it shrank visibly and still he walked forward, walked without moving a step, as the castle dwindled away and silhouettes of trees crossed it. The trees faded into transparency and behind them appeared starlit meadows, mile upon mile; still he glided forward as if under water, expressionless, untiring, inhumanly remorseless. There was a burst of applause from the few people in the audience. The curtain was down.

I was alone in the car, waiting for the driver, when he thrust his arm through the open car window and grabbed

my hand hard, breathless and shivering as if he had been running. He said calmly, "You haven't seen the whole thing." He was in his shirt sleeves.

"I was doing *marcher sur place*," he said, "and I wanted to talk to you, but they said you'd left. The last performance is Saturday. I wanted you to see the whole thing. Bill says there's a party, I wanted to . . ."

Here he opened the car door and got in.

"You've got to see the whole thing," he said, taking my hand. "I want you to. I have to go back. Goodbye," and sitting next to me and holding my hand, shivering violently, he looked at me very seriously, nodded to himself two or three times and got out of the car, letting in a gust of snow and waving to the driver, who had just appeared on the theater porch.

The driver asked me if I were going to the cast party Saturday night.

I said I wasn't.

But I did. He was there with his girl. It was a rehearsal room, bare, with two metal bridge tables in the middle and cartons piled along the sides. I stood with the crowd between us, miserably smoothing my hair and my dress; Bill was hugging everybody; then the two of them saw me and came over, and he said, "You look elegant." "Thanks, dear nephew," I said. The little girl thought that was funny. "The Princesse de Noailles," I said, "wrote to a famous actor at the age of seventy-three, addressing him as '*cher neveu*' and advising him above all *never to follow anybody else's good advice*." He exploded noisily and delightfully, he roared, he said he was going to tell that to Bill and went across the room to get us all a drink. The young lady, who was peering at me in a friendly way from under her very long bangs, said shyly that she thought the play had been very, very good and twisted a rope of pink wooden beads that hung down in front of her unfitted dress. She was wearing black stockings, both for adventure and utility, and probably to look serious, like a sheepherder or a sailor. I said I thought the acting had been good, and she colored a little. I asked her if she did any acting, and she said no but she had thought of it and

wondered if she should try out for anything. He brought back two full paper cups and said Bill was getting "absolutely out of hand." The girl looked shocked and then giggled. I asked her if she would mind lending him to me for a few minutes, as there were some professional secrets I wanted to talk to him about, and she shook her head shyly and eagerly. "She wants to criticize my acting," he said loftily. I led him to another corner of the room, near a water fountain where people kept breaking in between us, where I crossed my arms on my chest and leaned against the wall, leaning forward, too, guarded both without and within.

"Well?" he said quizzically.

"Well, now," I said, and then again, "Well, now, I've done something for you and I want you to do something for me." He looked uncomfortable. "I mean," I said, over the noise that the party made and the noise that my heart made, "that I've done something for you by coming here—and I don't like it, you know, never mind why—and now I want you to go somewhere during vacation with—for me."

"Is Mr. Beam coming?" he said politely. He was looking at the floor.

"No," I said, and then suddenly losing my voice, "I didn't ask him."

"All right," said he, looking straight ahead, both hands in his pockets.

"And I'm giving you the tickets because I always lose them," I said, pushing them into the hand he had barely taken out of his pocket, my own trembling quite visibly. Then we parted. I heard him say to his girl, "Oh, nothing." I caught sight of myself in the glass covering an antique theater poster on the way downstairs: as beautiful as the face of a witch imprisoned in the cave of a mirror, floating over my black dress like some kind of astonishing, disembodied, powdery substance, as beautiful as the lady in the old play, "The Face That Heaven Never Gave Me."

We went to the circus, in New York.

I met him on Eighth Avenue, outside the great arcade; he had come with divine lightness through the crowd, as

if everything were going to fly away; then he said very soberly and politely that he was *very fond of circuses*. He wanted to read the *Burgtheater von Dresden* poster with the sketch of an aerialist on it and the list of performers; he told me that American circuses always opened in the spring; and then he stopped in front of a luggage display with luggage arranged fanwise in graduated sizes like families of recorders: the plain, the cut-velvet, the stippled and the lightweight, every size, from one I could not have lifted to the "overnight bag" that nobody ever buys. "I've never seen that stuff on the street," he said of the velvet. I said, "Didn't you know? Nobody ever buys things in these stores," and he grinned mischievously, holding out his arm, which I took with a slight, smiling shiver. We went through miles of concrete corridors and stairs, I holding his arm lightly and looking up into his face, like the inveterate eater whose guilty cravings make other people sick: bonbons, stuffed prunes, liqueur chocolates, date-nut pie, strawberry-marshmallow tarts. He was lovely. He was telling me about all the circuses he had ever been to. We sat in the first balcony at one end of a horseshoe, overlooking a wilderness of lights and ropes, and when the lights came up and the band began playing, I didn't look at the ring, but at him. He had to put on his glasses. I saw, in his face, no reflection at all of the fake diamonds, the splendor, the peculiar artiness of a European circus, the overwhelming odor of animals and sweat, and under that the smell of blood.

I said, "You like it."

He merely nodded. In the far ring a lady was releasing doves dyed pink and blue, which came back and settled on a sort of wheel she held in her hand. In front of us dogs in collarettes and girls in tights turned somersaults over each other with wonderful vulgarity. I remembered a scrub circus I had seen once in Georgia, in which a bear-trainer had been rather badly mauled, and the slow, regular plunging of the bareback rider's horse around and around the ring—while the man's face was contorted with effort and the sequins on his white jacket flashed and flashed.

"I can't help it," said Alan, and began to laugh. He

turned, leaning on one elbow, and chuckled helplessly to himself. "It's idiotic," he said. I believe this was the moment when a dozen or eighteen clowns were getting out of one car; on the other hand, they may have been setting fire to a house or chasing each other—one a patient and one a nurse with breasts made of red balloons—around the perimeter of the outer ring to conceal the fact that machinery as ponderous as a derrick was being driven out, or dragged out, or rolled out into position. Then a tiger-tamer backed into the clumsy embrace of a tiger. A woman supported on her forehead a pole which supported another woman. People climbed into a pyramid and did modern dance leaps on a board held by those at the top. A tight-rope walker went up a forty-five-degree angle in such skittish, erratic bursts of speed that I had to shut my eyes and dig my fingernails into my palms. The animal acts all followed each other, then the aerialists, then the trapeze artists, all in such a blaze of bad color that I thought I was falling asleep: cloaks and high heels, feathers, elephants' silk coats, very Roman, very strenuous, the machinery right out on the stage, tons of glitter, and yet it was queerly moving all the same.

Princess So-Fa-La was on the high trapeze.

A little white orchid of a woman, she swung near the top of the tent, forty feet above the ring.

Then, like a paper flower someone had carelessly tucked in much too high, she hooked her knees over the bar and swung back and forth with her head and arms hanging down like a doll's.

Then, using pure ballet *pointe*, she threw her head back over the steel bar of the trapeze, pointed her arms straight down and swung serenely back and forth over nothing as if she had been tacked on or pasted, with no support at all but the hollow in the back of her neck, a very slight-looking, elegant Princess, born in the jungles of Burma: delicate, beautiful, and incomparably brave. We all applauded like mad, hoping she'd stop.

And then the lights were on, the performers were gone, the band was getting up to go. It was all over.

In the French coffeehouse he went to look at the paint-

ings on the walls, which I had seen many times before, and at a row of little flags they had in front of a miniature of the United Nations. He came back shaking his head. He said, "Oh, God!" looked at me, looked at the back of the menu, and then looked at me again severely, hooking one finger in his glasses as if he were going to take them off. Then he abruptly began to explain how he had done his role in Bill's play, what he had done with his hands, the miming, all the development that went into it. He said he wasn't satisfied with it. I said I wasn't satisfied, either. Frowning, he asked me if I had talked the role over with Bill.

"No!" I said.

Then he leaned forward, very serious, and said:

Did I think there was any good in the role?

Did I like it?

Did I like him?

Did I think he ought to study acting?

I said yes to all of them.

"Do you . . ." he said, but he didn't finish it; with a kind of all-over shiver and a faint smile he added, "I'm afraid I have to go. I have to catch my train."

"Oh, are you going back tonight!" I said, "But you still have time; see me home to my friend's," and being a good New Yorker, he said he would. In the cab we talked about the Royal Ballet, clouds, housing, everything else. When we got there, he said again that he had to go, but less vehemently this time—he was looking with admiration at the apartment building. It stands half in Chinatown like a gigantic chess-piece with odd-shaped knobs and shelves sticking out of it; the moon was shining on the bare concrete and the bare earth it stood on, and it was a beauty. I said, "Come up and see the inside." He hesitated for a moment.

"Very well," he said finally, word for word, *un caballero muy formal*. "Very well."

My friend—who writes children's books under the name of Aminta—keeps an old maid's apartment, full of dried ferns, chintz throws and "artistic" ornaments: paper toys suspended from the ceiling, shaky heirloom furniture,

old china. Aminta's fireplace is filled with oak leaves. I believe he had never in his life seen anything quite as eccentric; he was standing over the fireplace in his hat and coat with his hands clasped behind his back when he said, "Won't we disturb her?"

"Oh, no," said I a bit breathlessly, "she's in Europe." and slipping the hat off his head like a sleight-of-hand artist, I bore it into the bedroom as he turned round in astonishment. I half expected him to say, "Hey! Give that back!" but when I came back in and held my arms out for his coat he gave it to me docilely, only giving with it a look I could not fathom, turning to a book of sketches on the mantelpiece and examining them one by one. I brought Aminta's cognac from the bedroom and poured out two glasses on her little table: a Japanese lacquered table, heirloom glasses. He joined me on the couch. With the slowness of underwater swimmers we toasted one another and drank, but my hands were shaking so that I could not hold my glass. I put it down and tried to think of something to say, something provocative, something witty, something ambiguous, but not a word came to my lips and instead I found myself loosening the pins in my hair, shaking it down, desperately combing it out with my fingers until it fell clear to my knees, shivering a little and imparting to it the slightest evanescent motion, the slightest stir. I said, with an attempt at lightness, "I'll have to cut it after all." He remained silent. I looked at him, although I could hardly bear to do it, and saw that he was blushing slowly and deeply, enduring wave after wave of some profound and painful emotion; he shrugged a little and put down his glass, then turning to me with the look of a man under a grim sentence of some sort, he put one arm around my back, grasped my wrist with the other, and kissed me hard on the mouth.

He apologized immediately afterward.

Then he started to say something about getting his hat and coat, turned aside, turned back again—grasping me by both wrists—muttered in a low voice, "I don't care if you like it or not!" and kissed me again, so hard that I lost my breath, so hard that I really couldn't stand it. I pushed

him away with a small struggle—I don't think he knew that I wanted him to go on—and tried to open the buttons down the neck of my dress; he helped me, our fingers trembling and colliding with each other; then he repeated the kissing process on the hollow of my neck and shoulder, gluing himself to the swell below that for several hundred heartbeats. He came up a little dazed. He said simply, "I wanted this, do you know?" and then, calmly, "I haven't done this very much." He picked up his glass, looked into it for a moment, and then drank the rest of the cognac; tears came into his eyes. He put the glass down and slipped off his shoes and jacket; I helped him with his tie, a little embarrassed, and pulled off my own dress, and my slip, and shoes and stockings—what a lot of clothes there are! I had carried something in my purse for weeks, out of pure idiot persistence, but he had already taken care of that when we slid into each other's arms on the couch, quite naked, our flesh whispering together as if he were talking from head to foot, my beautiful young male. He went to work blindly, tunneling like a mole, and came much too soon, groaning and jerking with the face of a man on the rack, as if he were felling a whole virgin forest. I held him until it was over. Then, "Oh God, I'm sorry!" he said. I put my arms around him. We lay together on the couch for a while. Then, with a somber face, he got up and went in to make loud and angry splashings in the bathroom, and when he came back in, he wanted to get into his clothes; but I pulled him down next to me and began to frog-march my fingers up and down his spine, then to tickle him delicately and nip him until he grabbed for me, and finally to caress him outright: those parts of us that we don't speak about but that we privately hold the dearest, the loveliest and the best of friends. He took me in his arms again. This time I was excited enough to let go almost at once. I passed out at the climax, crying I don't know what, opening my blurred eyes for a moment on the side of his face and ear that shocked me with their novelty, their exquisite beauty, exclaiming something about "never—never" and sinking back into a faint convulsion, another, hearing him sigh, falling asleep.

He carried me into the next room, into Aminta's double bed, and twice again in the middle of the night decided he wanted more. The last time I was hardly awake; I spread out beneath him in sleep as a huge hand rotated somewhere in me, squeezing my entrails, and the bed roared and overturned once—twice. I wonder that there was anything left of us in the morning. A very feast of unreason.

I woke up earlier than he did and did not at first recognize his face on the pillow except for a kind of immediate trembling movement toward him in my thighs; it was not the same man I had united myself with four times the night before. He was sleeping with his head thrown back and his arms spread loosely to either side, as if in the act of enjoyment. I slipped out of bed and into the living room. On the back of the bathroom door Aminta kept a full-length mirror, and in this mirror I happened to see myself as I went by: the points of my body poking forward, my buttocks trembling lasciviously, completely nude. I felt as if my head had been amputated. I even fancied that there was someone at the outside door and that if I opened it some fully-dressed, passing man would seize me by the naked arm, first bend me backwards over the stair rail, and then throw me violently down on the landing, where I would lie huddled together, my neck broken, my nipples pointing straight up into the grayish air, like some rosy and indecently exposed eighteenth-century engraving or a message in peculiar Morse. And yet waking up to see a man's face on the pillow next to mine is no absolute novelty for me. My head began to ache. I quickly collected my clothes, scattered over the floor and chairs, and held them to my breast for a moment; then I stood and stared around at Aminta's apartment with its racks of magazines, its ferns, its rickety little tables, a spinster apartment so full of things, like a little world or a little shell. It had begun to snow outside, grayly, as if the dawn were merging into an indistinguishable blur, and through the filmy curtains I could see tar-paper roofs, brick chimneys, crooked small walls on the tops of tenements like the Great Chinese Wall seen crawling over

the plains from a hundred miles up. I was hanging by my neck, like the Burmese lady. I stood naked in the middle of the rug, thinking that we would have to go back to the same school, would see each other sometimes by accident at evening affairs, that I really could not stand it. I got into my clothes and sat down on Aminta's couch; then I put my valise by the door, got out my keys, took her notepaper from the wall shelves hung under an illustration for a Victorian fairy tale and wrote on it *Will Not Be Back; Do Not Wait*. I put this on the kitchenette table.

But when he came in an hour later I was still sitting on the couch, my shoes off, my knees drawn up under my chin, shivering.

He smiled slowly, radiating warmth, one beautiful, self-contained, naked young man, his eyes very fresh, a little mussed up with sleep.

"There you are," he said.

And here I am.

—Joanna Russ

GONE ARE THE LUPO

"Dance," say the Master. "Dance, Moomie!"

I are dance. I are dance the dance of morning. In house are two new Master, just come. That day are great fire ship and many new Master come and two Master come in this house and all day are talk what is new on Earth with old Master.

I are dance the dance of evening now. All day are eat and drink and now Master say dance.

New Master watch and open wide mouths and say oh ho ho ho ho. I are dance the dance of night and new Master and old Master say oh ho ho ho ho and are go first this way and that way and shake many way. Many moisture are run from eyes.

"Oh, no," say one new Master and roll on floor. "Oh, you're killing me. Make it stop, Jack!"

"Dance," say Master. "Dance, Moomie."

I are dance the dance of wind. Up and down and up and down and soft and hard and blow and sigh and up and down. New Master both roll on floor and say oh ho ho ho Jack you bastard make it stop.

"All right, Moomie. That's enough," say Master.

I are stop. I are get more drink and bring and new Master wipe many moisture from eyes and sit and watch and drink.

"How in the world do they do it?" say new Master. "Jack, you must have spent all your time teaching it to do that."

"Sorry I can't take the credit," say old Master. "Of course, once we found out Moomies could dance we didn't discourage it any."

"I'll bet you didn't," say new Master and say oh ho ho and roll and knock drink on floor. "You'll have to excuse

me, Jack, but every time I think of that one long leg hopping up and down I just can't help myself."

"How in the world do they balance themselves?" say new Master.

"I dunno. Some way we balance on our two short legs, I guess. Just like they can see out of their one eye as well as we can with two."

Old Master say, "I don't want you to think it was all gravy, though. Believe me, it was some job teaching Moomies to hop drinks without spilling all over."

"Oh, sure. Rough. Real rough." New Master slap old Master on back. "And here we used to pity old Jack, stuck on some stinking planet of Aldebaran."

Other new Master say oh ho ho. "Poor old Jack and his poor old wife and the other poor old pioneers. In the far reaches of space—deprivation, hardship—for the glory of good old Earth."

"Yeah. All the poor 'olds. Livin' off the fat of the land. Native servants."

Old Master say, "Listen, it wasn't that easy. The Moomies didn't just hop up and say 'Hello, Master.' It took a bit of teaching. Believe me. And when it came to things like housework—well, Myra had a job training this one, I can tell you."

"Poor old Myra. Where is poor old Myra, anyway? Where'd she disappear to?"

"I dunno. Headache, I guess. In her room." Old Master say, "More drinks, Moomie."

I bring.

"Well, we'll forgive your reticence, Jack. And applaud your skill in Moomie training. Just so we can each have one for our very own."

"I dunno about that. Not too many of them around any more."

"Jack! Don't tell us you're gonna hold out on your old pals. Old Jack wouldn't do that. Not poor old, good old Jack!"

I bring more drink. I bring cloth and wipe drink from floor. Pale eyes watch many green hand wipe, watch Moomie go and come.

"No, no foolin'. There just don't seem to be nearly as many Moomies as there were two years ago when we came."

"Ah. Race suicide. Look out, Jack. Failure to report to Genoquarters. No new babies, eh?"

"Uh-uh. Never did seem to have babies. Just sort of popped up full grown. Never saw a Moomie that wasn't full grown."

"Well, what then? Eh, Jack? Dyin' off? Earth plague? Mantamination? Look out, Jack. Failure to report to Epidemiquarters."

Old Master say, "I dunno. They don't seem to die, either. Sorta like elephants. Just go off into the swamps and disappear. We tried to follow some, but they just vanished. No trace."

"Ah. Mystery. Case for Spacelock Holmes. Allow me, Jack."

New Master say, "Hey, Moomie! Where do Moomies go?"

Rain are black and many and night are black and one. And night say now and black say now and many say moomie moomie moomie. And many say up and down and up and down say come come come.

Moomie are dance the dance of rain. And morning come and morning are blue. Moomie dance the dance of morning.

Evening are yellow and Moomie are dance the dance of evening.

Wind are red and up and down and blow and sigh. Moomie are dance the dance of wind. Up and down and up and down and blow and sigh and up and down. Wind are red and wind say moomie moomie moomie. Wind say come come come.

Night are black and one and rain are black and many. And many and one say up and down and up and down say come come come.

And it are time.

Moomie are come. Up and down and walk on hard. Walk on hard and walk on hard. And walk on soft. Soft

are many and far. Up and down and up and down on soft.

And now are swamp. Up and down and up and down and foot are wide and rain say come come come. Moomie are come.

And now swamp are soft and soft and deep and deep. And rain say down down down.

Foot are down and hand are down. Rain say down down down and Moomie are down and down in swamp. Foot take hold and hand take hold and many hand are many root.

Then rain are gone and night are gone and swamp are all. Morning are come and morning are not blue. Only warm. Day are warm. Deep under swamp morning and day are warm. Root grow strong. Moomie are stretch.

Many morning and many day. Many warm. Then wind are blow and sigh. Wind say moomie moomie moomie, Grow grow grow.

Moomie are grow. Moomie are green and day are blue and warm. Moomie are grow.

Master say Moomie bring. Say Moomie hop. Moomie are hop and bring. Up and down and up and down and bring and fetch.

Master say, "It could be worse, fellows. I won't deny it. We'll never get rich, but there'll always be enough. Crops just about grow themselves on Moomie. It's a soft life."

"Yeah, man. But what do you mean, 'on Moomie'? You call the planet Moomie, too?"

"Sure. Planet's Moomie, Moomies are Moomie, almost every damn thing is Moomie, even the big trees in the swamps. At least that's what the Moomies call 'em."

New Master are stretch. "Soft, Jack. You didn't even have a lot of names to learn."

New Master say, "Talk about hitting it lucky."

"I never complained, did I? You saw the colonization reports we all sent in. Wasn't a single squawk in any of them, I'll bet. Except maybe when we had the trouble about the Lupos."

"Trouble? No reports of any trouble. Look out, Jack.

Failure to report to Lupoquarters. Hey, that's my drink you've got, George!"

"Wrong, Ed. It's Jack's drink. Here's to good old Jack. And what do you mean about Lupos? Something here that ain't called Moomie?"

"Yeah. Lupos. That's what the Moomies called them."

Old Master are get up and walk quick. Up and back and up and back. "Man! That was really something! Talk about sport. Remember how we used to go out after antelope back on Earth?"

"Antelope? You mean hunting, Jack? All this and hunting, too?"

"Well, goddamn you, Jack. That *was* failure to report."

"Man, that was really something! Antelope just weren't in it. Not with a Lupo. Talk about five feet of greased green lightning. Eight legs that could change direction faster than a woman can change her mind."

"Carnivorous?"

"Hell no. Ain't anything carnivorous here. Moomies eat grass, and Lupos ate fruit off the Moomie trees. But talk about sport! One shot and that was all. You hit 'em or they were gone."

"Well, what're we waiting for, Jack? Get the guns. Let's work up some hospitality, man!"

"Keep your pile damped, boy. Don't get excited. There ain't any more Lupos."

"Jack! What're you talking about, Jack? Not even one little old measly old Lupo? You mean you goddamn anti-conservation colonists didn't even leave one Lupo for us?"

"I dunno. I guess we got our share, all right. But hell, there seemed to be millions of them when we came. Little ones, big ones, whole families of them all over the place. We couldn't have killed all of them."

"What, then? Huh, Jack? More race suicide?"

"I dunno. They had babies, all right. Didn't seem to die, either. Except those we shot. Never saw an old Lupo or a dead one. Natural dead, that is."

"Just sorta vanished. Like Moomies, huh?"

"Just dwindled, but fast. A couple of months we had fun. Then it was like someone had turned off the tap."

A trickle of Lupos, and then none at all. That's when we had the bit of trouble."

Master not say. But Moomie go fetch. Not fast. But voice follow Moomie in kitchen.

"At first the Moomies hadn't done much. Just kind of watched us setting up. When we got the first Lubos they seemed to get uneasy.

"At least that was *some* sign of life. They hadn't offered any help, even when we'd got to a word exchange stage. Just vegetated around. No work, no play, no nothin'. No artifacts, no culture. Most primitive, lazy bunch I ever saw.

"Then all of a sudden, here they were marching on us. Wanting us to lay off the Lupos. It was really funny, all the Moomies hopping up and down. Not even the sense to pick up a few sticks to threaten us with.

"Well, we figured it was about time anyway to lay down the law. Let 'em know times had changed and who was gonna run the show."

"Yeah. We read the report."

"Then you know. It wasn't much. A few blasts and they had enough. After that there was no more trouble, about Lupos or anything else. In fact, the next we saw of the Moomies they came bearing gifts, like Moomie fruit and such, and ready to settle down and be helpful."

Old Master stretch mouth wide, move shoulder up and down. New Master say "Hardly a saga of space. And I still say you coulda left a couple of Lupos for me and Ed."

New Master say, "Anyway, I'm hungry. What's to eat around here?"

"Let's wait a few more minutes. Maybe Myra will feel like joining us. One more drink to whet the appetite?"

"Good old Jack."

Gone are Lupo.

Rain are black and many. Day are many and warm. Moomie are grow up from swamp.

Wind are red. Loud and soft, up and down and up, and down. Blow and sigh. Grow, grow, grow.

Moomie are grow. Stretch out arm, stretch out limb.
Leaf are many and green. Fruit are begun.

Rain and day and wind. Fruit are green. Fruit are grow.
Time are now.

Time are now for Lupo.

Lupo are born. Lupo are run in day, in warm, in blue.
Lupo are grow. Lupo join with Lupo.

Now are more Lupo. Now are small Lupo, now are
new Lupo born. Now are time for old Lupo.

Now are time for Moomie. Now are fruit full and heavy.
Now are fruit fall.

Many are fruit. Many are Lupo.

Now are Lupo eat fruit of Moomie. Fruit are green.
Lupo are green. Fruit are many seed.

Lupo are eat. Wind are blow and sigh, up and down
and up and down.

Lupo are eat. Wind are blow and sigh.

Lupo are eat. Wind are up and down. Wind are three.

Now are time for Lupo. Now are time for Moomie.

Wind are blow and Lupo are dance. Up and down and
up and down. Lupo are turn are turn are turn.

Lupo are fall. Lupo are rise. Rise and fall and turn and
fall and fall and fall. Lupo are still.

Lupo are stretch. Lupo are stretch and change. Change
and change. Lupo are become Moomie.

Moomie are rise. Moomie are dance the dance of new.

Night are one and black and rain are black and many.
Day are blue and day are warm. Wind are red and wind
are blow and sigh. Fruit are many and fruit are fall.

But gone are Lupo. And soon will go all Moomie too.

Master are raise glass high. Master are watch in light.
Master are put to lip.

"Man, this is good stuff! You shoulda let us know you
had stuff like this up here."

"Look out, Jack. Failure to report to Alcoquarters."

Master stretch mouth. Master say oh ho ho.

"I guess we oughta have a little something to eat now."

"Good old Jack."

"Yeah. I think I hear Myra stirring around back there."

Probably be hungry as a wolf. She usually is after one of these headaches."

"Poor old Myra."

"Set the table, Moomie. And you'd better tell Mistress we're ready to eat."

Moomie are fix table. Moomie are put one plate here and one plate here and one plate here and one plate here. Moomie are bring and fetch. Moomie are bring fruit.

Moomie are go for Mistress. Up and down and up and down.

Door are shut. Mistress are still. Moomie are knock and Mistress are still.

Moomie are open door.

Mistress are still and Mistress are stretch. Mistress are stretch and Mistress are change.

Wind are red and wind are blow and sigh and up and down. Wind are three.

Mistress are stretch and change. Are stretch and change.

Mistress are Moomie.

Mistress are rise. Mistress are dance the dance of new.

Master are call. "Hey! Speed it up a little. Tell her the guests are starving!"

Moomie are speed. Moomie are hop and fetch and bring. Moomie are offer fruit, offer fruit, offer fruit.

"Hey, what do you guys think of Moomie fruit? Good, huh?"

"Good is right."

"Hey, Moomie. Dance some more. Dance some more for our guests."

Moomie are dance the dance of morning. Up and down and up and down. Soon will new Moomie come. Soon will new Moomie dance.

Gone are Lupo. Come are Man.

—H. B. Hickey

FIRE STORM

The city lay in the valley, quiet in the late-winter sun.

Captain Maast looked at it through his binoculars, his trained and experienced eyes missing nothing of importance.

The refugees were nearly clear. The route they had been directed to, through a low pass on the northeastern side, would get the last of them away before nightfall. Maast looked toward the pass, but could detect no movement. Refugees were a part of this business he could do without. There were bound to be many casualties among the old and frail. The days were getting warmer, but the wind at night was bitter.

It was better this way, than that they remained in the city. Maast was conservative in his methods.

At his side stood Lieutenant Andreek, his young aide.

Andreek said, "Lieutenant Ruud reports spasmodic resistance in the docks still, sir." Around his neck hung the lead from his headphones, plugging into the large transceiver kit on his back.

"Right."

Maast swung his binoculars toward the docks.

A broad river flowed through the southeastern quarter of the city, and here the former inhabitants had built several shallow-craft docks. In the warehouses adjoining, the invading soldiers had found grain, beer, machine-tools, timber, bales of wool, tires, nylon ropes, electric batteries, sewer-pipes . . .

All these, and a hard-core of determined last-ditch defenders.

A ferocious and bloody skirmish had broken out, and there had been casualties on both sides. At this stage it was vital that no serious damage be done to the city, and Maast had withdrawn the majority of his troops from the

area. Now he had only two hundred men down there, and the situation remained unresolved.

From here, the docks seemed quiet. Four thousand feet above the city, there were no sounds of a fracas.

"Call up Miils," he said to the Lieutenant. "I want to know if there's any news yet."

Andreek worked the tuner on the kit with the long, chromiumed handle.

A voice came through tinnily, amplified through the minute grille on the top of the transceiver.

"Miils, sir."

"What developments?" Maast said.

"The council's still in session, sir. They're taking a meal at the moment, but they anticipate another three hours."

"What about the artillery?"

"It's on its way now. We can't let you have much, but it will be sufficient if the decision is positive."

Maast grunted. "Who's in charge of it?"

A pause. Then, "Taaruk, sir."

"Good."

"Air cover will be on stand-by as of seventy-two hours from now."

"No sooner?"

"No, sir." Respectfully.

"Hold on." Maast turned away from the transceiver on Andreek's back, and lifted his binoculars again. The horizon, a line of grey bleak hills on the opposite side of the valley, was blank. There were no buildings on them anywhere. The edges of the city seemed to follow the natural floor of the valley, but not to expand elsewhere. The city was like a layer of lumpy soup, coagulating in the bottom of an oval dish.

He said to Andreek, "I want an immediate weapons count. Leave the kit with me, and report back."

Andreek said, "Yes, sir."

He slipped through the shoulder-harness, and laid it on the ground. He saluted perfunctorily to Maast's back, and walked quickly to the encampment area.

Maast picked up the microphone.

"Miils."

"Sir?"

"I don't care where you get them from, but I want rocket-launchers. As many as you can find."

Doubtfully, "Yes, sir."

"And a meteorology report for the next eight days." Maast glanced at the sky. "I want to know how long this weather's going to hold."

"Anything else?"

"No. Stay where I can get you, and call me as soon as you know anything."

He snapped off, and clicked the tuner downward.

"Ruud."

"Sir?"

"Get back here when you can, and abandon the docks. We're wasting time there now."

He flipped off the communicator button again, and disconnected the whole kit. With strong arms he lifted it and swung it across his broad shoulders.

He walked back to where his temporary HQ was being erected; a low marquee that would hold him and his aide, and the equipment with which he would direct the destruction of the city.

The tent was about three hundred yards from the cliff-edge where Maast had stood, and he covered the distance in just under two minutes. Pushing past the ordinary soldiers hurrying to get the marquee secured, he lifted the flap and went inside.

"Andreek!" he bellowed.

There was no one inside, and Maast swore. A soldier said, "He's setting up an arsenal, sir."

"Where?"

"Farther along the ridge, sir. He said to tell you."

Maast put down the transceiver kit, and went back into the open air. He looked in the direction the soldier had pointed and saw Andreek still on his way across to where many soldiers were unloading crates from a VTOL craft.

He turned back. "Who's your officer?"

The soldier said, "Major Wuulsen, sir."

"Get him."

The man scurried away, and Maast went back inside the tent. The men outside, evidently spurred by his presence, finished the work they were doing and moved away.

At the back of the tent, Maast found the crate he was looking for and wrenched off the lid.

Inside were many different electronic instruments, neatly stowed and bulwarked against handling damage. Wood-wool surrounded each piece, tightly compressed. Pulling it away, Maast took out the instruments one by one, and laid them on the stunted grass. Up here, where the HQ had been laid, the moors were open to the sky and unprotected, and nothing could grow except this tough, sharp-edged grass.

A Major came in and saluted.

"Major Wuulsen?"

"Sir."

"Major, I want you to form an immediate reconstitution party. Take as many men as you'll need and get down there straight away. You won't have much trouble, the city's in good order."

"Sir?"

"What is it?"

"The council has already given a negative?"

Maast threw aside a pile of wood-wool with such vehemence that the Major jumped nervously.

"No. But I'm working on the basis that it will."

"Yes, sir."

"Listen, I want that city like it was three days ago. I want everything in order. Everything, do you understand?"

The Major said, "Everything, sir."

"I want all the street-lamps on, and as many private houses and public buildings lit as you can manage. I want every power-station working. I want the gas-holders full, the sewers flowing, the radio stations transmitting. Have you done reconstitution work before?"

"Yes, sir. At Malgasster."

"Malgasster. There was trouble there, wasn't there?"

The Major said, a little uncomfortably, "That was where the nuclear power station wasn't primed properly."

"Was that your fault?"

"No, sir."

"I'll give you a day. Report back every four hours. Now get on with it."

The Major saluted smartly, and Maast turned away. He had no time for the protocols of Army discipline.

On an afterthought he said, "Wuulsen. You'd better keep away from the docks if you can. There's a spot of bother there."

"Yes, sir."

Exactly a day later, Maast walked back to the edge of the plateau. Superficially, everything about the city was as he had seen it before. The sun was a little brighter, and there was a steady breeze blowing. Meteorology warned him of a cyclonic depression approaching, but he had at least three days.

The pocket of resistance in the docks had been evacuated after Major Wuulsen's men had returned to camp. They had been unable to prevent the defenders from stoking up the boilers on one of the steam-driven ships moored at the harbor. According to Wuulsen's calculations, the boiler would probably blow in an hour or two. Maast looked down at the ship, lying quietly at berth. In its hold was a quantity of pure potash. If the ship sank, half the docks would go up.

It was already too late to do anything about it.

Lieutenant Ruud and his men had returned to the HQ the previous evening and had taken a detachment of artillery, twelve cannon, almost half of the available weapons, around to a hillside on the northern fringe of the city. Lieutenant Taaruk was in charge of the remaining thirteen cannon on the south side.

More was known about the city.

Its name was Anthus, and it had housed about a million citizens. Its shape was an irregular oval, three miles wide at its broadest, and five miles long. It had two parks, about seven hundred shops and stores of varying sizes, one nuclear power station, seven coal-fired power stations, three oil-fired power stations, and one small hydroelectric

station on the northern outskirts. It had a small system of underground railways, all electrified, and a surface-level system that was hauled by steam engines. In the streets of the city there were many hundreds of thousands of vehicles with internal-combustion engines. Gas, presumably natural, as there was no gas-making plant anywhere in or around the city, was piped throughout the city and many houses, particularly in the industrial sections, were heated and lighted with it.

In addition to this there were two museums, one concert hall, one library, about forty police stations, twenty-seven main fire-prevention stations, and . . .

Maast was not interested.

Wuulsen's men had done a reasonable job on the city. Only in one place had a fire been started by the rearguard of stalwarts that had not been extinguishable. During the night it had burned itself out. Maast looked at it without expression through his glasses. A minor blemish.

Anthus had probably been a good city to live in.

Maast turned and found that Andreek had come up behind him and was now standing quietly at his elbow.

"Where are you going to start, sir?" he said.

Maast looked back at the city.

"I'm undecided. But I think the docks . . ."

"The ship?"

"Yes. It's due to go any time now."

Andreek said, "You still haven't had word from the council?"

Maast lowered his binoculars. "No. I don't want to wait much longer."

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"Wait. What else?"

Andreek said, "I thought you might like to see Ruud's artillery emplacements. We could take the VTOL across the valley."

"Yes. We'll go now."

The VTOL aircraft circled slowly over the docks. It was the only aircraft in the sky, and Maast wished for the

hundredth time that it could be converted efficiently into carrying arms.

The aircraft was a wedge-shaped machine, built for a combination of capacity and maneuverability. In its belly there were four massive down-pointing jets, and alongside, two horizontally-mounted engines provided the forward thrust. As a military machine it was good for little more than carrying a massive load a long way fast. It had no combative use, except, as Maast had once sourly put it, for standing at the hatch and throwing explosives overboard.

Maast had ordered the pilot to hover above the ship, so he could watch its end from the air. He had no particular desire to see Ruud's emplacements, beyond the minor luxury of assuring himself the man would be able to do a competent job when called upon.

Suddenly, Andreek said, "There!"

The deck of the ship was shrouded in white vapour pouring out from many parts of the lower hull. Maast watched keenly. He said to the pilot, "What height are we?"

"Four thousand feet, sir."

"Better take her up a bit more, and back off a little." To Andreek, "How much potash is there in the hold?"

Wuulsen said about five tons."

Maast nodded.

About twelve minutes later, the ship exploded. It had been settling slowly for some time, and water was presumably pouring in through several holes in the walls of the boiler-house. There was a dazzling burst of white-crimson glare, then another. Large chunks of the superstructure of the ship buckled and flew apart.

A blast-wave hit the VTOL, then another. Maast fell heavily against Andreek, who was crushed against the glass of the cabin observation port. They pulled themselves upright, and looked down again. The jets of the aircraft roared violently as the pilot pulled it higher into the air.

The ship began to heel over toward the dock at which it was moored. As it rolled onto its side, an even larger

explosion tore through the ship and completely obscured it from their view.

Maast said to the pilot, "Take me back to HQ. I want to talk to the council."

Wordlessly, the pilot complied and they flew back to their encampment, Ruud's emplacement on the other side of the valley totally forgotten.

Maast walked alone in the late evening. To his right and far below lay the city, blazing all over with light. Lying there, Maast thought, ready for the taking, but untouchable. The smudge of orange flame in the docks, and the thick cloud of smoke, reminded him of what he would have to face if the council's decision were negative.

The explosion of the ship had fired two warehouses adjoining the dock, and one of those had itself later exploded. Now the whole of the area around the docks was ablaze, fed by the westerly breeze that blew through the valley.

It was a start, Maast thought, but premature. Too premature.

This was the difficult period. The condition of the city had to be maintained until the pronouncements of the council were made. Wilful damage by the evacuating inhabitants had to be kept to a minimum. If fighting broke out in the streets between the invaders and the defenders, the invaders had to withdraw or hold back. Ideally not a pane of glass should be broken, not a stone dislodged. If sabotage took place, it must be repaired.

It was a delicate balance between black and white. The only palpable weapon Maast had at this stage was the pending council decision. He knew, as did all the people in the city, that flame and death could pour down on the city in an instant once he had the word.

But if he was kept waiting any longer, he would have to send a fire-fighting crew down to the docks.

His interchange with Miils earlier in the afternoon had been short and frustrating. There was nothing available. No news. No decisions. No more arms beyond what he had, or what was already on its way. No action.

Categorically, no action.

He was now ready, or as ready as he would ever be. Never before, in all his experience, had he been so deprived of weaponry. His only strength was the artillery. The rocket-launchers had not arrived, though Miils promised them by the morning.

In some respects, he preferred to do it simply. There were some of his compatriots who, given the same job, would use nuclear weapons and finish the city off in a few seconds. Others would use nothing but high explosive and take as long as a month over it. His own preference was something of a middle road; to do the job cleanly and swiftly, using tactical weapons of immense conventional power.

In this, Maast felt, lay the greatest satisfaction.

So with twenty-five pieces of artillery, several hundred rounds of assorted projectiles, a toothless VTOL, and a handful of promised rockets, Maast and his men confronted the unarmed city of Anthus.

Maast stopped and looked back toward the camp. The bright yellow beacon had been switched on above his tent!

The council had reached a decision.

He broke into a run and covered the distance between the edge of the plateau and his camp in half a minute.

He rushed in breathlessly, nearly colliding with Andreck, who was on his way out.

"Captain Maast! The council says—"

"What? Come on!"

"Positive, sir. *Positive!*"

The destruct-order. Positive. The city must die. Destruct the city in the way you please. Burn it; bomb it; explode it; even dismantle it, if that's your way. But the city must no longer exist.

Destruct.

Maast moved quickly to his seat, where the electronic instruments he had unpacked the day before were now stacked orderly on their special stands, forming a console from which, if he chose, he could direct the whole destruct.

He flipped a switch. "Ruud!"

"Sir?"

"Arm your weapons."

"Sir!"

"Taaruk!"

"Weapons armed, sir." Taaruk had been doing this almost as long as he, and had probably sensed the council's decision before they had reached it themselves.

"Andreek!"

"Sir?" He was behind him.

"I want you to take over manual control of these instruments. I will direct you verbally from above the city."

"Yes, sir." He slid into the seat as Maast climbed out of it, and took hold of the main controls.

Yours is the hand that flies the bullet, thought Maast, looking at the back of the young man's head as he familiarized himself with the readings on each of the tiny screens. *And mine*, he added, *is the finger that points the aim*.

"Are you going alone, sir?" Andreek asked.

"Yes. You're in control here." He moved toward the flap of the tent.

"I'll be back before dawn. Keep me informed about the rocket-launchers."

"Sir."

Maast was gone.

The fuel-tank of the VTOL was full, and the machine had enough for up to twenty-four hours' constant hovering. Maast lifted the machine off, and headed it out into the valley.

The plateau on which his camp had been made was about four thousand feet above the mean height of the city, and he added another two thousand as a safety margin. Laid out in the cabin before him was a detailed map of the city and a comprehensive list of map references of all the major parts of the city.

Anthus lay below him, blazing with apparent life. Maast was one of the few destructors who had almost an obsessional neuroticism about the cities he was responsible for. Reconstitution crews, such as the one Major Wuulsen had led, were rarely used by other destructors for the work of refashioning an abandoned city.

But Maast retained some old ideals. He was probably too nearly middle-aged for a war like this. He had grown up in a traditional, conservative background of warfare, where destructing had taken on some of the aspects, almost, of an art. Refugees were another symptom of this approach. The policy of most destructors was harsh.

Maast wondered whether any of the refugees were in the hills, watching the city and awaiting its end. Should he, perhaps, have left them to die with it? It was always a decision that worried him.

The VTOL had reached the geographical center of the city, and he aligned his position to the map, so he hovered directly above a main square. This would do. He flicked the controls of the VTOL to automatic, and went down into the destruct-gallery of the machine.

On the floor of the gallery was a padded couch, and he lay along this on his chest. His hands fell forward, in easy reach of a compact range of controls, mikes, and cut-ins. Before his face was the clear plastic port of the gallery, giving him a panoramic view directly down onto the whole of the city.

He settled his head in the forehead-rest provided, and switched on his contact with the camp HQ.

"Andreek."

"Sir?"

Immediate response. The boy was good. Almost as good as Taaruk. Which one would eventually succeed him?

"You are at full stand-by." Not a question.

"Affirmative."

While he had flown the machine to its present position, Andreek had evidently prepared the others. Everything was ready. All he had to do was select targets and weapons, and Andreek would be able to bring them to bear immediately. Anywhere in the city was under the muzzle of his artillery. Anywhere.

He selected a reference, already worked out as a prime target by Wuulsen's team. There was no spade-work left in destructing. Get a good team under you, and a city like this can be set up overnight.

"H.E. Reference 74."

"Confirmed. H.E. 74."

A moment passed, and Maast watched the tiny building far below him. It was an oil-fired power station, a minor part of the city, providing current for the underground railway.

Another moment, and an explosion tore at it.

"H.E. Reference 74 + 1."

"H.E. 74 + 1."

Another two moments, and another explosion.

"Incend. 74 + 1."

"Incend 74 + 1."

Brilliant flames leaped around the building; white light glared, faded, glared again.

"Scatter-incend. 74 + 2."

"Confirmed."

As the second incendiaries fell, a dull, deep-orange ball of flame grew like an ugly tumor in the wreckage of the power station. An area nearly a mile in diameter was now ablaze. Maast shifted his attention. Somewhere else on the periphery.

He selected a densely built area where factories and cheap houses crowded one another. In the center was a cluster of gas-holders. Three scatter-incendiaries were sufficient, and in minutes a blaze half a mile long was roaring.

Again Maast moved his attention, like a dilettante god prodding his creation.

Another power station was exploded (two H.E.s were enough to blast it out of existence and ignite a large area around it), and the dwindling fires in the docks were reignited by a burst of scatter-incendiaries.

His excitement mounting, Maast lowered the height of the VTOL by five hundred feet. An idea was beginning to form in his mind. He was too high. It intrigued, disturbed, and stimulated him. He set the automatic pilot on the machine to start a slow, but very steady, descent. Imperceptibly, the machine began to drop.

He was still too high.

More targets. His hands began to sweat as his fingers

flipped from his talk-control to his reference selector. A pattern of destruction began to form.

On the outskirts of the city, at the very foot of the mountains, the houses of the city sprawled over each other, climbed into each others' back yards, fought for space. Here, his scatter-bombs threw flame like dust. Twisted scars of fire crawled around the edge of the city, joining in places to form long weals of flame, rolling in sluggish patterns toward the still undamaged parts of the inner suburbs.

"Captain Maast, sir!" Andreek's voice broke into his excitement.

"What is it?" he barked, forgetting that he and the Lieutenant should be able to demand equal attention of each other in the course of a destruct.

"Report on the rocket-launchers, sir. They'll be here tomorrow evening."

Maast said, "The hell with that."

And still the VTOL dropped slowly. Maast checked his height as Andreek cut off: 3,800 feet. He was now below the level of the camp.

"Taaruk!"

"Sir?"

"How many incends have you left?"

"About two hundred rounds, sir."

"Good. You, Ruud?"

"A few more."

He chose another reference, almost at random. H.E. and incends flew in, exploded at once. A semicircle of fire lay like an obscene white slash around half the diameter of the city.

"Sir!" Andreek again.

"What?" he snapped back.

"The nuclear power station is almost in the fire-zone."

Maast looked down his list of references, couldn't see it at first glance.

"Give it H. E."

"Confirmed."

An explosion racked at a large complex of buildings

near the edge of one of the shorter tongues of fire. The blast subsided, no flames took.

"H.E. Again!"

"Confirmed."

Another concussion in the building, and flame leaped about it.

His height was down to 3,500 feet.

A large area of the diameter of the city seemed undamaged, and he found the references. There was no major target here: houses, a few factories, schools, fire stations. Irony. He called for scatter-incends, again and again. Patches of flame took, subsided, then caught. His concentration was intense, and he could hardly feel the bucking of the VTOL in the rising thermal gales.

In the hands of one man was the death of a city. The council had decided it must go, and he was the one to do it. His hands trembled with the thought of the indomitable power he commanded.

He was too high. He could see the flame, not feel it. The machine continued to drop remorselessly.

"Sir!" It was Andreek.

"Yes?"

"Where is your location? We cannot scan you any more."

Maast glanced at his height, saw he was approaching 2,000 feet.

"I've moved away to the other side of the valley." He looked down through the port, saw that there was now a complete ring of fire around the city, broken only where the river crept through. "It was getting too warm."

Andreek was silent. Did he suspect something?

"I'm coming back to camp. Prepare for me to land."

A pause. "Confirmed. Sir."

Taaruk's voice came in. "Captain Maast."

"Yes, Taaruk?"

"Can we have more firing references. My men are getting restless. They want to finish the city off."

Maast looked down through his port again, remembering his own first destructs, when he was on a mortar-

incendiary crew. The excitement of lobbing fire-bombs into a holocaust was infectious.

"Fire at will. No reference."

"Confirmed. No reference. *Total destruct.*"

Andreek's voice echoed, "Total destruct."

Maast levered himself off the couch and was thrown against the bulkhead. He hadn't realised, in his prone position, how much the VTOL was bucking in the thermals and vacuum-winds blowing into the city. He climbed up to the control cabin, flipped off the automatic, and flew it on manual.

In the city, the fire was spreading at a terrifying rate, roaring in toward the center. High-force winds, at over a hundred miles an hour, would be blowing down the valley and into the city now, fanning the flames and spreading the fire at an ever-accelerating pace.

He dropped straight down toward the square, aiming for a patch of open space between the buildings. A hundred feet from the ground he slowed his descent and landed the machine with military precision in the center of the square, facing northward.

Meaningfully, perhaps, his back was toward the camp.

He stood up, walked through the belly of the machine and opened the rear hatch. He dropped through onto the ground.

He could see no flames, yet the sky was a terrible yellow all around him. Not far away a shell exploded, probably H.E. There seemed to be no air. Here, at the eye of the firestorm, no wind or breath of air moved.

Buildings seemed to waver before his eyes. He was feeling giddy. Incendiaries exploded nearby, yet failed to ignite.

Was there no oxygen?

A dull roaring he had subconsciously placed in the distance began to grow around him. It began to climb the scale of volume. Was it in fact approaching, or was it just getting louder? He couldn't tell.

He coughed, and dropped to his knees.

A building at the side of the square, a formidable con-

struction of huge crags of masonry, great walls of granite, a fascia of pillars and stone carvings, imploded and crumpled into a flimsy shower of flame. The building to its left disintegrated into an explosion of slow-flying white-hot concrete.

The roaring reached its peak. It could get no louder.

Scatter-incends fell around him, sheeted into white, liquid flame. The VTOL melted and flowed over him.

The fire storm was total. And the destruction complete.

—Christopher Priest

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

(a love poem in pieces)

A.

My earthquake
is ripping apart your shoulders,
every muscle
drops, your skin
breaks like plaster. (your smile
where do I find the soul?)

B.

Your ass is torn,
tits and both sides have been parted
the veins are gone
now the eyes and throat have opened.
Your rib cage is falling!
(do souls have a cock?)

C.

I'm standing across the street
watching your little home go.
I can even see the guts.
(I'm asking
how do you really sound?)
Very carefully
I put your hair in my mouth.
(do you like souvenirs?)

D.

The parts are on the sidewalk.
A loved one, I search the wreckage.
(carefully, what has survived,
do you force me to look?)

carefully, at the eyes
I handle every gut, hold
each bone to the light
I turn

(are you comfortable down there,
are you hungry? Please
let me open your stomach.
Please
get out of these lips.)

—Link

DOGMAN OF ISLINGTON

There are two and a half million registered dog addicts in Great Britain, and this figure does not take into account those owners who live in sin with their animals without benefit of Post Office.

The Galloways, a smart, middle-aged couple living in an airy, comfortable home in North London—in Islington, to be precise—acquired a nice, romping puppy, a cross between a poodle and a terrier, with several other breeds more or less represented. Sandy was a medium-sized dog with a blunt muzzle, pricked ears, curly black fur, a long spiky tail, and feathery black feet.

The Galloway family consisted of Neil Galloway, the editor of the *Islington Post*, the local paper of the area in which they lived. Mr. Galloway had been editor of the *Daily Record* before his collapse and rehabilitation. His wife was Irena Galloway, the granddaughter of Count Ivan Bresnin. She worked in the Russian section of the BBC's External Services. Sophia Galloway, their eighteen-year-old daughter, worked as a photographic model, and Ivan, their twenty-year-old son, was studying physics at London University. Peripherally, there was Belinda Hodges, Mr. Galloway's secretary and right-hand woman on the *Post*—she and Irena were secretary and chairman respectively of the Islington branch of the Campaign for Peace—Piotr Razin, a victim of totalitarian communism, a Sovietologist and a distant relative of Irena's, Samuel, Michael, and James, Sophia's boy friends, and Samantha Jamieson, Ivan's girl friend.

The Galloways and their various friends were reasonably controlled and steady in a crisis—Irena, being Russian-born, was allowed a little latitude. They conducted their personal relationships in a civilized manner. They kept their passions for liberal politics. Whether they had

feelings for those around them and elected not to display them, whether they had no feelings and had never had them, or whether they had once had them and they had shriveled up for want of practice, was uncertain. But the fact remained that when the clinic telephoned Irena to inform her that her mother, the old countess, had died, Irena merely remarked, "Well, she was eighty-four." Neil said, "She had a good run for her money, at any rate." Sophia asked, "When's the funeral?" And Ivan asked, "Who's going over to sort everything out?" Each Galloway in his or her heart of hearts admired the others for their exercise of decent self-control and appreciated his or her own display of same.

Small wonder that this well-adapted and stable unit needed in their midst a warm, simple creature whose idiosyncrasies, instinctive responses and richly human characteristics they could observe and comment on to each other during the lacunae of family life.

So when Sandy I had to be put down and Sandy II was offered to them by a neighbor whose poodle had been molested by an intinerant terrier, the Galloways accepted him gladly. Sandy's temerity, his gambolings, fanatic attachment to a pram rug which he constantly trailed over the parquet in his mouth, his peccadilloes in the curtain-tearing and floor-wetting line, all provided a source of innocent mirth and stimulating mild annoyance to counter the sound sense, enlightened views, and somewhat dismissive conversation of the Galloway family circle.

One breakfast, the strange event occurred. Seven-thirty, and Irena Galloway, cool and fresh in a subtly striped cotton dress, discreetly made up with a shilling's worth of kindly, odoriferous cosmetics, was scrambling eggs in her special way. Neil Galloway, in crisp business suit, read the *Times* calmly. Sophia, in a white ruffled peignoir, was examining her right eye—a shining cerulean orb fringed with jetty lashes—in a tiny magnifying mirror. Ivan, in well-pressed student attire, read the *Guardian*. Through the open back door, the garden, all green smooth lawn and colorful herbaceous borders, was revealed.

Their contemporaries often asked Sophia and Ivan why

they did not move away from home. "But I love them," Sophia would reply out of her ripe, childish lips. "It's mother's borscht," Ivan would say, glinting his slanted Nureyev-like eyes at his hearer. In actual fact, what with the children's car, the crisp ironing, the old family doctor, and the comfortable beds, Ivan and Sophia knew which side their bread was buttered on. No escape required for them from the stuffy living room, the fat cat, the snoozing granddad, and the smell of Yorkshire pudding. In the Galloway home all was modern, hygienic, and lavish.

The group was just putting fork to egg when Sandy burst in through the garden door and stood panting in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Sandy," Neil Galloway observed genially.

"Snuffle, snuffle," said Sophia in Sandy's direction.

"Here is your breakfast, doggy," Irena said agreeably in Russian.

Sandy trotted over to his plate.

"Nice," he said quite clearly in a rasping voice.

"What's that?"

"The dog spoke," said Irena and Neil Galloway together.

"Good heavens!"

"Surprise," said Sophia and Ivan together.

"What did you say, Sandy?" Irena said gently. But Sandy continued to snuffle and crunch down his breakfast.

"Well, well," said Neil Galloway. "That was quite extraordinary."

"I suppose with modified larynxes all dogs could speak," said Ivan.

"God forbid," said Irena.

"It might also be a question of the capacity to imitate," said Neil Galloway. "Young children, after all, learn to speak quite painfully. They're incomprehensible, they can't actually reproduce the sound they hear. But the imitative instinct is so strong that they persist."

"Hurry up, Neil, or you'll be late," said Irena.

The family ate up and then scattered to do the various things dictated to them by necessity and inner need. The

kitchen, bright and clean, was empty but for Sandy, who was waiting.

There was a click as the front door opened and footsteps sounded on the checkered marble of the hall floor. Sandy's ears pricked up; he wagged his tail. The kitchen door opened and in came the sturdy, shiny-faced *au pair*, Valentina. The Galloways agreed that people who worked for you made complications and upset the balance of the family structure if they lived in, so Valentina lived with a Russian family round the corner and came in when the family had gone out. After the death of Sandy I, Irena, full of the rich humanity of the Old Russian land-owner, as she wryly hinted, suggested that Valentina should come and occupy the spare room. Valentina refused, and the family, with some relief, got Sandy II.

Sandy began to jump about when he saw Valentina.

"Kood moornink, Sandi," said Valentina.

"Kood moornink, Walentina," said Sandy in his gruff voice, sounding like a boyar plotting against Ivan the Terrible in an archway.

Valentina began to collect the breakfast things from the table.

"I think," said Valentina carefully, "that I will put on the radio." She reached up and turned on the radio, switching to Radio One.

"There," said Valentina. "The radio is on and music is playing. Now I will wash the dishes."

Sandy wagged his tail. He enjoyed Valentina, who was always doing something interesting and gave him sweet biscuits to eat. They helped each other with their English.

Valentina washed the dishes. "Now," she said encouragingly to herself, "I will collect the dirty laundry from the laundry basket, which is in the bathroom."

Sandy was first out of the door, up the stairs, and into the bathroom.

So Valentina collected the laundry, went into the kitchen, put various items in the sink to soak, placed the others on the drain board, holding up, with a smile of mingled admiration and contempt, Sophia's ruffled petticoat and then replacing it. As she worked, Valentina

named the items she was handling and described her actions to herself in the careful manner of a Linguaphone record. Sandy hung round her feet, pattering backwards as she moved, wagging his tail, lolling his tongue and occasionally growling a word to himself under his breath.

Valentina then tucked her skirt into her drawers, took a bucket from under the sink, took a somewhat worn-down scrubbing brush and a cloth, went into the hall and began to scrub the tiles.

Sandy stood in the kitchen doorway watching as she scrubbed the immaculate squares. Light fell into the hall and onto the stooped figure of Valentina. She put away the bucket and watered the two trees and the plants which adorned the hall.

"Now," she said. "It is time for morning coffee." Sandy jumped up and down and skidded quickly into the kitchen, his oversized black feet sliding on the blue patterned vinyl of the kitchen floor.

Valentina made the coffee from a packet she had brought with her and put it in her special mug. She sat down on one chair and put her feet on another. Sandy sat beside her, flopping his tail up and down on the blue vinyl. His eyes were fastened on Valentina's face.

Valentina eventually looked down at him. "Yes, Sandy," she prompted him.

Sandy's tail hit the floor in giant thumps. "Biscuit," he rasped.

"Say please, please," said Valentina.

"Please," said Sandy in his heavily accented English.

Valentina had in fact cautioned Sandy long and hard against exercising his talent in front of the family. She could not have explained why she did this but, impressed by her sincerity, Sandy developed a strong conditioning against using words in front of the Galloways.

Months passed. And Sandy's small vocabulary expanded. Neil Galloway edited the *Islington Post* and worked late some nights. Irena worked at the BBC and on the Campaign for Peace with Belinda and attended cultural events at the Anglo-Soviet club with her relative,

Piotr Razin. Sophia was photographed and went to parties, dances, and balls with Samuel, Michael, and James. Ivan worked hard at the University and went about with Samantha Jamieson.

The Galloways' regular monthly dinner parties also took place. On one such evening the guests were Belinda, Neil Galloway's right-hand woman, Irena's relative, Piotr Razin, two of Sophia's friends, Michael and James, Samantha Jamieson, Ivan's girl friend, Nigel Hogarth, poet and publisher, and old Doctor Nugent.

Irena's dinners were known throughout the length and breadth of Isington and greatly looked forward to by all those invited to them. Five courses, ground, pulverized, and sieved—if Irena could have made salt by grinding two other ingredients together, she would have done so—and the guests were ecstatic. With each course—borscht, Albanian cured fish, *Tête de Veau*, an Indian pudding and Greek cheese, followed by those little Serbian savories for which Irena was so famous—Irena described the trek to Canonbury, Bethnal Green, and Harrow for rare and exotic ingredients. The guests fell about with mingled appreciation and guilt at merely devouring the fruits of such labor. Meanwhile the conversation ranged intelligently over the atrocities of the war in Vietnam, the color bar in England, and a nasty rape case reported in the park nearby. Valentina carried things in and out and was jested with gaily in Russian by Piotr Razin. She replied with the bright smile of one reared in a small village where it does not pay to offend anybody.

Fainting with food, liberal principles, wine, and the raptures they had gone into over their food, the guests rolled into the living room. The french doors at the end of the room were opened on to the garden. The floor, the grand piano, the table shone like mirrors.

"Piotr will sing," announced Irena simply.

She played the piano while Piotr sang Russian songs both grave and gay.

After the recital, man's inhumanity to man and other topics were again discussed.

"I felt," said Nigel Hogarth, "that Melanie's unconscious intention was to attack my ego at its weakest point."

"It's extraordinary," said Doctor Nugent, "how few women understand their own bodies."

"The roots of aggression," said Neil Galloway, "are with the primitive."

"But," said Irena, "xenophobia is a condition of man, as I know too well."

"Oh," said Sophia, "if only we could love one another more."

"Discoveries in the biological sciences," said Ivan, "will soon alter all that."

Sandy, having gleaned the palatable scraps from Valentina, left her sturdily washing up in the kitchen and came into the room wagging his tail.

"Delightful dog," said Doctor Nugent, trying to pat him. Sandy went and lay down in the corner to watch everything.

The light fell softly on the group: Neil, drink in hand, standing by the piano, Irena gesturing gently as she spoke, Doctor Nugent planted in his chair looking so reliable, the entrancing Sophia on the sofa with Michael and James on either side, Ivan and Samantha, hand in hand, sitting on the floor, and the vital Nigel Hogarth sprawled challengingly in his chair.

Sandy glanced from face to face.

Then Irena said, "After all, a woman's first job is the family. The mechanical jobs, cooking, washing, clearing up, are not intrinsically very valuable, but the whole—"

And Sandy, from the corner, said in a strong Russian accent, "Valentina washes my floor." Then he lolled sideways on the parquet, flopping his tail heavily, lolling his tongue and staring round at everyone.

There was a pause while all present worked out their reactions.

"Oh, God, so it was true," groaned Irena.

"Sort of stomach-turning," declared Sophia.

The older Galloway stared at Sandy carefully. The guests looked interested.

"Does your dog speak, then?" Nigel Hogarth asked neutrally.

Doctor Nugent's eyes glinted. "You ought to offer him for some kind of research," he said.

"Get him on television and make a fortune," said Michael, Sophia's boy friend.

Neil Galloway cleared his throat. "Sandy is a domestic pet," he stated. "I do not intend to offer him for scientific research or public display. He is a dog."

"An animal should be treated as an animal," said Irena.

Sandy glanced about him, the motion of his tail stopping gradually like an arrested metronome. Far from gaining any praise or kindness or, better still, the biscuit Valentina normally offered him at his better strokes, he saw only disapproving faces. He got up and slunk from the room. The guests watched him go.

"It seems a pity," Doctor Nugent remarked carefully, "to ignore the phenomenon completely."

He was interrupted by Nigel Hogarth's coarse roar of laughter. Hogarth threw himself back in his half-egg-shaped basket chair, nearly overturning himself, poked out his spindly legs and laughed in vulgar gusts.

"Arharharhar," he roared. "I wouldn't fancy having him about—arharharhar—he might come out with some ripe tales about you—arhar."

Neil Galloway stood up. Irena, meeting the manifest coarseness of the petty bourgeois, took on a frozen expression.

"I say, though," remarked Belinda clearly, "he would look splendid on television."

"That's really a bit sordid, Belinda," said Ivan. "You'll suggest selling him to a circus next."

"Ugh," Sophia shuddered her lovely narrow shoulders. "Those poor creatures. Shut up, Belinda."

Nigel Hogarth's snorts subsided. He pulled himself to his feet and walked toward Irena with his hands extended. "I'm terribly sorry, Irena," he said. "I really must have had too much wine. I'd better depart."

Irena smiled a cool smile and preceded him out of

the room and down the hall. And so Hogarth made his way down the trim path and out into the night, like Napoleon after Waterloo, knowing that the expensive and tasteful facilities of the Galloway home were now barred to him forever. He headed toward the Duck and Dragon to tell his story, which would not, of course, be believed.

"I'd really prefer it," Neil Galloway said, glancing masterfully round his circle and pouring himself another drink, "if no one mentioned this Sandy episode out of doors. Sandy is a dog. If the news gets out, we'll have the TV, newspapers, everyone, round our necks, pestering us and the dog. It would be most undesirable."

"Poor old woollydog," said Sophia. "Let's call him in and give him a pat."

They called Sandy, who was crouching in the corner of the kitchen. He heard their voices, but would not come. Valentina, who had just left, had pried from him the story of his lapse and smacked him hard. The whole incident had set up a series of unfortunate associations in Sandy. "You will get yourself into serious trouble, Sandy," Valentina had warned him, but something had told her that already Sandy's doggy game was up.

Eventually Sandy went into the living room. He ran about snuffling and wuffling, receiving pats and affectionate comment. Irena even gave him a piece of chocolate. The balance of nature was restored.

After this painful incident, Sandy behaved himself, barking, snuffling, sliding over the blue vinyl on his giant feathery feet. He even behaved himself so far as to misbehave behind the living room curtains. Sometimes, from the depths of his basket would come a low mutter as Sandy reminded himself of his vocabulary. But these mutters were very indistinct and completely ignored by the Galloways. Sandy was a real favorite, quite one of the family.

Nevertheless, that tattered fragment of childhood innocence no longer spread automatically over the faces of the Galloways as their eyes lit on Sandy. They began, without realizing it, to shut doors against him. This made the dog unhappy.

One evening the family assembled after dinner when the doorbell rang.

"Belinda!" Irena said delightedly.

"Irena!" said Belinda. And the two women kissed.

Neil Galloway, on his fourth drink, looked for some reason displeased. "What brings you here, Belinda?" he asked petulantly.

"Business," Belinda replied shortly.

"Well, you know where the coffee pot is," said Irena.

"I think I'll go now and leave you to it."

"That's right," said Belinda in a curious tone, as if this action of Irena's was no more than she expected.

Sophia and Ivan, who had been playing chess, smelled trouble and decided to evaporate also.

Neil Galloway and Belinda conducted the first part of their business on the sofa, unaware of the rolling, neutral eyes of Sandy sitting outside the french windows with his head on one side.

This over, Belinda went into the kitchen without a word and made coffee. Neil Galloway sprawled in an armchair, slightly muzzy.

When Belinda came back he said, "Well, what's the news, if any?"

"I'll tell you the news," said Belinda. "A letter arrived after you left today. The firm's accountant is coming on Wednesday."

Neil Galloway passed a hand over his clammy brow.

Now, it might have been wondered how, on their two salaries, the Galloways maintained their unostentatious but nevertheless very ample way of life—Valentina, the children's car, Neil's car which was large, the food, the drinks, the friends, the laundry, and the children themselves, neither of whom could have been called a financial asset. People naturally assumed that Irena's mother, the Countess, had not left Russia without the family jewels strapped round her then tiny waist. This was not true. The truth was that, faced with a drop in salary after getting the sack from the *Daily News*, Neil Galloway had taken to speculation. For historic reasons, the editor of the *Islington Post* also had some of the functions of a

business manager. Neil's system was this: Each month checks came in direct from retailers to his desk. And each month he abstracted two of the checks from the six biggest retailers. The sum he obtained was something like a hundred pounds a month. This, and his large overdraft, was tiding the family over fairly nicely. The children took their standard of living for granted. Irena shrewdly asked herself no questions about the fount of cash from which Neil drew. It was, of course, only a matter of time before Neil began to draw even more largely on the Islington *Post* funds. But time was running out.

Once again he passed a cold hand over his brow. "Don't worry, darling," he said. "I'll think of something."

"I hope so, darling," Belinda said neutrally.

She left, after kissing him tepidly in the hall. Neil stared after her as she tripped down the path in the fifteen-guinea boots he had bought her, giving no backward glance. He walked slowly back into the living room, sat down and poured himself another drink. He had the weekend and two clear working days until the accountant started work. He had four days in which to replace the money, something like eight hundred pounds, he had taken since he began the job. The bank's regard for him was cool; they would never lend him another eight hundred. Irena, if she had it—as she well might—would never lend it to him. If he asked her to sell something, she would refuse, making a quiet fuss. Belinda, he realized, if she had anything, would never let go of it for him. Neil finished his drink and buried his head in his hands. He was desolate, first in the face of ruin and second in the face of those who would not help him. "Only Sophia," he moaned secretly, "would help me." And she would have, it is true, with a curl of the lip which said father is a baby.

Neil went to bed. Between the emerald sheets he gazed at the broad, strong back of Irena, sleeping her usual sound sleep. Alone in the darkness, tears of remorse and loneliness coursed down his cheeks.

In the middle of the night he awoke foul-mouthed and exulting. He had the idea that would save them—sell

Sandy! My God, why hadn't he thought of it before? Any one of a dozen firms would want him, circuses, films, anything. The dog was worth a fortune, and he had not even thought of it. All that anxiety for nothing and the eight hundred pounds was in front of his nose all the time.

Neil, restored absolutely, jumped out of bed and went down to the kitchen. As he opened the door Sandy sprang up, started to wag his tail, then backed away slightly.

"Sandy, old man," Neil began. Sandy looked at him. Neil put the kettle on to boil and, rather self-consciously, gave Sandy some dog biscuits.

"It seems to me," Neil said, standing embarrassedly in the middle of the floor in his pajamas talking to the dog, "that we should have a talk."

A cowed look came into Sandy's eyes. He dropped his head.

"How are you, Sandy?" said Neil anxiously.

Sandy, too well conditioned by Valentina, wagged his tail and looked expectantly at Neil.

"Really talk, I mean," Neil said.

There was a silence. Sandy stood in the corner of the kitchen watching Neil out of the corner of his eye. Neil made himself some coffee, sat down at the kitchen table, drank it, and smoked a cigarette, considering the crisis of Sandy collapsed in a corner, and shut his eyes.

If he doesn't speak up, I'm ruined, reasoned Neil. But he will bloody well speak up and that's that.

"Sandy," he said. "If you'll talk to me I'll give you this whole bar of chocolate." And he took a bar of cooking chocolate from the tin.

"What," he said, waving it inticingly at Sandy, "do you say to that?"

"Please," croaked Sandy.

Neil breathed out, broke off a bit of chocolate, and fed it to the dog.

"Do you want any water?" Neil asked.

"I've got some," said Sandy.

Neil bent down to pat the dog, who waved his tail

enthusiastically, knowing that he was pleasing his master. "Do you listen to the wireless much?" Neil asked kindly.

"I can't understand it. I like to talk to Valentina. She tells me about her dogs in—in—"

"Russia," Neil supplied. He was triumphant. The dog was highly articulate, intelligent, and teachable. His accent was shocking but that could be corrected.

He got up and went back to bed. Sandy stood in the dark, looking at the door and wagging his tail uncertainly. Still, he had enjoyed the chat. He lay down happily and went to sleep.

Next morning Sandy stood by the kitchen door. Ivan, Sophia, and Irena were eating breakfast. Sandy was waiting for his new friend.

As Neil came in, Sandy bounded up and rasped, "Hello, Neil."

The family naturally pretended not to have heard.

"Hello, Sandy," muttered Neil in an embarrassed voice. "Not fair to be rude to the poor little bugger."

"Hrrm," said Irena.

Sandy went into the garden.

As usual, Neil and the rest of them went off to work. Half an hour later Valentina, on her knees in the hall, heard his car come fast up the drive. He flung open the door, interrupting the chat between Sandy and Valentina, and rushed up the stairs. He ran up the next flight to the attic and began to search. He came down, dragging a large basket. He dumped the basket in the hall, urged the bewildered Sandy into it and shut the lid. He made Valentina take a handle and help him carry it to the car. With the basket in the back seat, he backed quickly into the road and drove off at top speed. Sandy, in the swaying hamper, moaned gently. At home, Valentina, with her lips set, began to scrub again. "It is not right. It is not just," she said aloud. "And the English are said to be notorious for their fondness for the animals."

Neil drove through London, grinding his gears and cursing. He drove out into Middlesex.

At the shiny office of the P. R. O. for Spanier's pet

food he tipped Sandy out. "What's this, Neil?" said the P. R. O.

"Talking dog," said Neil tersely.

"We get one each week, old man," said the P. R. O.

"Not like this," said Neil.

A dazed and startled Sandy went obediently through his paces.

The P. R. O. was appalled. "Remarkable," he said. "I've never seen anything like it. How much do you want?"

"I won't sell the dog for a penny less than two thousand pounds and ten percent," said Neil.

Sandy, sitting at his feet, heard the word *sell*, threw back his head, and howled a long howl of fear and pent-up nervous tension.

"Sensitive little chap, isn't he?" remarked the P.R.O.

"He's as sound as a bell," said Neil quickly. "All this is bound to be a bit of a shock to him."

"You said we were going to see rabbits," howled Sandy. "Rabbits!"

The P.R.O. was shocked. "Well—I'll have to talk to the board," he said.

"I must have a yes or no by four o'clock this afternoon, or it's no go."

"All right, old man," said the P.R.O. soothingly.

As the lid closed again on Sandy, Neil gave him a pat. Sandy, very frightened, whimpered all the way back to Islington, where Neil ejected him into the hall and raced back to his car.

The dog lay trembling where he had been put for half an hour before Valentina could lure him into the kitchen. There she plied him with delicacies and began to ease the story out of him.

"Keep calm, Sandy," she said. "I will take you away with me tomorrow and we will go to Russia. There you will receive great respect and interest and you will be able to live with me always." She went on to outline a radiant future, full of kindly scientists, long rabbit walks through the forests, and no more hostility. Tears of gratitude stood in Sandy's eyes. When Valentina went off with

her little basket, he lay down in his and thought about the warm blankets, pine woods, praise, pats, and the kind Valentina.

Events, however, were moving too fast for Sandy, for Neil, for all the Galloways. The accountant appeared that afternoon in Neil's office, two days early, and said he would begin work. Neil headed him off and, sweating, invited him to dinner.

Irena, somewhat annoyed at this unexpected duty and with an idea something nasty was afoot, produced a dinner.

Neil had telephoned Ivan and Sophia asking them to be at home for the meal. Both scented unpleasantness and refused to come. Belinda also refused on the grounds that she was going to visit her mother. So Neil had to face the accountant, a thin decent-looking man called Nevers, with no backing but the huffy Irene, thwarted, because of the shortness of time, from producing any extraordinary culinary surprises.

Small wonder if, lacking other allies, Neil embraced the bottle.

They were sitting in the living room drinking their coffee. Neil, in spite of Irena's unobtrusive efforts to stop him, was also drinking brandy.

The doors of the kitchen and living room had been left open. Sandy trotted in and lay down under the piano. Irena glanced at him, making a mental note to eject him when the time came to do it naturally. Nevers spotted him.

"Nice dog," he said. "He looks very intelligent."

Sandy's tail flopped feebly up and down on the parquet, but he continued to stare at Neil with his huge brown eyes.

"He seems to understand," Nevers went on.

"He's a nice animal," Irena said. "Have you got a dog?"

"Yes, a Labrador," said Nevers. "He's getting old now, poor old thing. My wife and I will be heartbroken when he goes."

Sandy, overcome by emotion, began to whine.

"Something wrong with him?" Nevers enquired.

"He sometimes does that," Irena said smoothly and turned the conversation to a discussion of the neighborhood. "So very nice and *mixed*," she said. "So un-snobbish—"

Sandy's whine grew louder. "Sandy! Whatever is the *matter*?" Irena said crossly and, as she realized a moment later, very unwisely.

As she began to speak again, Sandy howled long and hard. "Neil's going to sell me and send me away," he keened.

Nevers started and almost dropped his coffee cup. He sat bolt upright and stared at Sandy.

"You're going to *what*?" Irena asked Neil with a hard edge to her voice.

"Give me awa-a-ay, give me awa-a-y," moaned Sandy.

"Oh, my God," said Neil, standing up and swaying in the middle of the room with his hands over his ears.

Irena felt a strange emotion growing in her. She fell on her strong knees beside Sandy and said in his ear, "No, no, Sandy. We won't give you to anyone else."

"I'm going with Valentina," came Sandy's muffled rasp.

"That's all right, Sandy—" said Irena.

"Shut up," said Neil Galloway drunkenly. "The dog's going."

Nevers stood up. "Perhaps I'd better say goodnight," he said pleasantly.

No one took any notice.

"He's got to get the money," Sandy told Irena. "Eight-underd pounds."

"What!" said Irena. Pulling herself together she said, "Well. We can sort it all out later. Come out with me and have some food in the kitchen, Sandy. And don't worry."

She led Sandy out. Nevers, still in a leaving position, said, "What a remarkable animal," to Neil.

"Try living with the bastard," Neil said thickly.

Irena returned. "I've given him something to eat," she said. "Poor old Sandy." She looked expectantly at Nevers,

who said, "I must be going, Mrs. Galloway. Thank you for a delightful meal—and the interesting experience—I suppose you're not having me on?" he said to Neil.

Neil muttered something. "Well, well," said Nevers. He walked out into the hall and collected his hat. Irena followed him.

There was the sound of paws thudding against the kitchen door and mingled howls and shouts. Irena tried to say goodbye to Nevers, who attempted to reply. The howling and growling shouts continued. Irena, suddenly not caring at all and full of rebellious spirit, shrugged and said, "Oh, hell, I'll let him out."

She opened the kitchen door and Sandy fell out. She picked him up. Nevers moved toward the door. Irena, carrying Sandy, followed. "He fights Belinda on the sofa, like you do with Piotr," remarked the dog. Irena flushed, gave a groan, and her face sagged. "Well, well," she said. "You are an observant dog."

Neil appeared swaying in the living room doorway. Nevers stood on the step, about to leave.

"He's going to get money for me," wailed Sandy and began to howl again. Irena put him down.

Nevers lifted his hat to Irena and smiled. "Thank you again."

"I'm sorry about all this," said Irena.

Sandy ran over to Neil and said, "You took money. Belinda said so. You want to sell me-e-e-e-e." His howl appeared to the listeners to be endless.

Irena gave a hopeless groan. Nevers lifted his eyebrows and said directly to Irena, "I'm so sorry."

Neil bounded forward, dropping his brandy glass, which splintered on the floor.

"You damned, lying dog," he screamed.

"You're selling me-e-e-e-e," Sandy moaned, standing at his feet and looking up at him.

"You bastard," shouted Neil and kicked Sandy in the ribs, hard. Sandy went sprawling. Neil went after him and kicked him again and again. "Bastard," he was shouting. "Bastard, bastard, bastard."

Nevers ran in and pulled Neil away. He dragged him

back into the living room and dropped him on the sofa. Irena was crouching over Sandy in the hall. Nevers dropped onto his knees beside her. Sandy was howling and gasping.

"My God, my God," said Irena.

"We'd better get him to the R.S.P.C.A." said Nevers. The dog bit him as he picked him up.

"Will your husband be all right?" Nevers asked as he carried Sandy to his car.

"I expect so," said Irena.

Sandy lay motionless in the back of the car with Irena beside him. The air came through his lips with a little whistling sound. Irena patted him and talked to him on the drive. As they drew up outside the R.S.P.C.A., Sandy gave a moan and died.

All four Galloways were still awake at five the next morning, sitting in the living room, drinking tea, dropping ash on the parquet, faces pale, hair dishevelled, clothes awry.

Ivan and Sophia had come in while Irena was talking to Neil. The story of the embezzlements and the death of Sandy had been told. Recriminations began, sums of money were added up, extravagances laid at each other's doors. Out came the story of Samantha's pregnancy, secretly terminated with the help of kindly old Doctor Nugent and paid for by Samuel, Michael, and James. The argument, a melange of cars, bills, lovers, mortgages, selfish children, and irresponsible parents, went on for what seemed an eternity, a timeless world in which memories of the past were as fresh as if they were yesterday's news and predictions about the future seemed unalterably true.

The family went to bed stale-mouthed and sick.

Next morning at eleven, they were seated grubbily in the living room, drinking coffee. The doorbell rang. Irena went to answer it.

On the step was a hard-faced woman with a large wicker shopping basket over her arm. Her eyes widened at the sight of her impeccable neighbor frowsty in a towel-ing wrapper.

"I believe," she said coldly, "that you have been letting your dog out without proper control again. These, I think, are yours."

She handed the basket over to Irena. It contained four beady-eyed black puppies. "I should be grateful if I could have the basket back in due course," she said.

Irena took the basket in to the living room. "These," she said, "are four puppies of Sandy's. Their mother was his mother, too."

No one spoke. Finally Neil passed his hand across his puffy eyes. "Get rid of them before they start to sing God Save the Queen," he said.

"I think I'll breed them," said Irena, "and see what happens."

"Irena," said Neil, "those dogs are a menace."

Irena merely smiled and tipped the basket onto the shining parquet floor. Sandy's puppies rolled about, squeaking, sniffing, and tumbling over each other.

The Galloways watched them silently.

—*Hilary Bailey*

SHADES

The turning of a body in its bed—a long sigh. Outside the rain falls on café awnings, on chimneys of orange clay, on the newspaper-shrouded forms of *clochards* huddled in doorways. In my sleep I ascend the steps of the subway once again into lurid smears of neon and the odor of almonds dipped in syrup.

Monique crouches on her haunches scrabbling raccoon-like through the jumbled, wadded, smelly contents of her suitcase. In the black dormitory she curses and mutters to herself at some outrage. A pair of leotights odor of feet and crotch—a piece of bread wrapped in a napkin. Sweater grainy with crumbs. A tiny absinthe bottle, empty. A skirt worn shiny in the seat and covered with lint. The quick hands flick and twist these belongings. The bowed head growls anger and revenge.

I am swaddled in an envelope of warmth, the air cold and damp against my cheeks. Not to move and touch the icy outer edges of the sheet. Having seen through the rain today a lighted window. Behind gauzy curtains two children bathed in a tub in a yellow room. Steam rose about their heads. Degas room. The private Paris I know only in glimpses. In this a terrible loneliness.

"They have taken my papers!" Monique grinds out the words in rage—meaning *you*, you have, my enemy. "They went through my suitcase and stole my papers!" *You* did. Eyes a thin blue-gray film, frosted windows over a world of long dripping corridors, names screeched from the walls, jagged mouths opening on the floor—leading back to a village where parents thick-necked and harsh-mouthed turned obdurate backs on a daughter, "You are not of us—you are no longer ours," for what crime (against nature?). To be eaten by the city. To be hol-

lowed out by all the faces suspicious or contemptuous or merely dead.

"They won't get the rest, I'll make sure of that!" Eyes bulge straining against the lids as she chokes to swallow the torn-up pieces of paper. Ugliness gulping, thin lips open to gasp, the neck contorted in a sudden retching. Eyes demand I watch. The squat body held awkwardly. The legs thick and ankleless in black leotights spotted with mud.

In the darkness of the dormitory a girl moans in her sleep. *Ohhhhhh, ohhhhhh*. . . I wonder who else is awake to hear, glad it is not I who have moaned in this room full of strangers.

Face turned partly away, eyes lowered behind the shades, Monique eats a few bites of the supper, as if in disgust, and scrabbles in cracked plastic purse for cigarette. Small teeth filmed with food. The smoke drawn hungrily in and coming in spirals from the narrow nose. There is a tic below her left eye, jerking the skin of her cheek. White slightly grimy skin, blue-veined, unflawed.

She sleeps in her clothes. Her bed looks like her suitcase, with wads and lumps of dirty blankets. She crawls in and pulls it all about her, covering her head, mumbles into the damp wool, grunts and burps, and stuffs the cloth into her mouth to muffle the sounds she makes—takes back the sounds into herself as she took the papers she had written.

A yellow apple tasting faintly of raspberries. Sour red wine gulped on the dripping porch of the Louvre. A walk on crumbling bricks along the river, wet leaves clinging to our ankles. In the warmth of a gallery great naked pink-fleshed women are hoisted onto horses. A scarlet drape. Am I to marry? Jerry sleeps in the men's dormitory on the lower floor.

They stride around Monique where she sits at the table over her books. She turns her head to watch them as they move, threatening, each taking courage from the other. Tight pants and pointed shoes, sunken faces, mouths taut and dangerous. Malice slashing in the room. Did *she* begin it? She gives ugliness for ugliness. Oh, delicate

anguished face and naked eyes, how could you let yourself be caught here with three attackers? Always watchful, how could you not have known that *you* cannot sit at this table alone: that you draw others' evil and are not safe anywhere? Her body turns to keep them each within her sight. Rising she scoops the books against her chest and backs to the wall.

Eyes the blue-gray of fragile china through which the light comes pearly. Bare frightened lids tensed to twitch. Eyes of unknowable pain.

Am I to witness then a ritual beating—the books scattered on the floor, a pencil rolling away from the foot that turns and slips, struggling for contact?

At my step in the room, there is a sudden hesitation in their movements. Hard dirty knuckles, faces like bone shadowed at the eyes. The hatred is a gust of stinking wind; I am frightened at its force—malevolent energy against which I must brace my body. There is a breathless time of indecision—the boys' eyes watching me from the side. Monique's face, surprised from its mask, opens for an instant into an expression of such terror and appeal that I am wounded. Then they begin to move again, but in random circlings and crossings, momentum lost, the mechanism running down. She sidles along the wall and at the door ducks her head and hurries out.

On the stairs she turns to look at me. The eyes are red-lidded. She hates me because I have seen. I stand in the dimness of the hallway, hearing her feet thump the stairs up to the dorm. A trembling somewhere in me. I shudder at the cold and close my eyes on the faces I have seen.

Dusty canvas backpack—a raincoat given to me by an English friend, the sleeves high above my wrists—Jerry's guitar repeatedly rainsoaked, the veneer glued carefully back in place—his cowboy hat: we are innocent indeed. Tomorrow he and I will leave to hitch-hike in the rain down to Nice. To be together. To go where it's warm. Perhaps to marry?

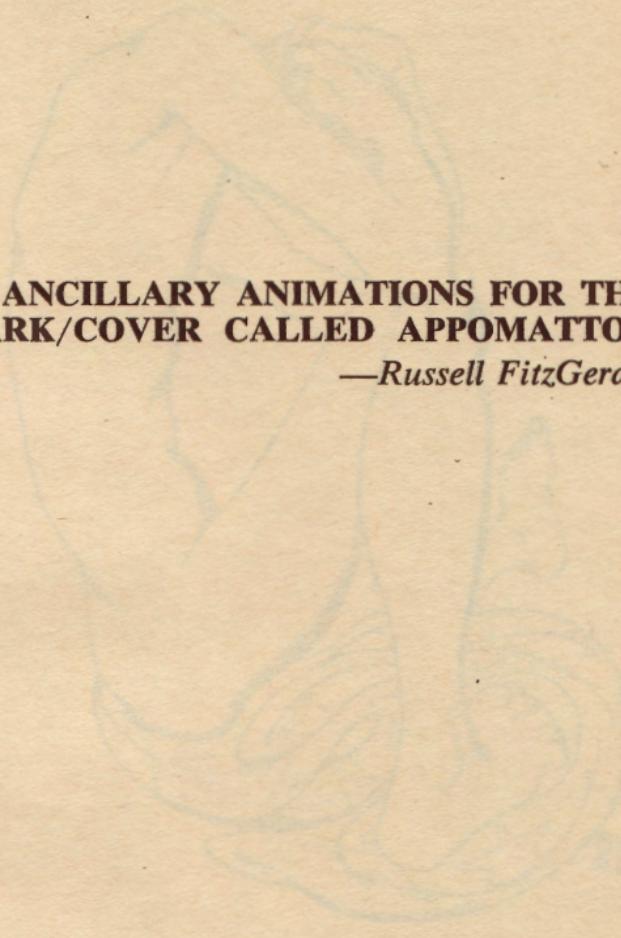
In the bunk below me, huddled like an animal in its nest of rags, Monique lies sweating in her clothes, mutter-

ing, invoking blight and pain on all of us who sleep in this room, on the boys who lie slackmouthed and sprawled in the other dormitory, on the city with its thousands of minds turned inward in dreams. Calls down a curse on us all. As long as I live, know that you are hated, you who hate me—and you who love me, twice cursed.

I look into the darkness, listening to the rain pelt the window. The bodies are suspended about me, as if we hang in the cold air. Below me the bed shakes as Monique rides her hobbyhorse of thwarted lust.

Eyes, having seen you, I am drawn down into the heavy body clamped on itself, suffering the face all muscles dragging at the taut flesh, into the mind clenched about its anguish—in which a farmhouse sleeps, and the animals who did not judge, and the land. Subway tunnel filled by shaking clanging train, all windows shrieking; faces lurching at each turn; smell of wet wool and hot unwashed flesh; lights bursting acid against the eyes; a sleeve of tweed, a thick-fingered hand furred with red hairs; a nose beaded in each pore with oil. There is a body under the wheels.

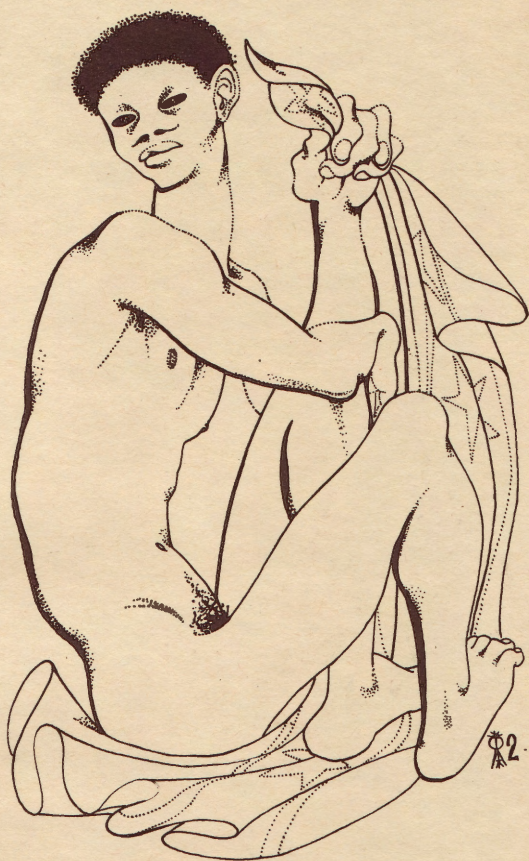
—*Sandy Boucher*



**12 ANCILLARY ANIMATIONS FOR THE
QUARK/COVER CALLED APPOMATTOX**

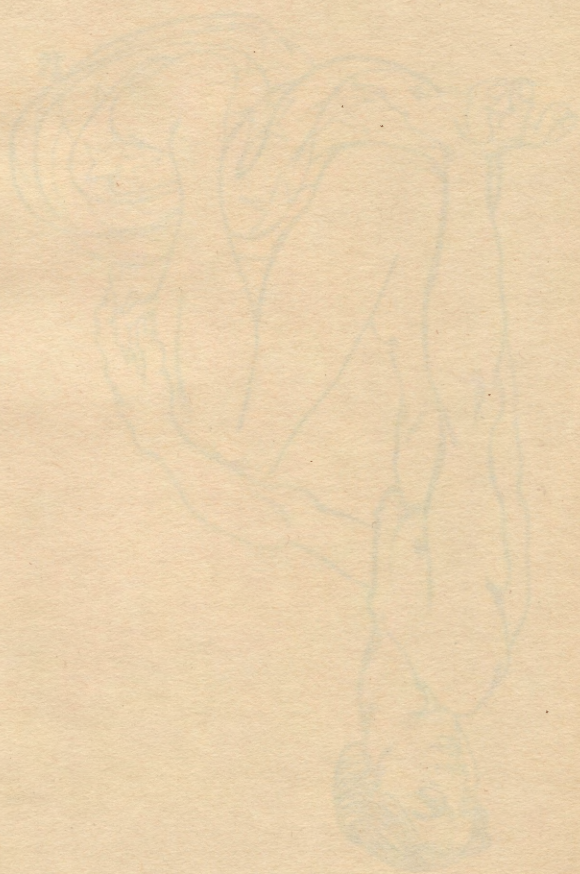
—Russell FitzGerald







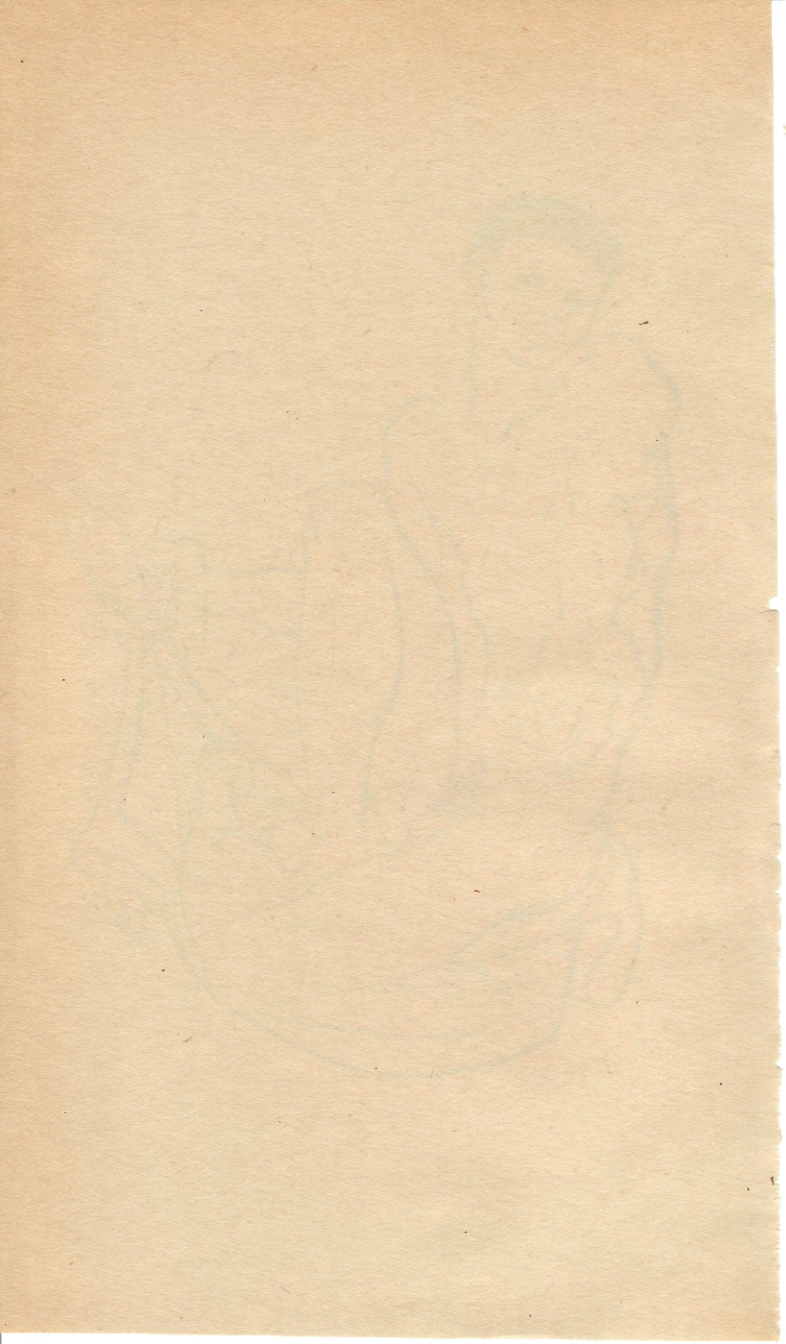




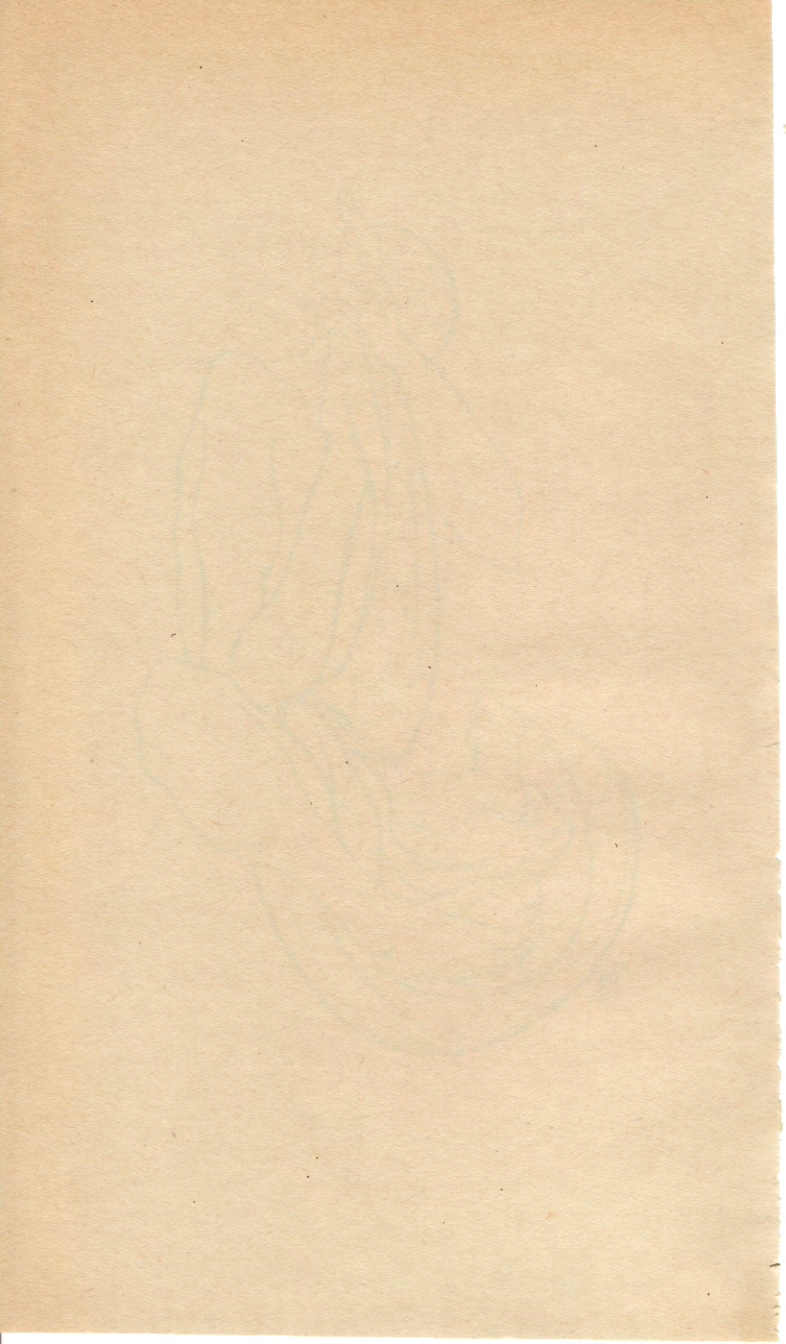






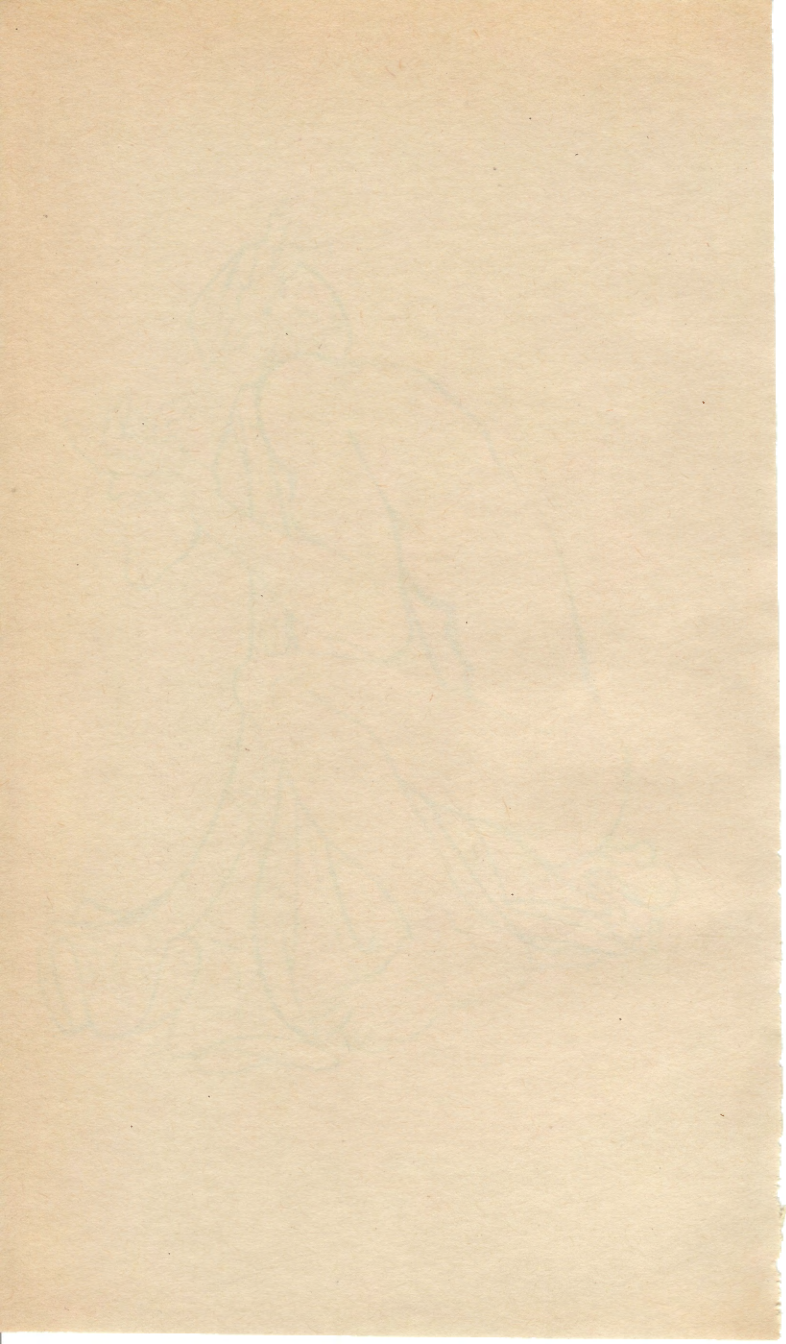




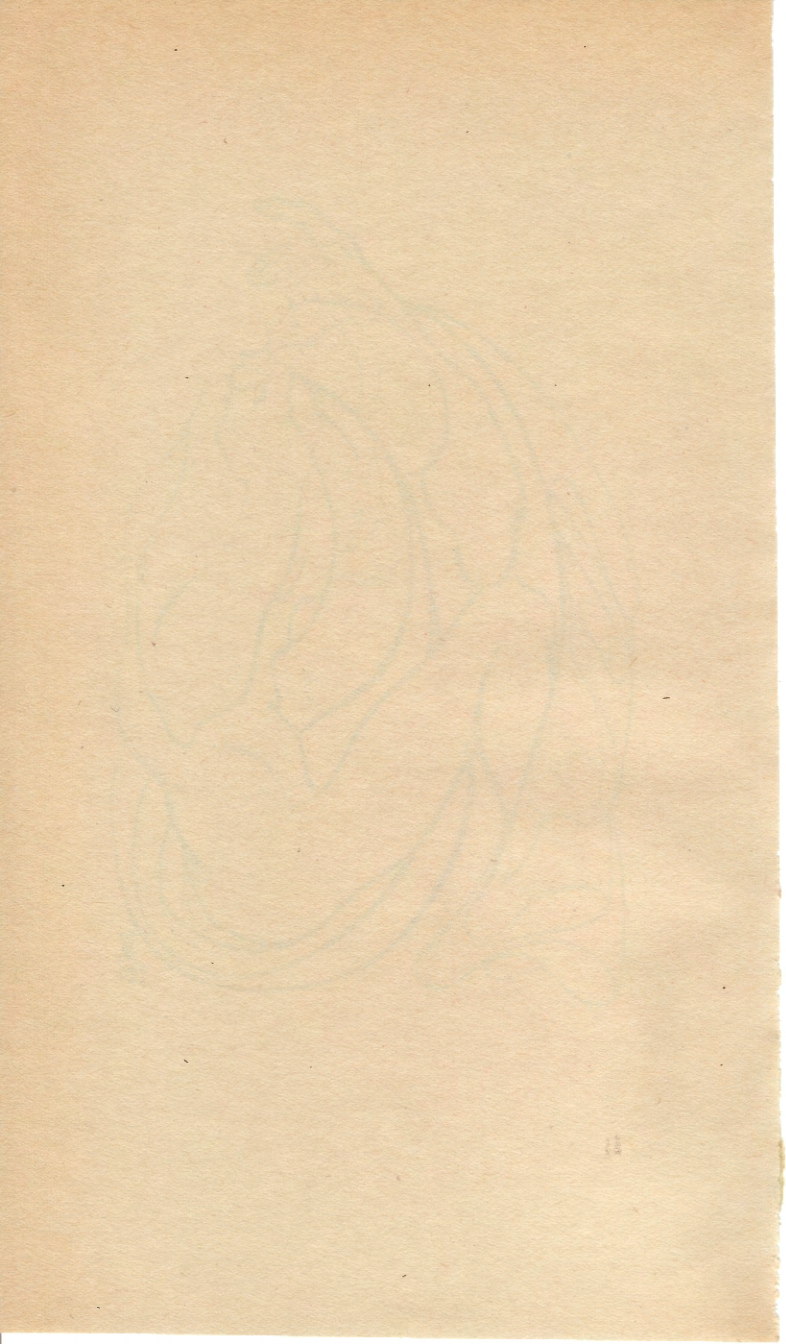


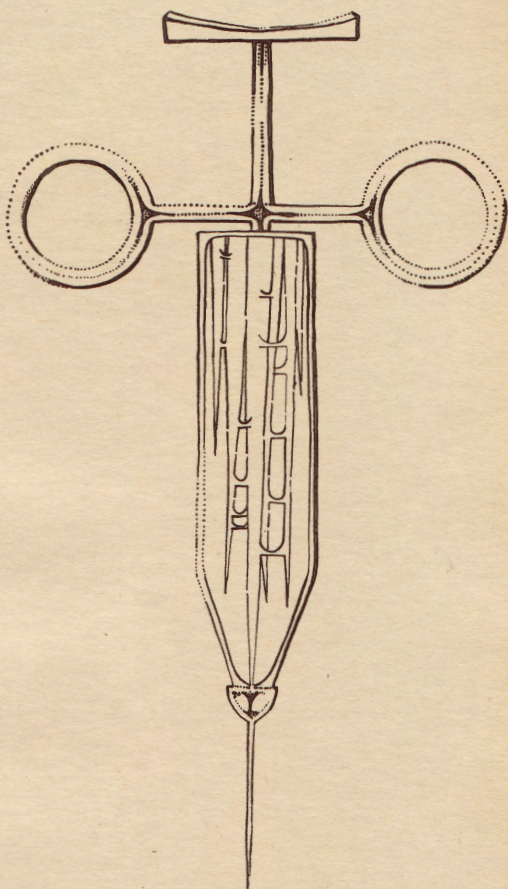


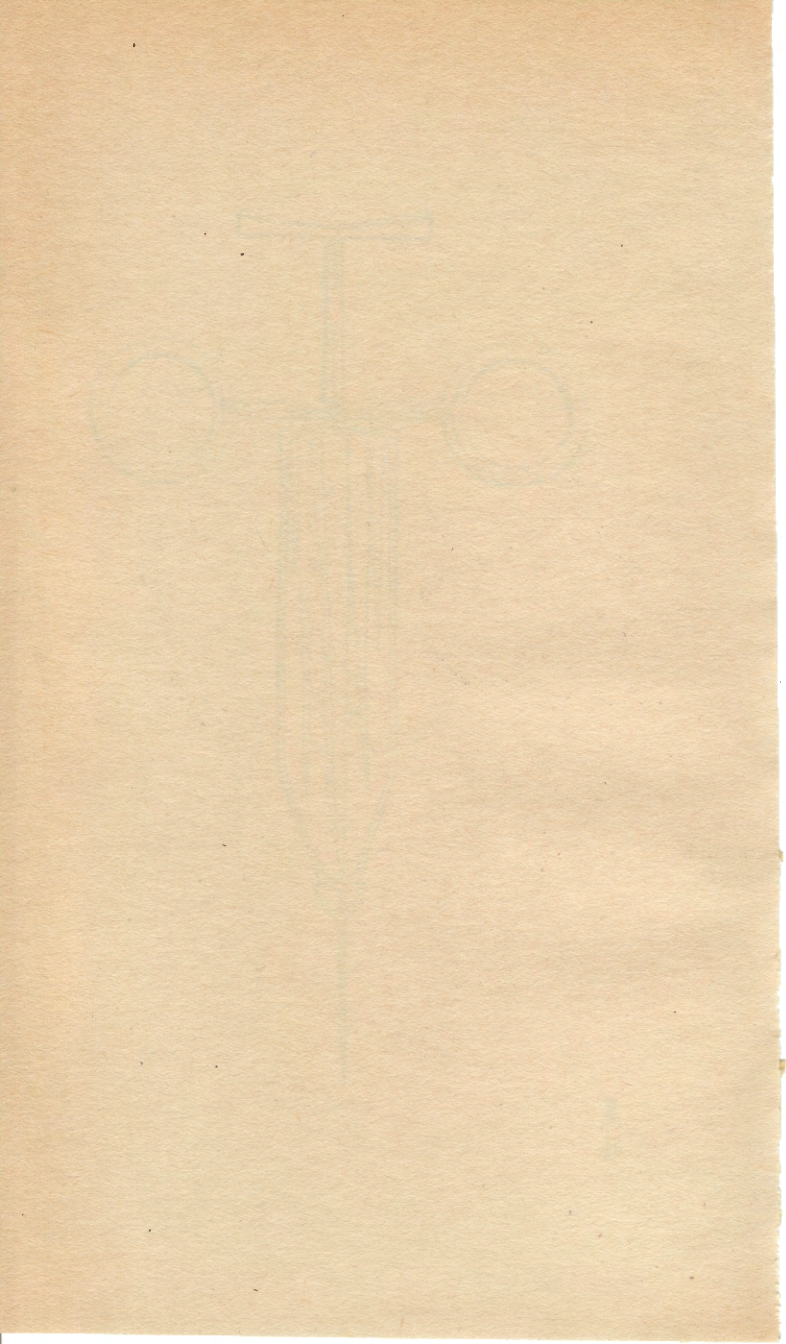


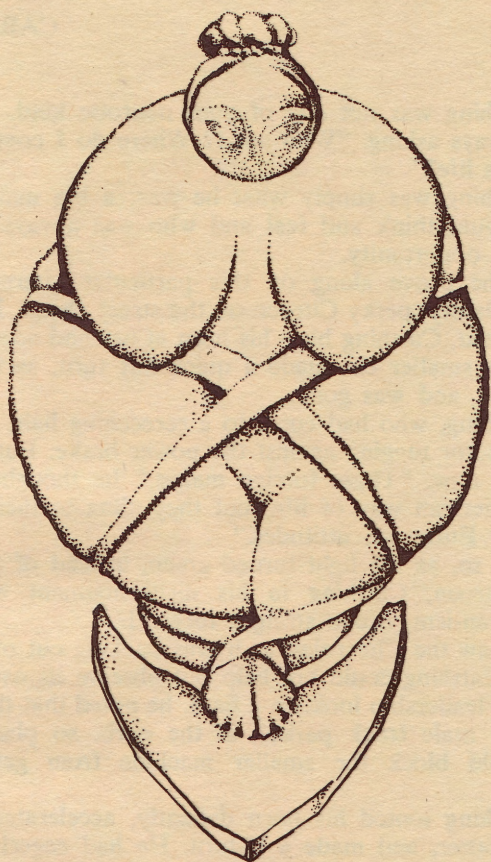












CARTHING

Carthing was not one of your neurotic kind. He was not always asking, "Who am I? Where do I come from? What is life?"

Carthing was simply what he was, a big male Buick who could think and feel and who was always looking for an opportunity.

As he drove along on this particular afternoon, he saw a dainty, perky Citroen on the street ahead. Instantly stimulated, Carthing blew his horn at her and accelerated. But the smaller car made a quick left turn, as the light changed, and was gone.

Carthing, who had come to a screeching halt, sat with huge motor tugging against the power brake. But he was cynical now. "These foreign makes," he thought, "want the American way of life, but they cling to their quick, darting European attitudes."

And so, as the light turned green, instead of pursuing the Citroen, Carthing in his disillusionment with un-Americanism, drove straight forward.

He saw the Chevrolet, as it was backing out of a huge door. Carthing could not help but observe its over-sized, luxury, leadership look. In a flash, he noted that there was a huge male truck parked at the curb, so placed that it would block the smaller machine from getting by easily.

Carthing tooted his horn defiantly, accelerated to the near corner, and made a U-turn. He had eagerly anticipated that this maneuver would bring him headlight to headlight with the radiant Chevy.

Instead, to his shocked dismay, he saw that she was climbing right up onto the big truck.

It was too much for Carthing's simple philosophy: "God, let me be the one that wins!"

In a moment of blinding jealousy, he stepped all the way down on the gas . . . He struck at 80 miles an hour . . .

The man who had started loading Chevrolets onto a trailer truck stared at the shiny wreck and then called his supervisor.

"Just came out of nowhere," he said, "and crashed head-on into the nose of Big Joe here." He indicated the gigantic truck with a wave of his thumb.

"And there was no one in it?"

"Not a soul."

"Well—" said the supervisor, after a moment's thought, "it's well known that these eager, fun-loving new Buicks practically drive themselves. I guess one of them finally believed it."

—A. E. Van Vogt

DAUGHTER OF ROSES

In a grove of red roses
Before I was born,
The mouth of my mother
Was pricked by a thorn.
She stood in her beauty,
A bride seeking love,
Among the dark flowers
Of the beckoning grove.

Blood welled to her lip,
Seven drops bright as day.
Lady Silver came softly
And kissed them away.
Long dead Lady Silver
Whose dwelling is still
The House built of moonlight
'Neath Fair Maiden hill.

On haunted Fair Maiden
No flowers ever thrive
Except the red roses
Her kiss keeps alive.
Imprudent my mother
Such roses to crave.
Soon the skylark of springtime
Sang low on her grave.

Now I, her young daughter,
Too early a bride,
Must tryst in the shadow
Of love and its pride,
With the Queen of cold moonlight.
My fear is my bliss.
At last, Lady Silver,
I'll taste of your kiss.

A circle of roses
Before I drew breath.
On blossoming roses
The hoar frost of death.
The flowers of Fair Maiden,
The moon palace there.
Those dreams known to women
That no man may share.

Light-footed is Eros
With wings on his back.
But Oh! the red roses
By moonlight are black.
The skylark at midnight
Triumphantly sings,
While the god in the rose grove
Is shorn of his wings.

I stand in my beauty
Just seven days wed.
At the roots of dark roses
My blood will be shed.
I'll live among roses
Until my babe's born.
But the young man who loves me
Shall die by the thorn.

—*Helen Adam*

ADrift ON THE FREEWAY

Interstate 25 stretched north and south like a rubber band softened by the July sun. The road narrowed to a vanishing point in the blue haze marking the Colorado border. This was New Mexico. To the left of the four-lane highway were the heat-blurred Rockies.

Richard Forrester took one hand from the steering wheel and wiped sweat from above his eyes.

Harve Gilbert looked up from *Fielding: Twenty-three Critical Interpretations*. "We've been screwed around."

"What?"

"No justice in the world." Gilbert spoke loudly to override the wind noise. All the car's windows were rolled down. "None. You're the department's white hope, Dick. How come you weren't issued an air-conditioned limousine to get us to El Paso and back?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Gilbert sank back in his seat and dangled a hand out the window where the rushing air was cooler. "I'm going to die."

"Look," said Forrester. "Bitch to the purchasing office. Kenner's a small college. Budgets don't cover air conditioning. And nobody supposed we'd be so ambitious as to go to a conference between summer sessions."

"Ambitious," repeated Gilbert, muttering.

After ten silent minutes, Forrester reached to turn on the radio, then remembered the car was not equipped with one. He withdrew the hand and took a cigarette from his shirt pocket.

"Seven," he said.

Gilbert turned a page but didn't look up. "Seven what."

"Cars. Abandoned by the road." Forrester lit the cigarette. "Like dead animals. Seven since El Paso."

"So?"

Forrester let the smoke rake his throat. "You've never noticed the abandoned cars? It's getting to be a hobby on trips like this. I started noticing it a year ago. It occurred to me there was something queer about all the cars I saw just sitting on the edge of the freeway. No flat tires, nobody around them, no distress flags. New cars, too—most of them. More than one would expect to break down on the freeway."

Gilbert considered. "You know what?"

"What."

"You're crazy."

Cigarette smoke circled lazily and was sucked out the window. "It beats counting telephone poles."

Another ten minutes, twelve more miles of straight pavement. Another few inches of mountain range had crawled past on the left. Harve Gilbert spotted the car first and pointed.

"Eight," said Forrester.

It was a shiny late-model yellow Chevrolet parked on the shoulder. Forrester edged the school car slightly into the left lane. They saw no one in the car as they passed. And they encountered no one farther along, walking on the Interstate.

"Must've run out of gas," said Gilbert. "Highway Patrol probably picked them up. Took them in to Springer or Raton or whatever town's up ahead."

"Maybe."

"What the hell do you mean 'maybe'? You make it sound sinister." Gilbert's sudden vehemence surprised both of them.

"Sorry. I wasn't trying for melodrama." He paused. "There's a friend of mine, a state trooper who lives down the block. We talk quite a bit. He told me this abandoned car thing is a major problem now. The cars turn up, but the drivers and passengers have been disappearing permanently. The police are getting worried."

"Hate to be a skeptic," said Gilbert, "but why hasn't this vanishing epidemic been all over the papers?"

Forrester moved his shoulders noncommittally. "The trooper said the FBI was on the case, so it's evidently a

national thing. Maybe there's a security blanket on it." He glanced at Gilbert. "I'm not kidding."

"Sounds crazy."

"But it exists."

Gilbert's voice took on a secretive tone. "I have a theory."

"No doubt." Forrester ground out the cigarette butt in the ashtray and reached for his pack.

"The government's hushed up this whole affair to avoid a panic. It seems there's a strange plague afflicting the freeways this year. A plague of giant, invisible, telepathic, predatory birds."

Forrester glanced across the seat; his friend's face was deadpan.

"The bird-creatures," Gilbert continued, "use their telepathic powers to force drivers to pull over to the side of the freeway and stop. Then the birds swoop down, snatch up the driver and passengers in giant invisible claws and fly away with them."

Forrester felt obliged to respond. "So what happens then?"

"They get eaten, I imagine. Probably nourish the young birds."

Forrester watched the left front fender eat the flashing white center-stripes. "Harve, it's a good thing you teach novels. You wouldn't make it writing them."

Polite smile. "You're the writer, Dick."

Silence and heat.

"Another strange thing about the cars," said Forrester. "Nobody single disappears. Just families. All of them with children."

But Gilbert was absorbed again in the critics of Fielding and only nodded politely.

They passed an abandoned VW bus before crossing the border into Colorado. They passed a Ford and an expensive-looking sports sedan, both deserted, before pulling off the Interstate to refuel just outside Pueblo.

"These are the real freeway predators," said Forrester. The two men stood in the doorway of the gift shop ad-

jacent to the service station. The room was cluttered with displays of onyx bookends imported from Mexico, genuine Indian-stitched leather moccasins, ashtrays carved from petrified wood, cello-sacked Japanese novelties, Indian lances with bamboo shafts and soft rubber heads, cowboy hats, miniature license plates, turquoise jewelry, and felt pennants printed with "Souvenir of Colorful Colorado."

"Driving wears me out," said Gilbert. "There's a soda fountain."

They sat patiently while girls in antiseptic lime-green uniforms behind the counter took twenty minutes to prepare sandwiches and coffee.

"It's a life of quiet desperation," said Forrester unexpectedly.

"Yes, well. That's a good line. Still got claustrophobia from teaching at Kenner?"

Forrester nodded. "Kenner State College." He shook his head and expelled his breath suddenly. "Another semester and I'll be up the wall."

"What is it now—seven years you've managed?"

"Six. But it feels like twenty. I'm getting out."

"Good sentiment, Dick. Admirable spirit. But think a moment. You got started late in the game, even if you are the department's *Wunderkind*. You haven't had that doctorate as long as most of the rest of us, right?"

Forrester nodded.

"I hear you're in line for the department chairmanship when Hodges retires," Harve continued. "But this college is on the make, academically, and they're not going to put up with a prima donna act on your part. They'll kick you out, buddy. Right on your ass."

Forrester started to retort.

Gilbert held up a hand. "Just a second. I'm envious as hell. I admit it. We'd all like to be department head. But I'm also your friend. You're pushing forty, Dick. That's a little old to start over." Harve paused. "What would you do? Go back to writing?"

"You kidding?" He smiled. "Probably. Free-lancing it

isn't going to be easy on Lil and the kids." Forrester picked his words carefully. "This is partly for them."

"The children?"

"Right. I want to get my family out of Kenner." It would sound condescending, Forrester thought, to admit he didn't want his children to grow up in a town that was such a stereotype of the provincial, close-minded small-town mentality.

"Where would you go?"

"That's the problem. I don't know. I've thought about it a lot. There are quite a few interesting places to visit, but to actually live . . ." Forrester smiled humorlessly. Maybe it's the times, he thought. The cities had the de-personalization, the towns had the particularly vicious intolerance, and shadows of pollution and CBW fell everywhere. "Deschamps was right."

Harve Gilbert looked quizzical.

"Fifteenth-century poet. He wrote 'I know no more where I belong.' He should have added '—or can go.'"

"The anomie of my anomie is my . . ." Gilbert left the rest mercifully unsaid.

"You're sick." Forrester grinned. "You've hung around your sophomores too long."

A sullen-faced waitress dropped a white paper bag on the table in front of Gilbert.

"Your turn to drive," said Forrester.

Colorado was as parched as New Mexico. There was more traffic now on Interstate 25 than in the morning.

"Ever notice the mountains?" Forrester asked.

"Only when they get in the way," Gilbert said, resisting the suggestion to look up at the Rockies.

"It's utter illusion that they look so close. I remember hiking in the Sierras when I was a lot younger. Sometimes I'd walk all morning toward a mountain. I'd never get there, no matter how far I walked." He looked sharply over at Gilbert. "What would happen if the mountains were just as close as they appeared?"

"Jesus, I don't know." Touch of exasperation.

Forrester smiled.

"The faculty comic." Lillian Forrester smiled at her husband as she poured his breakfast coffee. "Flying freeway monsters. That sounds like Harve."

"And invisible," said Forrester. "His scenario was very complete."

"Maybe he knows something we don't?"

"I hope you're just trying to be humorous," said her husband. "The world supply of paranoids is overstocked." He reflected soberly. "Of course, predatory carnivores on the freeways would cut congestion . . ."

"Not that. I was thinking about your illusion with the mountains. It reminded me of us driving through Illinois. Remember? It was late afternoon and we were passing those farms, all green and lush."

Forrester remembered. He recalled aching eyes and pulling the visor down across the windshield to block the red Midwestern sun. He remembered Lil's farms, seductively cool in the dusk.

"The woods and those farms were so completely unreal. I expected them to fade away like a mirage and turn into a line of Howard Johnson restaurants." Lillian turned toward the sink and rinsed her cup. "I almost asked you to pull off the freeway and stop. It was impulse. I so wanted to go across the barrow pit and the fences and see a farm before it vanished."

"Speaking of stopping cars and vanishing—" Forrester began.

Someone rapped on the kitchen door. Lillian opened it.

"Morning, Miz Forrester," said Mrs. MacKenzie, their next door neighbor. She nodded. "Doctor Forrester." Mrs. MacKenzie was short and wore her sparse brown hair tied back in a bun. Her complexion was wrinkled and blotchy, like toadskin. She had long been widowed.

"Thought I'd drop over and borrow some of that artificial sweetener stuff. You don't mind? I was going to fix me some tea, but I'm all out of sweetener."

"Of course we don't mind," said Lillian. "I'll put some in a jar." She was torn between instinctive courtesy and the knowledge that her husband hated Mrs. MacKenzie.

She ventured, "Would you like me to brew you some tea now? It won't take but a minute."

"Well." Mrs. MacKenzie pondered the offer. "No, no, thanks. I better get back to my place."

Forrester relaxed.

"It wouldn't be any trouble."

"Thanks, Miz Forrester. I got to get back right away. Things to do." Mrs. MacKenzie picked up the jar of sweetener. "I'll bring this back sometime before noon." She suddenly turned back with her hand on the knob of the kitchen door and lowered her voice as though imparting a state secret:

"You know that Connie Alessi, the girl what rents out the little house across from me?"

"She was in my poetry section last semester," said Forrester. "Bright girl."

"Yeah?" Mrs. MacKenzie rushed on. "I was setting on my porch last night about ten when a car pulled up in front of that girl's house. Then a man got out and went in. A *man*," she repeated significantly.

"So?" said Forrester.

Mrs. MacKenzie paused for dramatic effect. "His car's still out there this morning."

Stupid, nosy bitch, Forrester thought. *Mind your own—* Lillian flashed him a warning look.

"I think," he said, rising from behind the breakfast table, "it's time for me to get some themes graded. Pardon me, Mrs. MacKenzie."

The neighbor looked at him strangely, as though she vaguely sensed the rebuff. "Thanks against for the sweetener." She backed out the door.

Forrester sat down again and savagely beat a tattoo with his coffee spoon on the formica tabletop. His wife bent and gently kissed the back of his neck, then sat opposite and poured herself another cup.

"I told Harve yesterday," Forrester said. "The small town in action. It's why we're getting out."

"Decided where, yet?" Lillian gingerly sipped at her coffee.

"When I get an idea, you'll be the first to know." He meant it to sound humorous; they both tried to smile.

"You're very worried," she said.

Forrester nodded. Lillian reached to touch his hand.

Noise overflowed from the basement stairwell; airplane sounds, then a crescendo of stinger chords.

"What's that?"

"Your son, dear. First thing out of bed, he's watching TV. The Saturday morning shows."

"His mind will rot."

"No, it won't. Your son's a very intelligent young man. Just like his father. Besides, he's just doing what you'd like to do."

"How's that?" Forrester tasted his cooling coffee and grimaced.

"He's found a better world; a more interesting one, at least. He can travel there with his mind and imagination. He can come and go as he chooses."

"Between commercials," Forrester said dourly.

"Well." She shrugged. "Still, wouldn't you like to do it?"

"I suppose."

Lillian took her hand away from his. She poured him fresh coffee.

The old man perfunctorily shook hands with Forrester. His skin was dry like parchment. "Thank you for coming up this afternoon, Richard. I'm sorry I bothered you on a Saturday, but I felt a word would be in order as soon as possible."

"It was no trouble, sir," said Forrester.

"I need not remind you that this be kept strictly between us until the college's formal announcement."

"Of course." Forrester released the old man's hand and turned toward the door of the office.

"Oh, and Richard."

"Sir?"

"Congratulations."

"Thanks." Forrester quietly shut the door behind him. So the anticipated moment's here, he thought as he

walked through the deserted anteroom of the English office. The promotion that would make Forrester's ties to the Kenner State College scheme of things nigh inseparable. His career fulfilled. He supposed he should feel jubilant.

"I know no more where I belong," he quoted at the closed doors of the elevator. *Why was I born a bum?* he wondered as the doors slid apart.

Forrester was accosted as he walked across the grass mall toward the faculty parking lot.

"Hey mister, can I talk to you?"

Forrester turned and confronted a fantastic collage of long hair, beads, feathers, leather, paisley print, and bells. In the midst of all the spectacle was a young face, tanned, with green ageless eyes.

"You have any spare change you'd like to contribute for peace?" the girl asked.

"Whose peace?"

"Everyone's. Yours, mine." The girl smiled ingenuously. "Give me bread, keep me fed, and I'll stay off the burning streets. Dig?"

"No," said Forrester. He turned to walk off.

"Hey, mister, wait!" Patchwork color jangled past Forrester, did an expert front flip, landed upright.

"Very good." Forrester clapped, the sound sinking dully into the grass.

"I bug you, mister? Sorry." The girl was out of breath.

"No," said Forrester. He hesitated. "No, I think you make me jealous."

"Now I don't dig."

"You're supposed to," said the teacher. "You're the aware generation, right?"

"Right." The girl laughed. "Wow, you're a groove."

Forrester pulled out his cigarettes and offered the pack to the girl, who declined: "Tobacco's a bad trip."

"You know," said Forrester, sitting on the grass, "I see you hippies around campus all the time and even in some of my classes, and I never get to talk to you."

"Hippies?" said the girl. "Us? Me? You're generalizing, mister."

"I am? Well, what are you?"

She clapped her hands like a child. "I'm a changeling. Or a radical, maybe, or a head, a witch, a militant, a secret agent, a mover, a shaper, a drop-out, or maybe, just maybe, a hippie. Beware of categories, mister."

"Yes," the teacher said. "Sorry." He paused and ground out the remainder of his cigarette in the dirt.

"Just what are you going to do with the world?" he asked.

The girl laughed again, white teeth sparkling. "Gonna do with it? You mean, what are we *doing* with it?"

Forrester, amused, nodded.

"We're making it groovy for everyone."

"Worthy ambition. Just how?"

"Two ways. In here—" The girl touched her forehead with an index finger "—out here." She patted the grass. "And both. They're really just the same thing."

"I don't see," said Forrester.

"It's like with the Pentagon," said the girl. "Some of us could burn that whole scene down; I mean, take it apart brick by brick. Or we could use a higher power—like the exorcism they tried."

"That last tactic didn't work."

"It will one of these days. Things are readier every day. The right time is coming."

"And wishing will make it so," Forrester said softly.

"You know it won't. Not entirely. There's something else. Someone else."

"Who?" Forrester noticed that in the sunlight the girl's eyes had curiously altered from green to gray. He looked at her fragile happy face and felt a sudden pang of desire which he repressed.

"We're beyond your command, you know." Her expression was amused.

Forrester thought he understood.

"Hey, mister," said the girl suddenly. "About that bread. You want to lay some on me?" She smiled innocently.

"Yes," said Forrester, smiling back. He reached into his jacket pocket for the wallet.

Forrester dug into his pocket for the ignition key. He turned toward the connecting door to the house. "Hey, come on!"

Lillian appeared in the doorway. "Haven't we got all day?"

Forrester smiled. "Yes, we do."

She returned the smile, loving him, half-understanding what was happening, but willing to trust.

Richard Junior, age nine, trudged out of the house followed by Nancy, his younger sister. "Hey, Dad," he said. "Where we goin'?"

"On a Sunday drive. Where do you want to go?"

The boy shrugged. "Where you do."

They drove out of Kenner, past the red brick blocks that were the college buildings, to the signs that indicated the freeway ramp. The weekend traffic was dense as they approached the city, Forrester carefully merged the big Plymouth station wagon into a middle lane just as they reached the many-leveled interchange called the "stack" in one city, the "spaghetti bowl" in another, and the "changer" here. Forrester considered the myriad signs and obeyed some at random. He hoped the right ones.

They drove out of the city until the solidly angular freeway wavered crazily in the heat. They drove until the western mountains were close. The Rockies, cool under forested slopes and lingering snow peaks, projected high above the asphalt heat-shimmers.

Forrester braked the station wagon. The vehicle slowed and he steered it off the freeway, onto the shoulder. He turned off the ignition.

He looked up at the rearview mirror. In the back seat the children sat quiet, concentrating.

The mountains were very near.

—Ed Bryant

MY FATHER'S GUEST

Yesterday, the first snow fell. It began soon after dawn as the sunlight, falling through the window onto my sleeping head, awakened me. I opened my eyes to peer back through the white curtains into that brightness, but even as I watched, the light dimmed and the morning turned gray. Then a bit of rain whispered against the roof shingles above. And the transparent rain then crystallized into tiny white stars falling evenly to the ground. The stars stiffened and grew rounder and bigger, and became our October snow.

I slid my legs sideways from under the blankets until my long toes barely touched the floor, then lay there in that odd, angular position—my head heavy on the pillow, my waist and knees vertices. Transfixed, I felt a wave of memory cresting in my mind, fed either by some half-remembered dream or the curious nostalgia brought on by the first snow. It was a memory of womanhood, of a mother-sister, or a lover. One year, the first snow didn't come until the twentieth of December; that was half my life ago.

I was nine years old at the time. I recall my father's quietly gleeful sense of victory then, as day after fall day passed, and the crisp, wild colors of autumn hung mysteriously on, trespassing into wintertime. In all those months, never did flakes of vicious snow gather forlornly around locks of winter alfalfa, nor cluster between the horns of our one bull. But when the snow finally came, fertility's surrender was complete. Immediately, the Oldsmobile stalled, the cow's legs stiffened with cold, and my mother caught a virus infection that lingered in her tired body for five long weeks, and from which she never fully recovered. It took her seven months to die, and when death came the following summer, she seemed to leave us

without regret, almost without notice. Lucille was eighteen at the time; Mark, fifteen; Andrew, just ten. In the weeks of her illness, she slowly receded from us into the grayness that eventually consumed her—her pale face, lined and soft like an over-ripe peach, fading meekly and carelessly into the brown halo of her hair. It seemed to me as if she were backing away into the distance of some tawny country road, growing smaller and smaller with time. Her casket might have been the size of an infant's—a stillborn child's. She died having been a grandmother for only six days to Lucy's mulatto daughter, Sophie.

My father, for the most part, was only a gracious witness to all the events occurring in our house that year, and all the other years since. There had never been a question for him of forgiving Lucy for Sophie's unconventional conception. The baby chiseled a corner for herself in our lives, the way, the way almost all of my father's strays did. He always welcomed strangers into our home, most often during wintertimes, and during the period after my mother's death. And there was that one in particular, a special guest who perhaps changed our lives. But I couldn't quite remember.

I finally sat up on the edge of my bed, pulling the heaviest quilt over my nakedness, and moved over to the window seat. Listening to the snow hit against the window, I sensed a quality of imminent richness in my pensiveness; I felt that if I'd wait patiently and be very still, the vague recollection I had of our guest might crystallize, like the snow.

But as I sat there, the snow thinned and then stopped falling. Sunlight and shadows appeared on the ground beneath the amber chrysanthemums Lucille and Sophie had planted alongside the house. So the autumn would persist a while longer, and I would dress and divide the day between meals and tending animals and working in the field with my father.

I asked Lucy about my memory this afternoon, but she just shook her head with a certain impassivity, her chin a trifle extended, the muscles in her neck slightly taut

behind a spray of dark curls. In a flurry of specious culinary artistry, she peered into the pot of stew she was preparing for dinner, as if preoccupied with onions and potatoes, and shrugged her shoulders. It wasn't until much later, when we'd all finished eating and were idling at the table, that she flashed toward me a look of sudden, faint recognition. "Andrea!" she said softly, through the thick odor of well-seasoned beef and vegetables. "I remember the name Andrea."

I remembered, too: my father's voice floating heavily into a winter living room in firelight, "Our guest's name is Andrea." *Andrea*. The elusive phonics of three invisible h's; "Handrheah." My father would recite the name like some breathless poem, like "Om," a holy word.

Were there so many guests in my father's house that we'd all lost the ability to differentiate between them? Many I recalled vividly: a runaway boy from New York State who stayed with us for three months before his parents finally located him. Their threats against my father for sheltering the boy genuinely frightened me, and I had brief anticipations of his being sent to prison and I, at fifteen, taking on full responsibility for the crop that year. Then, too, I remember Royal, the colored man from Georgia who fell in love with my sister, then left us in terror and shame when she conceived his child. And I remember my brother Mark leaving home, then returning five months later with his bride Judy—a frail, blonde girl whose shirtwaist dress fell in folds across her flat bosom, and whose large hands fluttered self-consciously around her throat. Mark and Judy stayed only long enough to make us lonely later for her vibrant laughter and the perpetually creative energy with which she vitalized our lives and transformed the house with pastel wall paint and bright curtains.

And there was the endless parade of animals—strays who lingered namelessly about the farm, then disappeared for weeks at a time, always to return eventually. We had a menagerie of them: cats, dogs and puppies, wandering calves, pet squirrels. And Andrea.

Now, tonight, the pace of recollection is quickening. I undress slowly in candlelight, savoring the dramatic evolution of my understanding: my family sleeps in so many ways; they are unaware of things I see and remember. Lucy recalls only her name, but I, standing in this dim room and waiting for the inevitable snow to fall again, I have brief, silent visions of her white roundness huddled in the corner of our kitchen. I can recall the warm dampness of her flesh, her tiny, sparkling eyes almost hidden in a massive oval face. I have to laugh at our forgetfulness. It was only last winter; father found her outside in the snow, lost and lonely because she needed to give herself to someone, and no one was there. She quivered next to the fire where he laid her on a soft blanket, the pale down on her limbs reflecting gold firelight. Her eyes sought out each of us in the dimness. We all loved her, and she silently, instantly, decided to stay and give herself to us, because she loved us all.

I am sitting again near the window; the moonlight reveals the snowfall that the evening was promising only hours ago. The snow falls somberly and hides the rusty greenery of the landscape as I watch. It's going to be a remarkable winter; we all realize that. Especially my father. The car may never survive the coming months of cold. There will be great, crippling storms, and perhaps for weeks at a time we'll be snowbound. The animals may consume our supply of grain before February; maybe they'll all die. Maybe Sophie will become ill again, like last winter, and her thin arms and legs will again be covered with that carpet of brown-black gooseflesh.

I rise, touching my forehead where it pressed against the woven curtain, and feel the imprint of the curtain's texture. Curious, I take the candle into the hallway, to the bathroom, and look intently into the mirror. In the reflection, I notice that Lucy is standing behind me, seeming paler than before, her lips thinner, but with that new smile. Lucy and I have always been very close.

In the mirror, I notice a white puffiness above my thinning eyebrows, and my small, intent eyes. The candle

lights up a thin layer of white down on my face, as the fire did on yours, Andrea. And, like you, none of us will ever die.

—*Joan Bernott*

CRITICAL METHODS: SPECULATIVE FICTION

The historical discussion of the development of some area of art, while often illuminating, does not necessarily exhaust that area. The development of a particular literary technique or theme over several decades through several writers, often in several countries, is not completely solved by a chronological listing of who did what first.

The historical literary critic tends to see literary progress as a process rather like this: some seminal genius invents a form; another refines it; still a third brings it to heretofore unimagined perfection; while a later fourth now takes the form into decadence; finally a new genius appears who, reacting against this decadence, invents a new form, and the cycle begins again.

But this view only traces a single thread through what is essentially a tapestry of aesthetic productions. The line, by definition, tries to connect the high points. Frequently enough, these high points are, in reality, connected. But just as frequently they are connected more strongly to other works and situations totally off this line. Historical artistic progress only exists by virtue of the perspective lent by hindsight.

Of the many ways in which an artist can be influenced by other art, the historical art-critic over-concentrates on two: the desire to imitate excellence, which, in genius, sometimes results in former excellence surpassed; and the distaste for the mediocre, the stultified, the inflexible, which, again in genius, can result in new forms.

But there are other ways to be influenced. One artist may find a work that seems to him to have an interesting kernel, but strikes him as so badly executed that he feels he can treat the same substance far more rewardingly. More frequently, I suspect, he finds an interesting technique employed to decorate a vapid hollow center, and

uses it to ornament his own central concerns. It is still a little odd to look at whom some major authors felt to be their greatest influences. Thus Coleridge says that the sonnets of the country Reverend William Lisle Bowles, insipid and artificial by today's standards, were the literary epiphany of his youth. And Keats was practically fixated on the eighteenth-century boy-poet Thomas Chatterton, who, after perpetrating a series of forgeries of Middle English poems, allegedly the work of a non-existent monk, Thomas Rowley, came to London and within the year committed suicide by taking rat poison, aged seventeen years and nine months.

Let us look at the development of one of the narrative techniques that practically alone supports science fiction: expertise—that method by which an author, deploying a handful of esoteric facts, creates the impression that he, or more often a character in his story, is an expert in some given field. It was formulated as an outgrowth of French Naturalism by a writer who began as a younger disciple of Zola, Joris Karl Huysmans. He brought the technique to pitch in his extremely influential novel *A Rebours*, published in 1884, a year after *Treasure Island*, a year before *She*. But where the Naturalists employed exhaustive research to give density to their endless chronicles of common people at common professions, Huysmans used comparatively superficial research to give an impression of thorough familiarity with a whole series of bizarre and exotic subjects, including late Latin literature, horticulture, and perfumery, to list only a few.

Till its recent reissue, I doubt if many currently working SF writers had read Huysman's plotless, characterless, yet totally enthralling novel. But you can find the technique employed in exactly the same manner in something as recent as Thomas Disch's *Camp Concentration*. Still, though I cannot prove it, I am sure there is a line (more likely a web) of writers who read writers who read Huysmans, and who took from one another this obviously effective technique, as directly as Wilde took the cadences and repetitions in the dialogue for *Salomé* from Poe's *Politian*.

Indeed, we know Huysmans was familiar with Poe. Poe and Baudelaire are the most frequently mentioned authors in *À Rebours*. Huysmans undoubtedly knew Poe through the superb Baudelaire translations, which, from their impact on French literature, quite possibly have more merit than the originals. In *À Rebours*, *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* is mentioned by name, a work which Poe dots with much nautical expertise to make his sailor narrator convincing, on a thoroughly unreal voyage to the South Pole, that ends with the appearance of the White Goddess herself. This, and the similar use of expertise in the tales of ratiocination, could easily have prompted Huysmans to make the jump between using expertise to validate the commonplace to evoking the exotic and bizarre. (For those of you interested who are unable to acquire the book, you can get some idea of the flavor of *À Rebours* from Chapter Eight of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Grey*, which is a pastiche of Huysmans; the mysterious yellow-backed French novel after which Dorian patterns his life was immediately identified by the Victorian public as *À Rebours*, which was confirmed by Wilde during the Queensbury trial; the book had achieved a reputation for decadence and corruption, as sexual oddities were another subject that Huysmans explored with his newly perfected technique.)

One place where the connection is clearly drawn is in Alfred Bester's early horror novella, *Astarte Was a Lady*. The opening of the novella is practically a rewrite of the opening movements of *À Rebours*. The relation is so close that I am fairly sure that Bester, an erudite author who studs his work with overt and covert literary references, was undoubtedly familiar with it when *Astarte* was published in the late thirties in *Unknown*.

And Bester is easily the SF writer who brought expertise to its full fruition in his work.

Thus an SF literary technique has its burgeonings in an American fantasist, passes over the ocean to be translated by a great poet, is furthered by a French *fin de siècle* decadent, and returns a hundred years later to American magazine fiction. In the early sixties, it moved

away to support the pseudo-SF James-Bond-style thriller, which would thoroughly collapse without it. But this is the way the web of influence works, passing in and out of the genre, crossing national and language boundaries, and returning, completely frustrating the historical critic who would keep everything in its proper path.

In the same way, the didactic methods of Robert Heinlein owe a great deal to Shaw's comedies of ideas, far more than to Wells and Verne. Indeed, part of that mystical optimism that pervades so much of SF is a product of a process that we can see in the ending of Shaw's *Man and Superman*, Twain's *Mysterious Stranger*, Kipling's *Children of the Zodiac*, and Poe's *Eukera*, a process shared by such SF classics as Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Clarke's *Childhood End*, Sturgeon's *More Than Human*, and Disch's *Camp Concentration*: any attempt to be totally rational about such a basically mystical subject as man's ultimate place in the universe tends to squeeze all the mysticism into one bright chunk that blurs all resolutions at the end.

Contrary to what might be expected, it is much harder to trace the development of a strictly limited subject than of a general one. To take an absurd example; it would be fairly intriguing to discuss the growth of interest in late medieval, Gallic song-forms among poets of the past hundred years. From Joyce's villanelle in *Portrait of the Artist* to Pound's and Auden's experiments with the sestina and canzone, or in the turn-of-the-century profusion of rondels and rondolets, there is great give and take among the general run of poets, with a few enduring examples that give significance to the whole discussion. It would be quite another matter to discuss the use of only one medieval song form, let us say the triolet, over the same period. One could cite, in a historical list, Rimbaud's "Le Coeur volé," go on to mention Ernest Dowson's and Lionel Johnson's attempts, (contemporaries of Yeats) and perhaps Sara Teasdale's "Why Do You Walk Through the Fields in Gloves" from the twenties. For what little it's worth, I would hazard a guess that Dowson had read Rimbaud and that Teasdale had read Dow-

son. But this gives us only a list, not a development. The fact is, the impulse to write one's first triolet is simply to see if one can do it. But once the form is learned, the impulse for the second or third might just as easily come from reading Gray's *Anatomy* as reading Milton, from the ubiquitous unhappy love affair, or the poached egg you had for breakfast.

To explore the development of SF poses a similar problem. Though its audience is growing, it is still a limited form, a specialized genre. The historical approach has been tried many times. But the fact is, if SF had been influenced only by itself, it would have strangled long since. If it did not continually influence areas outside itself, we would not have the present increase of interest. Simply because it is limited, a simple listing of which writer wrote what first will not do, whether one starts with Wells or Lucian.

The usual historical approach, at present, is the common intellectual property of practically anyone who knows that SF stands for *science fiction*. It begins with Wells and Verne and more or less ends with Heinlein and Bradbury. Anyone whose interest extends to actually reading it knows that an editor named Campbell caused some major changes, and before that an editor named Hugo Gernsback was important.

My own feeling is that, in an attempt to give respectability to American SF, much too much has been made of the relation between English Victorian, or Wellsian SF, and post-Gernsback, or Modern. Risking the other extreme, I propose that the relation actually is no stronger (or weaker) than the passage of the idea that it was possible to write stories and novels set in the future. Let me make some sweeping statements about areas that have been covered much more thoroughly by a host of other writers. Wells' "Romances of the Future" come from much the same impulse that produced his monumental multivolume *An Outline of History*. The future stories were an outgrowth of the perfectly viable fancy that history might well continue beyond the present. Both the historical work and the SF, however, fell out of

the same twin Victorian views: that man's knowledge, in general, and his technology, in particular, develop in a more or less orderly way; and also that, in a given situation, human behavior will always be more or less the same, no matter when, or where.

Both of these views, however, are Victorian prejudices.

Technology has always run in both constructive and destructive directions at once. While Rome's engineers built amazing stone aqueducts with engineering techniques that astound us today, her aristocracy was unintentionally committing mass suicide with lead-based cosmetics and lead-lined wine-jars. Pasteur invented vaccination, which prevented smallpox, and which, when the technique was finally extended to typhoid, typhus, diphtheria, and yellow fever, made possible the Second World War—till then, it would have been unthinkable to mass so many soldiers in such unsanitary conditions without having them completely wiped out by communicable diseases. Yet, from modern military medicine come the new discoveries in bioelectronics, and the science which Pasteur invented to preserve life is ultimately rushed on a step. Man's technical achievements, like his aesthetic ones, do not form a single line, but a web, in which numerous lines can be traced. Indeed, they sit in the same web. Any new discovery, from Oveonic devices to the revelation of a new ecological relationship, may spark changes in all directions, with good and bad results, that will cycle and echo, perhaps for centuries, in science, economics, and art.

Nor is human behavior any more stable from age to age, place to place. In seventeenth-century India, a Buddhist priest went to sit at the gate of a Sultan who had treated his people too harshly. At the gate, the priest refused to eat or drink, and inside the house, the Sultan died from guilt and shame; while, in eighteenth-century France, the Queen, upon being told that the people had no bread, responds with the line that has become an emblem of political irresponsibility, "Then let them eat cake." In Greece in the ninth century B.C., the accidental revelation of incest between mother and son resulted

in suicide and self-mutilation; five hundred years later in Persia, parents and children who could prove that they had indulged in carnal relations were elevated to the rank of holy men and women with great honor and reverence. A Mediterranean, upon discovering his wife in the arms of another man, commits a brutal double murder, while an Eskimo, receiving a stranger into his igloo, graciously offers his wife for sexual pleasure during the length of the visitor's stay. (And the unbiased student of anthropology could further cite societies or times in which incest was neither holy nor anathematic, but commonplace, or in which the disposal of her own, and possibly her spouse's, sexual favors was the woman's prerogative.) In nineteenth-century Russia, certain aristocrats organized weekend hunts for their guests, with dogs, horses, and rifles. The quarry, slaughtered and hung up for show in the barn, was thirteen- and fourteen-year-old peasant boys. Today, in Vietnam, seventeen- and eighteen-year-old American boys amuse themselves shooting at war prisoners through the stockade fence, while, in the states from which these boys hail, the death penalty is finally declared illegal as a primitive and barbaric custom.

There is nothing universal about the laws of human nature, at least as the Victorians pictured them. My readers sensitive to cultural resonances will probably sense them from all these examples of behavior as they look around our own culture. But that is because the human mind resonates. To try and construct historical chains of causation between these types of behavior and our own society is to miss the point. The human animal is potentially capable of *any* behavior. The feeling of resonance is a personal response to that potential.

Not only can the human animal behave in any way, the human psyche can approve or disapprove of any behavior. Thus, in one cultural enclave, the supreme moral act is the eating of bread and the drinking of wine; in another it is the act of sexual congress itself; while in another it is the disemboweling of babies. One group feels that avarice and selfishness are the roots of all evil. Another feels that uneducated altruism is the source of all

the world's mismanagement, and that altruistic acts are the basic sins that rot the society. One group feels that ignorance is the cause of all the world's trouble. Another feels that all knowledge leads to pain.

No, the Victorian supposition of the linear moral logic of human progress and the inflexible catholicity of human nature have been left rather far behind. But these ideas are as inchoate in Wells's SF as they are in his history.

To look at Gernsback—or rather, Gernsback and his progeny—in relation to Wells, questions of literary merit set momentarily aside, immense differences appear immediately.

Gernsback was interested solely in the wonderful *things* progress might bring. As a popular entertainer, he was just as interested in the possible as he was in the probable. In his own novel, *Ralph 124C41+*, there is the chaste ghost of a love interest, but it vanishes amidst a host of marvelous gadgets. His use of behavior went only so far as it showed what *things* could do. Most of the objects were socially beneficial. When they were not, they were in the hands of the criminals that Ralph triumphed over. But there was none of the socially functional logic in which Wells indulged: *Since this is scientifically infeasible, it would not be socially beneficial to discuss what might come out of it.* The logic behind Gernsback's view of SF, which persists today, is rather: *Even though current technology claims this is impossible, if we were to achieve it, look at what marvels might result.*

It is just this basic concern with *thingness* that makes me insist that the initial impulse behind SF, despite the primitive and vulgar verbal trappings, was closer to the impulse behind poetry than it was to the impulse behind ordinary narrative fiction.

As another critic has said, in another context, "Poetry is concerned with the *thingness* of *things*." The new American SF took on the practically incantatory task of naming nonexistent objects, then investing them with reality by a host of methods, technological and pseudo-technological explanations, imbedding them in dramatic situations, or just inculcating them by pure repetition:

Television
Rocketship
Waldo
Spacesuit

But this is SF at its most primitive. The incantatory function—a better word than “predictive”—is no more the chief concern of modern SF than it is the concern of modern poetry; though remnants of it still linger in everything from Cordwainer Smith’s “ornithopters” to Greg Benford’s “brain tapping.” Here is the place to note, I think, that when the British SF magazine *New Worlds* was awarded a London Arts Council subsidy, one of the testimonials, from a member of the editorial board of the *Oxford Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, explained that science fiction was the most fertile area of writing in the production of new words which endured in the language—a position held up till the mid-thirties by poetry.

Because it was unconcerned with behavior at its beginnings, SF was eventually able to reflect the breakdown of Victorian behavioral concepts which, for all his advanced thinking, had strictured Wells. It has been remarked, everywhere that man has noted in detail what goes on around him, (you will find the idea in Confucious and in Plato) that the objects around him do influence his behavior, as well as how he judges the behavior of himself and others. The philosophers of aesthetics never tire of reminding us that the man who grows up in a beautiful and aesthetically interesting environment behaves very differently from the man raised among ugly, squalid surroundings. The Victorian progressives added to this, that a person raised in an efficient, healthy, leisurely environment behaves quite differently from one raised amidst harrying inefficiency and disease. The aesthete quickly points out that the behavior of the person brought up with efficiency is still not the same as that of the person brought up with beauty.

McLuhan formulates this more precisely when he explains that any man-made object, and a good many natural ones, as they express or reflect aspects of man’s

inner consciousness, become factors in the equations governing communication as soon as they come into our perception.

But well before McLuhan had put this so succinctly—indeed, SF was to prompt McLuhan to this statement, another example of influence across boundaries—American SF writers, freed from the strictures of the probable, left to soar in the byways of the possible, not bound by the concept of universal human nature, in a country that was itself a potpourri of different cultural behavior patterns, sat contemplating marvelous objects in the theater of the mind. Slowly, intuitions of the way in which these objects might affect behavior began to appear in the stories. Editor Campbell was astute enough to see that this was perhaps the most powerful tool in the realization of these marvelous inventions. He encouraged his writers to use this tool, to make the focus of the stories the juncture between the object and the behavior it causes. As the writers followed Campbell, SF began to grow up.

By much the same process that poetry expanded beyond its beginnings in ritualistic chant and incantation, to become a way to paint all that is human, and etch much that is divine, so SF became able to reflect, focus, and diffract the relations between man and his universe, as it included other men, as it included all that man could create, all he could conceive.

Already, how much more potentially complex a template we have than the one left us by Victorian Utopian fiction. The Utopian fictions of Butler, Bellamy, Wells, as well as the later Huxley and Orwell, exhaust themselves by taking sides in the terribly limiting argument: "Regarding this new society. You say it's good, but I say it's bad." Or, "You say it's bad, but I say it's good."

Auden has pointed out in his collection of essays, *The Dyer's Hand*, and then gone on to examine in his cycle of poems, *Horae Canonicae*, that this argument is essentially a split in temperaments, not a logical division at all.

There are, and always will be, those people who see hope in progress. Auden calls their perfect world New Jerusalem. In New Jerusalem, hunger and disease have

been abolished through science, man is free of drudgery and pain, and from it he can explore any aspect of the physical world in any way he wishes, assured that he has the power to best it should nature demand a contest. There are, and always will be, people who wish, in Auden's words, to return to Eden. He calls their perfect world Arcadia. In Arcadia, food is grown by individual farmers, and technology never progresses beyond what one man can make with his own hands. Man is at one with nature, who strengthens him for his explorations of the inner life; thus all that he creates will be in natural good-taste; and good will and camaraderie govern his relation with his fellows.

To the man who yearns after Arcadia, any movement to establish New Jerusalem will always look like a step toward Brave New World, that mechanized, dehumanized, and standardized environment, where the gaudy and meretricious alternates with the insufferably dull; where, if physical hardship *is* reduced, it is at the price of the most humiliating spiritual brutalization.

In the same way, the man who dreams of New Jerusalem sees any serious attempt to establish an Arcadia as a retreat to the Land of Flies: that place of provincial ignorance, fear, disease, and dirt, where man is prey to the untrammelled demons of his own superstition, as well as any caprice of nature: fire, flood, storm, or earthquake.

The final argument for either of these views must ultimately be expressed: in the environment *I* prefer, *I* would find it easier to treat the variety of my fellows with affection, tolerance, and respect. And this, as Auden says, is a statement of personal preference, not a logical social dictum. With the variety of fellow beings what it is, the argument will probably always be here.

Modern SF has gone beyond this irreconcilable Utopian/Dystopian conflict to produce a more fruitful model against which to compare human development.

The SF writers working under Campbell, and even more so with Horace Gold, began to cluster their new and wonderful objects into the same story, or novel. And whole new systems and syndromes of behavior began

to emerge. Damon Knight, in *In Search of Wonder*, notes Charles Harness's *The Paradox Man* as the first really successful "reduplicated" novel where an ordered sara-bande of wonders reflect and complement each other till they have produced a completely new world, in which the technological relation to ours is minimal. Now the writers began to explore these infinitely multiplied worlds, filled with wondrous things, where the roads and the paintings moved, where religion took the place of government, and advertising took the place of religion, where travel could be instantaneous between anywhere and anywhere else, where the sky was metal, and women wore live goldfish in the transparent heels of their shoes. Within these worlds, the impossible relieves the probable, and the possible illuminates the improbable. And the author's aim is neither to condemn nor to condone, but to explore both the worlds and their behaviors for the sake of the exploration, again an aim far closer to poetry than to any sociological brand of fiction.

As soon as the Wellsian parameters are put aside, far more protean ones emerge from modern SF almost at once.

In the most truly Utopian of New Jerusalems, sometime you will find yourself in front of an innocuous-looking door; go through it, and you will find yourself, aghast, before some remnant of the Land of the Flies; in the most dehumanized Brave New World, one evening as you wander through the dreary public park, sunset bronzing fallen leaves will momentarily usher you into the most marvelous autumn evening in Arcadia. Similarly, in either Arcadia or the Land of the Flies, plans can be begun for either Brave New World or New Jerusalem.

SF has been called a romantic and affirmative literature. J. G. Ballard has gone so far as to point out, quite justly, that the bulk of it is rendered trivial by its naïvely boundless optimism. But we do not judge the novel by the plethora of sloppy romances or boneheaded adventures that make up the statistically vast majority of examples; if we did, it might lead us to say the same of all areas of literature, novel, poetry, or drama; with no selection by

merit, I'm afraid on a statistical listing, expressions of the vividly happy would far outnumber expressions of the tragic on whatever level. As any other area of art is judged by its finest examples, and not by the oceans of mediocrity that these high points rise above, this is the way SF must be judged. There are threads of tragedy running through the works of Sturgeon and Bester (they can even be unraveled from Heinlein), not to mention Disch, Zelazny, and Russ, as well as Ballard's own tales of ruined worlds, decadent resortists, and the more recent fragmented visions of stasis and violence. And one would be hard-pressed to call the comic vision of Vonnegut, Sladek, and Lafferty "naïvely optimistic".

If SF is affirmative, it is not through any obligatory happy ending, but rather through the breadth of vision it affords through the complexed interweave of these multiple visions of man's origins and his destinations. Certainly such breadth of vision does not *abolish* tragedy. But it does make a little rarer the particular needless tragedy that comes from a certain type of narrow-mindedness.

Academic SF criticism, fixed in the historical approach, wastes a great deal of time trying to approach modern SF works in Utopian/Dystopian terms—works whose value is precisely in that they are a reaction to such one-sided thinking. It is much more fruitful if modern works are examined in terms of what they contain of all these mythic views of the world. (Carl Becker has suggested that New Jerusalem and Brave New World are the only two new myths that the twentieth century has produced.)

It is absurd to argue whether Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy represents a Utopian or a Dystopian view of society; its theme is the way in which a series of inter-related societies, over a historical period, force each other at different times back and forth from Utopian to Dystopian phases.

In *The Stars My Destination*, the Jaunt Re-education program is clearly a product of New Jerusalem. Equally clearly, the Presteign Clan, with its four hundred ninety-seven surgically identical Mr. Prestos, is from Brave New World. And they exist side by side in the same work.

Gully, though he has been uniformed by *Brave New World*, begins as an unformed lump of elemental violence, ignorance, and endurance from the Land of the Flies. Robin Wednesbury's home in the re-established forests of Greenbay, insulated from its neighbors, with her collection of books and records, exists in Arcadia. Gully/Caliban implodes into it with violence and rape; and Robin and Arcadia survive to both help and hinder him as the novel goes on. This sort of optimism, emblematically as it is handled, is far more true to life than the Victorian convention that equates "dishonor" with death—though in black Robin's eventual marriage to the only other non-Caucasian in the book, the Oriental Yang-Y'eovil, there is a hint of acceptance of an equally nasty American convention.

Because all four visions are offered in the best modern SF, no single one is allowed to paralyze us with terror or lull us into muddle-headed euphoria.

What I would like to see in serious SF criticism, among other things, is an examination of how all four of these mythic visions sit in concert in given works. And I would like to see an end to the lauding (or dismissal) of works because they do (or do not) reflect only one.

—*Samuel R. Delany*

RAMONA, COME SOFTLY

The little man's name was Harvey, and he had a bad leg, a thyroid condition, an ulcer, and a job. The job was to gather material for his famous and international column, "Harvey Asks Questions," and tonight he was in New York, on Broadway, asking about Ramona and Adrian and their performance.

A sampling of theoretical answers from a post-performance random selection would show:

Hari (twenty-four, performer, New York City): I think it was all rather golly goshish, you know. Ramona is lovely, a symbolic ketic for the nineties. She is soft and swovish and very much angelic. For zero, I'd go performy with her myself, since I've got a small (i.e., midget) act, and we're pretty swovish, too.

Bertha (thirty-two, housewife, London, New York City): I thought it was an average performance. We've done much better things in the past, but Ramona is still relatively new at this game. I think if you give her a chance to empathize with Adrian, as I was able to do, things will improve tremendously. Really.

Matthew (thirty-eight, doomsayer and prophet, New York City): The moment of final doom is swiftly approaching as the Lord moves to wake the multitudes, who will drive the whores, sluts, tarts, and pimps from our land, so that the millennium may arrive with all eyes fixed on the heavens, and the Lord will look upon the earth, and He will see the smiling faces, and He will breathe easily. Neo-Vic? Oh, yes, of course. I'm a neo-Vic.

Eldridge (fifty-nine, student, Oil City, Pa.): Sex ought to be limited to the bedroom. I put on a much better show twice each night with my girl friend, Sarah. We've never

thought to sell tickets, but—who knows?—after this—maybe we will. Money is where you find it.

Timothy (nine, unemployed, New Haven, Conn.): I don't get it, but Mom says I will, and soon.

The helicopter, painted bright gold and shallow violet, dropped to the center of the Staten Island Soniport, and a moving sidewalk swept them off their feet and deposited them in the waiting room.

Ramona said, "Check our reservations, Mick, and make sure they're near the end of the plane. You know why."

"You're no safer in the tail," said Mick. "If the plane goes down, you'll go down with it."

"But I'll live longer if I'm in the tail."

"A few seconds."

"A few seconds can be very important." She lifted an eyebrow at the fat man in the purple robes who held her hand to stop the quivering in her middle. "Uncle Solar?"

"No chance of a crash, my dear—it's really quite safe. As I've told you before, you may travel on any day except the twenty-fourth of July, which happens to be a very bad day indeed, not only for you and me, but for all of humanity."

"And today is?"

"The twenty-second of July."

"Thank God. Mick . . ." But he was gone, and with him, the curly black hair which hung past his collar, and the bright red nose which had once been broken in three separate places. Only Ramona knew why, for she was the repository of many shared secrets.

Ramona moved away from Uncle Solar and went searching for Mick. She looked for him at the magazine rack, in the drugstore, at the bank, in the kennel, and at the rent-a-copter outlet. She looked for him almost everywhere. The terminal was filled with people of all descriptions, but none of them was Mick.

She ended up in front of a ticket booth. A bright green

sign flashed: "New York to London Soni Special." This was Ramona's flight, and she stepped into line.

The man in the ticket booth was tiny, barely five feet tall. He wore a huge red mustache, which sat on his upper lip and twitched each time he spoke. When Ramona reached him, she said, "I'm Ramona, and I have three private seats on this flight."

She still wanted to find Mick, but the little man leafed through his cards and found hers. He handed it to her, then looked carefully around, as if ensuring that they were indeed alone. As she was about to leave, he leaned over the counter and whispered, "It's not your fault, Ramona. I know that."

Ramona caught herself, lifting a tentative eyebrow. "Not my fault? What do you mean?"

"A lot of people are losing their heads and blaming you." He looked furtively around, then lowered his voice. "But I know better. It's not your fault. Don't let them say otherwise. We know better. All of us."

"Not my fault?" But it was too late for further questions. The gentleman behind her, a commuter of sorts, was late and in a hurry. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed. She spun away from the booth, stumbling, then found her balance.

When she raised her eyes, she was staring at Mick.

"Where have you been?" she said.

"Bathroom."

"Oh. I—I've got the tickets."

"Good. Let's get Solar and go."

Ramona followed Mick to where they'd left Uncle Solar. It wasn't her fault. How many times had she heard that expression in the last week? Dozens of times, at least. The doorman at the hotel; the novelist at the orgy; the dwarf at the State Department reception.

As they boarded the sonicraft, shuffling through ankle-deep red carpet, Ramona said, "Uncle Solar, what's going to happen on the twenty-fourth?"

"Destruction and death—that much, at least. Our instruments have never been more certain."

"But—but why?"

"The planets are aligned in a fashion that has never before occurred. And—in the other systems—those that we can reach—the planets are similarly aligned."

"But whose fault is it?"

When Uncle Solar laughed, his jowls shook and quivered. But this time he did not laugh. He shrugged and said, "Who knows? Perhaps the fault lies with the manufacturer."

"You don't mean God?"

"Or whoever it is that holds the current option. Just don't let it worry you, my dear. It's not your fault. It certainly isn't."

The private sections of the sonircraft were nearly empty. Besides Ramona and her party, only a single individual occupied the area, a fat smiling man, either Indian or Eskimo, who wore heavy dark furs. He sat alone, thick curtains hiding his chair, as did Uncle Solar, whose duties required him to maintain continuous contact with the Himalayan observatories and their powerful radio-telescopes. Solar drew the curtains around his seat, flashed a smile, and left Mick and Ramona alone.

"Shouldn't Adrian be on this flight?" Ramona said.

Mick shook his head. "He and Bertha had another battle. They'll be along, once things are straightened out."

"I hate Bertha," Ramona said.

"And she hates you."

"Am I better than her, Mick? Am I? The critics say I am. Everyone says I am. But she still acts as though I'm her apprentice."

"Bertha was getting fat. It took her ten minutes to get her tail off the floor. Watching her and Adrian was like watching a slow-motion flick."

"And I'm fast?"

"You're divine."

Ramona laughed and fell to the carpet, burying her knees in the soft fibers.

"I love you, Mick, but you're a liar."

"How perceptive you are, Ramona. How accurate and original."

"But I'm not original," Ramona said. "Eve was there many years ahead of me."

"Yes, but she wasn't an artist. She and Adam just went behind a bush and did it. You're different."

"Because I don't hide behind a bush?"

"Because you're beautiful."

Ramona laughed and thought: *I love you, Mick, but you're a liar.* She'd told him that, and she'd never told him that before. But, of course, she didn't love him. No, she loved Adrian. They were—what was it the swingers and movers said?—they were the lovers of the age. A twentieth-century Romeo and Juliet, unashamed, unafraid, willing to share their love with the masses.

It was funny. They didn't hate each other; they just never talked. It was strictly a business arrangement, like that between two law partners or two collaborating writers. Strictly a business arrangement, more like Laurel and Hardy than Romeo and Juliet.

And Mick. It was a long time ago, and it was the Circus of Delights. The name wasn't Ramona then—oh, no—it was Sally Jenkins, seventeen years old, the last three alone, up and down the island, dancing and stripping and swallowing swords. And then, at last, Tony the Lover and his circus, doing freak stuff during the day and turning fifty-fifty tricks at night. Some life for a former beauty queen.

Mick was conspicuous among the audience, and Sally noticed him almost immediately. There was that funny broken nose and those long black curls. The old ladies and country gentlemen gave him plenty of room and, eventually, he had a chunk of sawdust all to himself. He latched his eyes to Sally's trim form and watched as she did her freaky contorts. Foot behind the ear. Gasp and clap-clap. Head between the knees. More clap-clap. Hands to the ankles and roll like a ball. More applause; sporadic cheers. None of this was easy for Sally Jenkins—that and look sexy at the same time.

It was hard to visualize the Circus of Delights. Only three years had passed, but they could just as easily have been three centuries. There was the old gramophone,

squat and rusty, which played mid-seventies grunt-and-groan loudly and poorly. There was Tony the Lover and his tonsils, barking from outside the tent, calling to the shills, pulling them inside with promises of freaky delights. There was the smell of wet sawdust on the ground and the taste of dry country dirt in the air.

Sally went into her back roll—hands to the ankles—a difficult maneuver, the climax of her act, and when she emerged, grinning at the audience, the long-haired funny nose was gone. Long hair was just returning to style, and only the most uninhibited of men dared wear it. Uninhibited men seldom attend the Circus of Delights, and so Mick had left.

That night, Sally lay beneath a trick, somebody named Alfie, the local constable, fat and hairy and smelling of prison conditions. She lay beneath him, tasting his breath, thinking for some reason of something else entirely.

Then she heard the voice. Tony the Lover was arguing with someone at the front of the trailer. A man's voice, a little shrill, a bit pansy-like, hopefully not another trick.

Leaving the constable buttoning his pants, she went up front. Tony was there, looking especially up-tight, glaring at the man, and the man was the boy she'd seen in the audience. His long hair looked even more soulful in the tight confines of the trailer. It fell past his shoulders and covered his ears. His pants flared widely at the knees and the cuffs, and his shirt was so bright that it stung her eyes. She stared at his face—tanned and yet pale—and studied the turn of his nose.

"This fellow wants to see you," Tony said.

Sally shook her head. "I'm busy," she said, "and tired."

"I've got work for you," Mick said. "I saw your little act, and you were great."

"He's going to make you a bloody star," Tony said. "Tell her, boy—tell her you're going to make her a star."

Grinning crookedly, Mick said, "I'm going to make you a star."

"You want I should kick him?" Tony said.

Sally shook her head. "How are you going to make me a star?"

"I work for Adrian and Bertha. They're the sex-art stars, and Bertha is going to retire. We need a replacement, and I want you. I'm their business manager."

Tony flared indignantly. "Adrian and Bertha. Oh, Christ. They're about as artistic as a fat, hairy constable—" he looked at Sally "eating a slice of green cheese."

"Let's go outside," Sally said. "I want to hear your story."

On the steps of the trailer, Mick said, "It was my idea to grab somebody like you. We've got a pack of imitators dragging our tail, and you'll give us a bit of class. And, besides, you're beautiful."

She laughed.

"What's your name?"

"Sally Jenkins."

"We'll have to change that. And you'll have to be an American. Can you talk like an American?"

"Sure."

"Then you're . . . um . . . Ramona. Yes, that's it. Adrian and Ramona. Beautiful."

"Is it?" Ramona asked.

It was raining in London, and a crowd of thousands surrounded the downed sonicraft. The mob voiced its excitement in an indecipherable howl.

Ramona peeked out a window. To Mick she said, "Are they for us?"

"I hope not. I think not. They're not our kind of people."

"Him?" She pointed at the booth the Eskimo occupied.

"I don't know." He looked out the window again and saw the crowd move softly across the field. He followed it with his eyes and listened with his ears. He heard, "*Ulak. Ulak. Ulak.*" "They're for him," he said. "I didn't recognize him at first."

"Who is he?"

"Ulak, the Eskimo prophet. You mean you haven't

heard? He's taken over from Ravi Aklar. The latest of our saviors."

"Does he predict doom?"

"Heaven on Earth, I think it is. The crowd's gone. Shall we go?"

Ramona pulled on the curtains and waited for Uncle Solar to emerge. He reported an unchanged universe, and the three of them disembarked. They were forced to walk on the runway, cutting through a light rain, touching the tail of Ulak's mob. In the distance, they could hear a flat, dry voice as it orated dully.

"He sounds like them all," Mick said.

"But he's not," said Uncle Solar.

Ramona was watching the welcoming signs. Four in particular caught her eye: (1) London Welcomes You, Weary Traveler from Afar; (2) IT (softdrink) is ★IT★; (3) Destroy Buckingham Palace; (4) Keep Sex in the Bedroom. The signs were so colorful and charming that Ramona ignored their messages in favor of their flavor.

"I want to hear him," Ramona said, stopping abruptly.

"Who? Ulak?"

"Yes, I want to hear him. Uncle Solar, could you get me close?"

"Perhaps, my dear—yes, perhaps I could."

Ramona followed Solar across the landing strip and into the crowd. People parted before them as if it were ordained that the fat man in the purple robes should reach the front of the mob. As Ramona passed, there were shouts and shrieks of recognition.

Ulak stood on a makeshift stage, his eskimo furs shielding his body from the drizzling rain. His eyes flashed like headlights. Between parched lips, Ramona could see that his teeth were rotten. He spoke of heaven on earth.

"The moment short. The time now. The prophets wail throughout the land. Doom. Death. Destruction. Morals collapse. Men starve. Women weep. Children perish."

Ramona listened. The rain drew thick streaks in her freshly painted hair.

"The fault is with no one. Not with he or she or thee. The fault is not with Ramona."

Goosebumps sprouted on slippery thighs.

"Ramona. Never. To blame."

"He's speaking of you," Solar whispered, his hand finding hers in the darkness. "Listen carefully, my dear."

"Not her fault. Say . . . no! Never!"

"But what can I do?" Ramona shouted, not realizing that she'd spoken until long after the words had left her mouth.

Ulak looked down at her, and she saw the ice, the cold, the eternal arctic nights.

"Nothing. One can do nothing. But all may do everything."

"And all is one," shouted a voice from the rear.

"No," Ulak said. "All is not one. But one is all."

"The same thing," insisted the voice.

"But, no," Ulak said. "God is love. Love is blind. Derek is blind. Does that mean that Derek is God?"

"Who's Derek?"

"You are, my friend. You are Derek, all is Derek, and Derek is blind."

Ulak paused, then waved, and bounded off the stage. He waded through the crowd, people parting before him as though they were strands of tall grass.

"To the car?" said Solar.

Ramona nodded, and they walked away.

"Did you like him?" asked Solar.

"I don't know," Ramona said. "Aren't they all the same?"

"But of course, my dear. Of course they're all the same."

Ramona dreamed of Ulak's wet embrace and woke at nine-thirty. She opened her eyes and glared at the pastel plastic bedroom. She rolled to a sitting position and called, "Mick—where are you? I'm up."

A willowy old woman in a dirty yellow uniform popped through the door. Above her left breast, a stitched black notice read, "Hank's Rooming House."

"You called, miss?"

"Yes, I did. Where's Mick?"

"There's a gentleman in the sitting room with thick black hair and a funny red nose."

"Get him—and bring me a robe. From the closet."

"Yes, ma'am, right away. Would you like me to pull back the curtains and give you a peek at our lovely city? You haven't been to London before, have you? I don't remember you, and we get all the celebrities here at Hank's. Why, just last week we had—"

"I was born here."

"What's that?" The maid held Ramona's robe—kneelength and bright green—in her hands. "Where were you born?"

"Right here. In London."

"Oh, really? I never heard that. You sound like an American. I guess that explains everything."

"Explains what?" Ramona said, taking the robe and putting it on.

"Oh—you know—just everything. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Would you get that man for me now?"

"Certainly, ma'am." The maid took a step and paused. "It must be wonderful for you, coming back to your land of birth like this, all famous and all." She smiled tenderly and slipped out the door.

Ramona sat on the edge of the bed, her dimpled chin resting casually in one hand. It had been three years since she'd left England—three years of fame and glory—and she hated the country. The bleak memories rotting in its soil.

Even the hotel room—its drab pinkness—brought back the traveling circuses and the youthful carnivals, the fire-eaters and the sword-swallowers. She'd returned to London to find herself, and found instead Tony the Lover.

Mick entered quietly and found a chair. He propped a booted foot against the wall and pulled nervously at a long black curl. "You look awful," he said.

"I'm frightened."

"Of what? The neo-Vics?"

"This is their stronghold, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not afraid of them."

"Then what?"

"Is Adrian here yet?"

"He arrived about an hour ago. He and Bertha are down the hall a piece."

"What about after the show?"

Mick removed a black notebook from his hip pocket. He thumbed the pages and said, "No performance for two weeks. Rome, if you're interested. Zano, the fashion man, is hosting a party in the Colosseum."

"Will they sacrifice Christians?"

"If they can find any."

"Will Adrian be there?"

"I doubt it. He'll probably want to stay in London. He's never been here before."

"I have."

"Yes, I know." Mick glared at the drawn curtains—pale white with lilac fringe. "You really hate London, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll get tickets for Rome. We'll leave as soon as the show is over tonight. The party will do you good."

Ramona tossed off her robe and padded to the closet. She sorted through a bright collection of skirts, shifts, and mini-nothings. "I feel like wearing green today. Doesn't it feel like a green day to you?"

"Uncle Solar predicts good tidings and cool vibrations."

"Uncle Solar also predicts that the world will end tomorrow at midnight." She found a tinselled green dress and slipped into it. "And I believe him. Have you asked him about Rome?" She searched for a pair of green boots.

"The signs are mixed and quandrious—is that a word?—and we should check with him later."

Fully dressed, Ramona kissed Mick lightly on the nose. She kissed him rarely, and when she did, he always blushed. "We'll go to the party. See that everything is delivered to the soniport before ten."

Mick finished blushing and smiled. "Are you going out?"

"No, I'll just stay here. And think."

"Good idea." He got to his feet. "See you tonight."

As soon as he'd left, the maid reappeared. Sucking on a rotten tooth, she walked to the closet and began straightening hangers.

"Is your family still in London?" she said abruptly.

"They're dead," Ramona said. "All of them. Years ago."

"During the war? I lost a brother during the war. On Long Island."

"No, afterward."

The maid turned to leave. Ramona fell back on the bed and locked her hands behind her head. The maid stopped, spun, and glared.

"It's not your fault," she said.

Ramona sat up and straightened her dress. "What? What isn't my fault?"

"Your parents. Everything. I don't see why they blame you."

"Who? Who blames me?"

"Everyone."

"You're a neo-Vic, aren't you?"

"No." Her cheeks shriveled against her jawline. "I'm . . . I'm only a maid." She laughed softly. "An old maid."

"But you used to be a neo-Vic?"

"Yes." The maid seemed younger now, no more than forty. "I used to think it was all going to end."

"End?"

"The world was going to end. We had nothing to fear from fat bloated Bertha, but you—you were a different story, too good, too close to perfection."

"But it wasn't my fault."

"I thought it was. I thought you ought to kill yourself and save us all. Like Jesus did."

"But you changed your mind?"

"Yes," said the maid, smiling peacefully. "Ulak changed it for me. He knows the truth, and he told me. It's not your fault."

"But whose fault is it? Did he tell you that?"

"It's his fault," said the maid. "All his. Don't you find that funny?"

Ramona arrived early at the Albert Hall. She was fully costumed in a sleek transparency that revealed all her secrets for a mere twenty pounds. Adrian was already there, similarly dressed, and his wife was with him.

Bertha bolted toward Ramona. Two hundred pounds of vicious strength, she stopped, wriggling a blackhead, and said, "Better be careful tonight. The audience is hostile."

"Hostile?" Ramona looked around for Mick, and thought she saw . . . But that was absurd. Not Tony the Lover. Not here. Impossible. "Why would they be hostile? They know what we are."

"Neo-Vics," Bertha said. "The place is jammed full with the fools. I haven't seen so many since that time in Bombay. Adrian—you tell her."

Adrian stepped carefully forward, moving like an actor preparing to take a final bow. He'd been an actor originally, but not a very good one, and the sex-art act had been his conception.

"Bertha is right, dear. I don't know whether the promoter is a sympathizer, but the hall is full of neo-Vics. I don't intend to go on, frankly, unless something is immediately done."

"Don't be silly," Bertha said. "You have to go on."

Ramona continued to search. She looked back at Bertha and said, "Where's Mick? I have to talk to him."

"He's up with the promoter, trying to get things fixed."

"Where?"

"Upstairs and take a left."

Ramona removed her coat and moved softly, without awareness of flesh. As she passed, people turned, some staring, some grinning, some blushing. They knew who she was and why she was naked and that she was art, which was all that was important. If she hadn't been art, she would've been filth, and everything would've been ruined.

But she was art, and thank God for that.

Mick was coming out a door, and Ramona stopped him with a light hand on his wrist.

"What's happening?" Fear slid into her eyes and shivered gently. "Is it bad?"

Mick nodded and led her down the hallway. He found a small room with a couch and forced her to sit, then crouched at her feet. Ramona looked at his nose and saw it twitch with worry.

"Bad trouble," he said. "That bastard Solar. This is the type of thing we keep him around for. Why didn't he warn us, instead of chasing Eskimos around?"

"It's the twenty-fourth," Ramona said. "Solar can't see beyond it."

"Who cares about the twenty-fourth? This is the twenty-third. He can see this far. You can't go on."

"Are they dangerous?"

"They lynched a low-grade act in Scotland."

"But they can't touch me. Can they?"

"Why not? This is London. They rule here. You haven't been out. I have. The whole city is theirs."

"Bertha says we have to go on."

"Bull."

"Tony the Lover is here."

Mick sighed and shook his head. "Tony is dead."

"Show me his body. I saw him—when I came in. He's backstage."

"He's dead."

"Remember my first performance? In Philadelphia?"

Mick nodded. "Tony was there, dressed to the hilt. He was your man, and you were famous."

"And he sat in the first row, and he saw everything."

"He saw you making love to Adrian."

"And he didn't understand."

"Wasn't that funny? He had you doing tricks, and he couldn't understand."

"That was because it was different. With Adrian, I seemed to enjoy it."

"But you didn't?"

"I don't know. I've never been able to find out."

Mick stood and shook himself. "Let's go to Rome."

"I'm going on."

"Ramona . . ."

"This might be my last chance. The twenty-fourth is tomorrow. This is my last chance."

"Uncle Solar . . ."

But her mind was made up. She was going on. Five billion people in the world, and of them all, only Ramona was frightened, worried, and concerned. In two days, it would all be over. No more fear and no more worry. Nothing to be concerned about. Strawberry graveyards forever.

Mick followed her downstairs and past the ebony dressing rooms. She looked for Tony, but he was gone, and Bertha jogged up to her and said, "Are you going on?"

Ramona nodded.

"And the promoter? Is he doing anything?"

"Ask Mick. Is Uncle Solar here?"

"In the audience."

As Mick and Bertha discussed business, Ramona prepared herself for the performance. This was to be her last moment on stage, her grandest achievement, and everything had to be perfect. She blotted all thoughts from her mind and inserted Adrian, letting him grow and expand until he tingled in her fingertips.

A trumpet exploded, a bass drum cracked, and Adrian rushed past her. The stage was hard and bare, flowers touching the edges but failing to intrude.

Ramona moved with the spontaneous casualness of a trained performer, and the audience caught its breath, hissing lightly. She felt Adrian and moved with him, locking, and she thought of Eve twisting lightly in the Garden, and she thought of the end of the world and dropped to the floor. She cooed and Adrian cried, and in the audience, more hisses, then a sudden brutal shriek.

"No." That from the audience, but Ramona could not hear. She knew they were out there, thirsting for blood—neo-Vics—thousands of them—but this was art, she told herself, wanting Mick more than ever, and art prevails when all else dies.

"No."

She twirled and twisted, churned and bounced. Adrian pushed lust aside, inserting art in its place, and Ramona, moving coldly but softly, stretched her body ever upward. Cold tonight, that was Adrian, but Ramona, alone on stage, failed to notice.

"Sin."

Let them yell, as she moved again and again. Higher, yes, higher, ever upward, quick and divine, the soft, then the flesh.

"Stop."

It hit her in the temple, and she tasted her own blood. The spell broken, she stood, seeing . . .

They were coming at her in the thousands, their eyes like searchlights, and they carried signs and held rocks and spat profanity. They screamed:

"Your fault. Your fault. Your fault."

Was it? The question flared in her mind. Then she turned toward the wings, seeking escape, and saw that Adrian had gone there first and that the passage was blocked. The neo-Vics were everywhere, as if the fish in the sea had turned suddenly and begun to devour the old fishermen.

Adrian dropped at her side. They crouched together in the center of the stage, on their knees, their legs parted, as if at prayer.

"I was right," he whispered. "We'll never make it out of here alive. Where's Bertha? Where's Mick?"

"He can't get through," Ramona said, soft tones spinning in a sea of noise. "They're everywhere."

"It's art. Can't they see that? Don't they read the critics? It's art."

"It's me they're after," Ramona said, still whispering. "Don't worry—they won't hurt you. It's all my fault. You had nothing to do with it."

He shook his head carefully, sweat covering his body, bristling the hairs of his chest like so many black wires. "They don't give a damn."

Ramona shut her eyes and listened to the voices. Mingled with the neo-Vics, she heard Mick and Bertha

screaming love at one another. She heard the maid and the ticketman and Tony the Lover—

Step inside, gentlemen, please, and see Miss Sally Jenkins, the girl who can twist her sweet young body as though it were a pretzel. Come on inside, and see things you could never see at home on the Tri-D. It's bizarre, weird, strange, and exotic. But it's for real—and not for the timid of heart. If you're a man—a Real Man, that is—let Sally Jenkins show you how to do it. Miss Sally Jenkins, the human symbol of love and passion.

She felt a cold wind on her thighs and opened her eyes, fleeing the past. The mob was closer now, nearly to the edge of the stage, and a single face bobbed above it. The face moved toward her and emerged from the crowd. It was Ulak's face, and below it, Eskimo furs and bearskin boots. He climbed to the stage and rushed to her side.

"Ulak."

"I can stop them. Tell me that I should. It is not yet time."

"Why are you here?"

"Mere curiosity. I wanted to see your show. But now I can help."

Ramona turned her head and saw Adrian. He was lying flat on his stomach and he was crying. The edge of the mob stood inches away, edging carefully forward.

"Stop them," Ramona said. "For his sake, stop them."

"For your sake, too?"

"No, not for mine. I don't matter. But Adrian—he hasn't done anything."

"He is here with you."

"It doesn't matter."

"Very well. I'll do as you ask." Ulak turned to face the mob. His voice was strong and clear, swelling as he spoke.

"*Wait.* The time is not yet here. It is not the fault of Ramona. Search your souls, my friends, and you shall see. You ask the right questions, but supply the wrong answers. Perhaps, if you ask the wrong questions, then you will find the right answers."

The mob shouted at the walls, "It's him. Ulak. The Eskimo."

"You have drawn the sign, and it has been seen. You have spoken the word, and it has been heard. But now you must go. Return to your homes. Await the moment when you will be called. Harm not these two, for they are part of the answer we all seek to find."

More whispering, and this time, a few people moved slowly away. Others followed, plodding sheepishly back to their seats. Twenty were left—mostly men, a handful of women, a solitary young girl. As one, they took a single step forward. Raising a hand, Ulak stopped them, saying, "Do not destroy that which must happen. Let it be. The world must exist as existence. It must remain as it is."

A fat, red-faced man at the front shouted, "What do you mean by that?"

"Wait until tomorrow, my friend, and you shall see what I mean. Everyone shall see as with perfect vision."

Adrian pulled himself gingerly to his feet. Reaching down, he grasped Ramona by the wrist. Peering over his shoulder, watching Ulak and the mob, he led her to the safety of the wings.

In a moment, she collapsed against the coolness of Mick's chest.

"I told you not to do it. I did. I told you."

"I know. You were right. I almost ruined it."

"Ruined it? We'll have to wait and see. It's all right now."

"Is it?" She jerked away from him, suddenly aware of the faces. "Is Solar here? I have to talk to him."

"I haven't seen him."

Ramona ran to Adrian, who talked pleadingly with Bertha, tears clouding his eyes.

"Have you seen Uncle Solar? I have to talk to him."

Bertha wheeled on her, viciously straining her cheeks. "Go away. Can't you leave us alone? It's your fault. Adrian almost died because of you and your—"

"I didn't—"

But it was too late. The little man—thick red hair, fat

lips, soft womanly flesh—had been waiting all night. Concealed by the surging mob, he'd moved to the wings, and now, everything in readiness, he ran, pulling the weapon from his pocket, pressing it against Adrian's chest, and . . .

Mick gasped.

Bertha wailed.

Ramona screamed.

Solar emerged.

The mob howled.

Adrian died. The bullet penetrated his heart. Without protest, he ceased to live.

Ramona crouched at the side of her dead lover, holding his head in her hands. A policeman ran, firing wildly at the assassin, who, blood spurting, fell to the floor. Within moments, he, too, ceased to exist.

Bertha screamed at Ramona: "How does it feel? How does it feel to have killed the only person who ever loved you?"

Ramona grinned, pointing at the body of the little assassin. "You mean him?"

It was raining in Rome, drizzling on the steps of the Vatican, as Ramona and Mick watched the Pope.

"Why did we come here?" Ramona said. "I feel so silly watching him up there on his balcony, like an old historical film."

"He's a very historical figure," Mick said.

The Pope wore a cowboy outfit, two pearl-handled Colt .45 revolvers strapped firmly around his pudgy waist. Instead of a tin star, a wooden cross hung neatly from the chest of his red flannel shirt. His ten-gallon hat flashed brazenly white.

"What time is it?"

"Three o'clock. Why?"

"I don't want to be late."

"For Zano's party?"

"For the end of the world."

I'm glad you folks turned out. We're going to have us a mighty fine prayer meeting this afternoon.

"I'd sort of like to meet him. Are you Catholic, Mick?"
"Sort of."

May the Good Lord bless our crops and our animals and, most especially, our hungry little children.

The rain poured harder. Mick unfurled an umbrella, and he and Ramona cuddled beneath it. The rain lapped at their feet, soaking their shoes. Ramona, in a bright yellow mini-nothing, shivered, resenting her image.

"I wish I could dress warm sometimes."

"Shh," Mick said. "This is the best part. He's talking about Jesus."

And then the Great Lone Star appeared high in the sky, right above the City of Dallas, and its bright holy light directed the three wise cowpokes to the tepee of the littlest Injun.

"That's not Jesus."

"Everyone to their own god."

"Don't be philosophical. I know Jesus when I see him."

"When did you see him last?"

Goodbye, my good friends. We shall meet again in the Happy Hunting Ground.

The fury of the downpour lessened, perhaps as a sign. The Pope, with a wave and a tossed kiss, fled to the sanctuary of the Vatican, his spangled chaps crinkling as he walked. Ramona and Mick waited until he was lost to view, then turned toward the street.

"He sounds like a comedian," Ramona said.

"Before he submitted low bid for the Papacy, he was one."

A stooped old woman, her black robes soaked by the rain, followed them at a distance of six yards. When Ramona took a step, the woman did the same. But she never drew closer.

"What does she want?" Ramona whispered. "I hate it when they follow me. I think they're going to stick a knife in my back."

"Give her an autograph," Mick said. "She'll go away."

They paused at the curb. Electro-cabs whizzed by in packed masses, whirring like hives of arrogant wasps. A street peddler sold rain-soaked flowers to the grinning tourists.

The old woman shuffled closer, then stopped. Hesitantly, she lifted her black veil, displaying yellow teeth and black gums.

"Do you want my autograph?" Ramona asked.

The woman shook her head, smiling. "No—no autograph."

"Then what do you want with me?"

The woman's face crinkled, and she seemed to laugh. The laugh cracked beneath a rasping cough.

"What do you want with us?" Mick demanded.

The woman fought to control her coughing. "I must tell you—I must tell you that Adrian is alive."

"Adrian is dead," Mick said.

"But—but no. He is alive and wishes to see you both."

"Go away," Mick said. "We don't want to hear your lies." Furiously, he waved for an electro-cab.

"I am sorry it must be like this," the woman said. "I only carry the message." She turned slowly and moved toward the Vatican. A cab stopped, and Ramona moved to climb inside, but the old woman turned.

"It's not your fault," she said. "It's not your fault at all."

"How can you be sure?" Ramona asked.

"I am sure," the woman said. "I say nothing unless I am sure."

Ramona and Mick climbed into the cab. As it hurried through thick evening traffic, Ramona said, "She was mad, of course."

"Isn't everyone?" said Mick.

"No," Ramona said. "It might be better if they were. But they're not."

The rain had stopped by the time they reached the Colosseum. Huge yellow spotlights flared brightly from the highest levels, and Ramona, standing in the center of the arena floor, felt frightened and alone. The lights

had always been the same, but now the audience was gone.

She turned to Mick, who sat cross-legged on the ground, his crimson trousers speckled with orange sawdust.

"We should've come later," she said. "This place scares me."

"I hope they keep the lions caged." When she didn't laugh, he added, "That's what they used to do. Feed Christians to the lions. Bread and circuses. A million laughs."

Zano was famous throughout Europe for his parties. Great wooden tables filled the arena floor, each stacked high with the richest of foods and the finest of wines. Tuxedoed waiters stood quietly beside the tables, their arms folded and their knees loose. An orange pig roasted forlornly above a towering flame.

"They'd better hurry," Ramona said. "Or I'm going home."

"Don't worry. There was a concert at Zano's castle. I know you hate concerts."

"I hate parties."

Seventeen tunnels, dark and silent, led to the Colosseum floor. Two thousand years before, the tunnels had bustled with life and death. Now history grimly repeated itself. A horn beeped and a siren howled. Heavy footsteps crackled in the sawdust. A man screamed, and a woman shrieked.

"Here they come," Mick said.

They poured out of the tunnels in an unceasing flow of flesh and cloth. They came in twos, in fours, and in dozens. No one was alone. They filled the arena and charged the tables, pushing the waiters aside, attacking the food and guzzling the wine.

"Let's get something to drink," Mick said, "before it's too late."

They waded to the nearest table, pushing their way through surging humanity. Mick stuck in a hand and emerged with a bottle of red. With his teeth, he pulled the cork and drank deeply. He pushed the bottle at Ramona,

and she shook her head. A fat man in a scarlet toga collapsed at her feet, rolling in the sawdust. "I'm a Christian," he bellowed. "I'm a bloody Christian."

"Let's find Zano," Mick said.

But finding a single individual among the milling hundreds was an impossible task. Mick and Ramona paused at a concrete wall and struggled for breath.

"I want out of here," said Ramona. "We should never have come."

"We had to come. This is our last chance for celebration."

"This is our last chance for everything."

"Please . . . A question, please . . ."

Ramona raised her eyes at the sound of the new voice and saw a thin, stooped man with bushy eyebrows and a hooked nose.

"Yes?"

"How did you find your lover's death?"

"Who are you?"

"The name is Monticello. I'm a journalist."

"Go away," Mick said. "Ramona never grants interviews."

Monticello grinned, displaying sharp teeth. "Did his blood turn you on? Did it make you hot? Did seeing his guts lying loose on the floor do something to you inside?" He removed a notebook from his breast pocket and stood ready, pencil poised above the page. "Tell me everything, my dear."

"Why should I?"

"You have a public that's fascinated by every facet of your wild and glamorous existence. Satisfying the desires of that public happens to be my sad duty. Personally, I couldn't care less. You revolt and disgust me."

"But after midnight, I won't have a public. They'll all be dead."

"Nonsense. Of course you'll have a public. You see—" he leaned close, fastening his lips to her ear "—they fully intend to follow you to your grave."

Ramona jerked away from him. "You don't care," she screamed. "None of you care. I'm the only one. I have to

carry the whole world on my back. Why me? Why? Why?"

"Why not?" said Monticello. "It's your fault, isn't it?"

Ramona ran. She ran faster than she'd ever run before, footsteps pounding at her heels, increasing her pace, knowing that it was only Mick who followed.

She stopped at the center of the arena, alone at last, and gasped for air.

Mick walked casually up to her and said, "Uncle Solar is over there."

Ramona looked to where he pointed. Solar, attired in his violet and velvet robes, sat in the dust at the edge of the floor. He clutched a bottle of wine in his right hand and, grinning, tilted it to his lips.

Mick and Ramona crossed to where he sat. They dropped to the ground, one on each side.

"It's going to end?" Ramona said.

Solar's chin rested languidly against his chest. At the sound of her voice, he began to lift it. He moved it two full inches, fat jowls, folded skin, then stopped, exhausted. "Yes," he said.

"And you care?"

Solar sighed, licking parched lips. "Yes, I care. Isn't it funny? You see, I never really believed in it until now. I saw it all as a vast cosmic joke, a mild bit of amusement on the part of the gods. Scare the human race out of its pants. Make them appreciate the fortune of their existence. But we didn't scare—oh, no, not us—we're too brave for that. We just looked the other way. And now it seems to be over."

"The stars . . . ?"

"Say nothing. There is no future. Time dies at the stroke of twelve. Perhaps—" he laughed "—perhaps we shall all turn into pumpkins."

"I cared," Ramona said, "and I was the only one, wasn't I?"

"I think you were, my dear. But does it matter? You were too small and too late. They merely blamed you."

"But it wasn't my fault, was it?"

"No," said Solar, "it wasn't your fault." His chin fell back against his chest, and his eyes closed.

Ramona looked at Mick. "Can we go now? It's late, and I don't want it to end here."

Solar tilted his bottle, streams of red juice flowing down his chest. "I want it to end here," he said, eyes still shut. "This is where it started, and this is where it ought to end. At least we're going out the same way we came in—drunk on our fat, flabby tails."

It was eleven o'clock.

Mick and Ramona left the Colosseum. Solar remained with the sawdust, clutching his wine, his thought, his pain.

The streets were deserted, dark. Clouds covered all but the brightest of stars: Jupiter here; Sirius there. The moon was hidden. Thick sheets of rain dropped from the sky, and something else—was it hail?

"The party's over," Mick said, finding shelter beneath a concrete ledge.

"Get a cab," said Ramona.

"Where to?"

"I don't know—who cares?—I don't care."

Mick paced the streets, rain slapping his face. He found a cab two blocks from the Colosseum and stopped it.

It was ten minutes past eleven.

The driver listened to the radio, a steady blast of howl-and-moan. Ramona said, "Turn it off."

The driver peeked over his shoulder and blinked. "I know you, don't I?" He flicked off the radio, preened his mustache, and drove.

"Just drive," Mick said. "Anywhere."

They moved slowly, up streets, down alleys, around blocks. The driver slapped the steering wheel, a powerful rhythm of non-music.

Ramona watched the streets and found them empty. Where were the people? Were they huddled inside, waiting for the end? What of the dark skyscrapers, stretching miles into the heavens? Were the people curled inside those sleek concrete wombs, waiting for the end? What of the squat, dark houses and the bright, gleaming shops?

Were the people there? Or had they run, seeking the earth in their last faint hours?"

"Stop here," Ramona said.

The head of a dog, red with toothy grin, rotated above the shop. The dog wore a white chef's cap, which tilted awkwardly at a cocky angle.

Mick lifted an eyebrow. "A hot-dog parlor?"

"Wait here," Ramona told the driver. "Or don't, if you'd rather not. It doesn't matter."

"I'll wait," he said.

They went inside. It was eleven-thirty.

Ramona went to the nearest vending machine and selected three buttons. Punching them, she received a hot dog, a tray of french-fried potatoes, and a thick chocolate milk shake. The machine refused to return her change. She slapped it, then kicked it.

Mick said, "We're alone."

Ramona said, "Eat your food."

They sat, eating. The hot dog was dull and tasteless. The french-fried potatoes were cold and uncooked. Ramona finished, belched, then lit a cigarette. She smoked softly and quietly.

"It's nearly midnight," Mick said. "Do you want it here?"

"Yes," said Ramona.

Mick shrugged.

At five minutes to twelve, Ulak entered the hot dog parlor, his thick furs dripping with rain. He went to a machine and selected a cheeseburger (with all the trimmings). He moved to Ramona's table and sat across from her.

"You were expecting me?"

Ramona nodded, then shook her head.

"A few things you must know," he said, biting into his cheeseburger. "In my land, we do not have these foods. We have the ice, the snow, the cold. We eat the walrus, the fish, the bear. But we do not eat the cheeseburger." He took another bite.

"Do you like our food?"

"It is very healthy," said Ulak. "It has the important

nutrients." He flicked his eyes around the parlor. "Lean your ear close, and I will tell you."

Ramona leaned across the table, feeling Ulak's lips as tiny chips of ice. He whispered: "All the world is a stage."

Ramona pulled away and rubbed her ear. "That's paranoid," she said. "And stupid."

"Unoriginal, as well," Ulak said. "But it's what you believe."

"Yes," she said.

"And you're wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Yes. Here, let me show you. Mick—what is the time?"

Mick glanced at his watch. "A minute past," he said, whispering softly. "And we're still here. Did . . . ?"

"Allow me to show you," Ulak said. "Please follow." He climbed unsteadily to his feet, and Ramona realized that he was very drunk. She looked at Mick, and he shrugged his shoulders. They followed Ulak to the front door. The glass panels, sensing their approach, swung open.

The streets were cold and dark, but the rain and hail had stopped. Ramona looked at the sky. The stars were out, but they did not blink. The moon stood paused in the center of the sky.

Ulak waved a hand. "Look at this," he said. "Is this the world our God created?"

Ramona tried to look where Ulak pointed, but all she could see was the waiting electro-cab, its sleek lines and bright ornaments. They passed the cab and moved down the boulevard. It was one of Rome's finest, and hundreds of neon signs danced with a lifegiving force all their own.

"The signs," Ulak said. "They have a message for all of us."

"You're drunk," Ramona said. "What kind of messiah are you? The world is ending, and you're drunk."

"How else?" Ulak said, laughing. "I attended your party. It was much fun. Nothing like Alaska."

"Do you have these signs in the arctic?"

"Nothing like them—" he staggered and Mick grabbed his arm "—and perhaps that is why I love them."

Ramona looked again at the neon signs. They shouted the delights of quick-frozen vegetables; they announced the beauties of swirling fad music; they called attention to artful new designs in modern electro-cars. Ramona studied the signs—more electronic colors than she'd ever imagined possible—but she failed to understand them.

They found a man at the corner. His eyes were white, and his flesh was pale. He wore a heavy winter jacket, twenty years out of date. An engraved sign dangled from his neck:

DIEGO MORTON CUNNINGHAM
(1954-1985)

Designer of Prefabricated
Rome

Ramona reached out and stroked Diego Cunningham's granite jaw. The sound echoed, firm, bleak, and solid. Ramona circled the statue, noting the slim economy of its linear formation. It wasn't art, but it spoke directly to her soul.

"Are they all like this?" she asked.

"All but us," said Ulak.

"Do you think he led a good life?" she said. "Do you think he died happily? It seems—I may be wrong—but it seems as if he's smiling."

"He died of cancer, slowly, painfully."

"They could cure it now."

"They could have cured it then; but, yes, he lived a good life, a marvelous life."

Mick touched the statue, running his fingers along its

furrowed brow, past its long, sloping nose. "Why are we free?" he asked. "Why have we been allowed to live?"

"Because you are the saviors."

"And you, I suppose, are God."

"I don't think so," Ulak said, "but I've never given it much thought. Symbolism is so very painful."

"But," said Mick, "that's what all of this is. Symbols."

"Then remove the signs."

"Remove them?"

"Yes, remove the signs."

"Me?"

"Or Ramona. It doesn't matter which."

"I'll do it," Ramona said, stepping forward and touching the sign which dangled from Cunningham's neck. It was made of a light cheap metal and felt crisp and new beneath her grasp.

"Don't," Mick said.

Ramona released the sign and turned, shoulders tense. "Why not?"

"Don't you like it better this way? Don't you see that it's all a trick? Do you want to go back to parties at the Colosseum, assassinations at the Albert Hall, pain, hate, guilt? If you remove the signs, you bring it all back to life. Why should you save the world? Let it take care of itself."

Ramona turned to Ulak. Hands open, eyes bright, she said, "Is this true?"

Ulak nodded and said, "Yes, perhaps it is."

"Then—then I'm not going to do it," she said. "I like it better this way, too. It's so quiet now, like in the mountains after a fierce storm."

"But won't you like it better without the signs?" Ulak said. "Won't it change everything?"

"Perhaps," Ramona said softly, "and perhaps not. I'm sick of living by your principles. I'm tired of suffering for the same senseless reasons. Why do I suffer? Because you say I have to suffer. You say it's my fault, then you turn around and say it's not my fault. The one thing you won't ever say is that it's not even my problem."

"But you were worried," Ulak said. "You were the

only one who was. That's why you're here now, without a sign, making the choice."

"Do you think removing signs is the only answer? Do you think it will make that much of a difference? I don't know—maybe it will. Maybe up in the arctic where all the signs say simple things like 'bear' and 'cold' and 'walrus'. But here they say too many things, and most of us carry a dozen signs around our necks all our lives. The signs say things like 'love' and 'hate' and 'envy' and 'honor' and 'pride.' You can't remove those signs, Ulak. You have to scrape them away with a knife."

"Then—then scrape."

"I—" Ramona grabbed the sign on the statue's neck and pulled it off. She threw it to the pavement, where it clattered and rang like a broken bell. "There," she said. "Now I've done it. But what about his other signs? What about the ones that say 'father' and 'provider' and 'good guy' and 'bad guy'? What am I supposed to do about them?"

"Ignore them," Ulak said. "Stop looking at the signs and start looking beyond them."

"They won't do it for me. Why should I do it for them?"

"Maybe they will now," Ulak said. "Maybe it will be different with their signs gone. Why don't you wait and see? What can it hurt?"

"Maybe this and maybe that. That's all you ever say. Why don't you say something definite for a change?"

Ulak looked at his watch and said, "It's twelve-thirty."

"Then that was it," Mick said. "That was the end of the world. Not much to it, really. Not much at all. Hardly enough substance for a short subject."

"That's it?" Ramona said.

"That's it," said Ulak.

"Was it enough?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps it was."

They walked away. The streets had turned to life with the speed of a Boeing Sonicraft. When she reached the curb, Ramona paused and looked back. Diego Morton Cunningham stood frozen as the drizzle began anew.

Ramona stared at him, wondering. Had it been enough? Could she truly expect to do it all herself?

She waved lightly at the statue and climbed into a waiting electro-cab.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

"Take us home," Mick said.

"And where's that?"

"Far away," Ramona said. "Far, far away."

"That's funny?"

"You'll understand someday. Please. Drive us."

The cab cruised the streets, circling the same block a dozen times. At last, the driver stopped.

"Why are you stopping?" Ramona said. "I didn't tell you to stop."

"I can't drive in a circle all night. I've got to have some directions."

"Is it really necessary?"

"Yes."

"What if I asked you a question instead?"

"What question?"

"Do you think it's my fault?"

The driver pondered. He tapped the steering wheel and scratched his chin. Then he laughed. Soon Mick laughed with him, and Ulak.

"It's my fault," the driver said. "It's all my fault. And yours. And his. And—you know what . . . ?"

Ramona shook her head quickly. What?"

"I don't give a damn. I just don't give a holy goddamn."

And with that, the driver stomped on the gas pedal, and the cab soared down the street, Ramona looking out the window, seeing life everywhere; it danced and it swirled and it lived and it shouted. Right there in the streets of Rome—it did everything life could possibly do.

Mick was laughing. He was laughing as he'd never laughed before and, quickly, before she joined him, Ramona said, "Nothing is funny; nothing is so absolutely funny, and I can't stop laughing."

And Ramona laughed.

Loudly.

Louder.

Loudest.

Ramona laughed because the signs had come crashing down, and the people were dancing in the streets, and Adrian was dead, and Tony was back, and Philadelphia was where she'd started. Bertha and the maid and the Pope and Uncle Solar and the woman in black and all of them: Animals and vegetables and minerals.

And minerals: Where it had all begun.

And, yes, and minerals.

—*Gordon Eklund*

SIX DRAWINGS

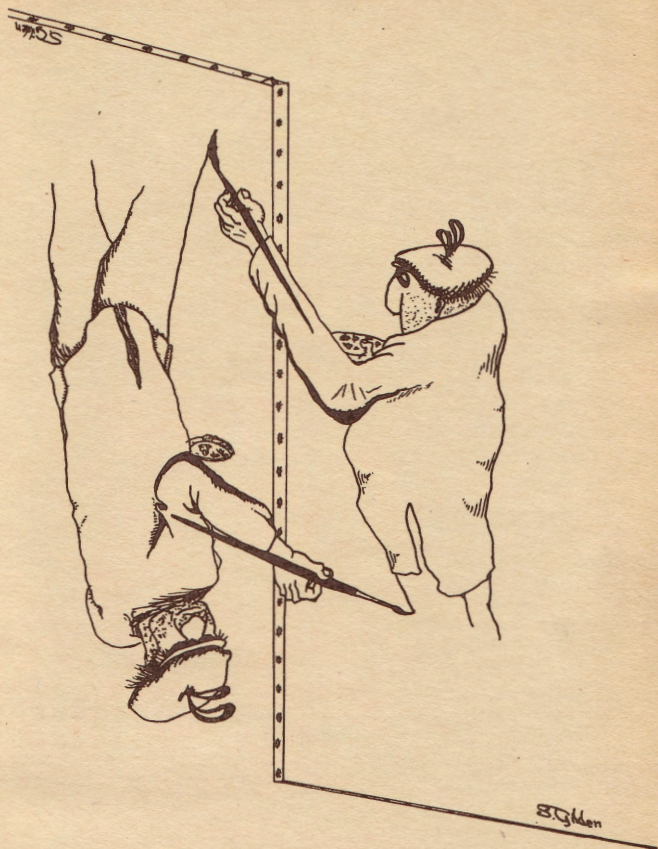
—*Stephen Gilden*



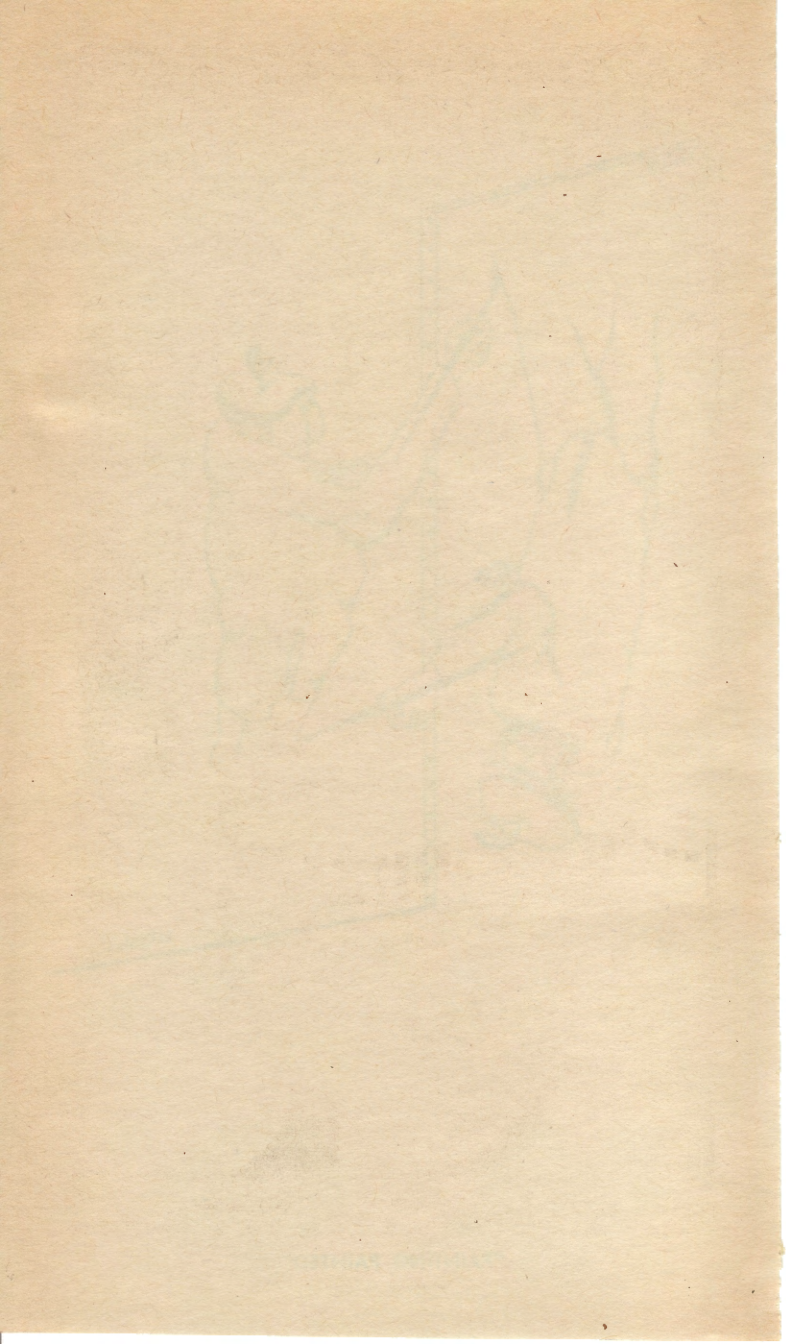
"STUDY AFTER SOMEBODY OR OTHER"



"EYE-STONED"



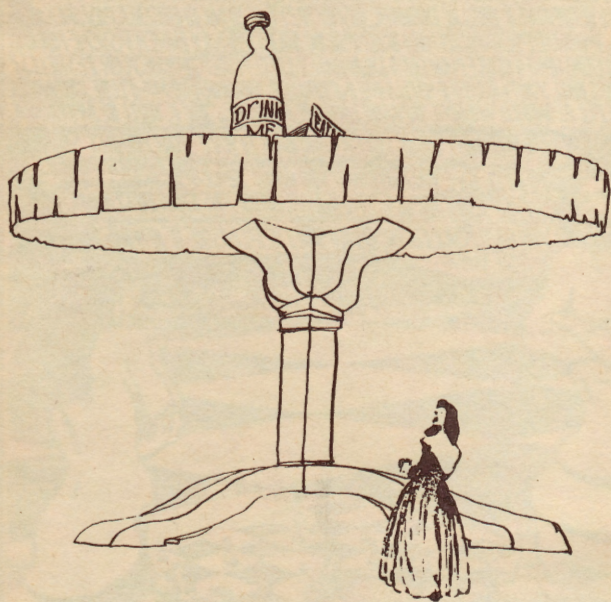
"PAINTING PAINTED"



I'LL TRADE YOU 3 GUARANTEED SYMPATHY-GETTING EXTERNAL
 VISUAL POSTURES IF YOU'LL GIVE ME ONE INNER SENSE OF SUPERIOR
 SATISFACTION. I'LL TRADE YOU DOUBLE-EDGED INSIGHT FOR A MORBID CUR-
 IOSITY. CHECK. I'LL LET DOWN MY HAIR IF YOU'LL CLIMB MY WALLS OF
 I'LL GIVE YOU A YOUNG INNOCENT-TYPE ID FOR A TIRED OLD WORK-OUT. HOSTILITY.
 EGO. I'LL SUCCEMB TO YOUR INTELLECT IF YOU'LL FACE YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES.
 I'LL TELL YOU WHERE IT'S AT IF YOU'LL TELL ME HOW TO GET AWAY FROM IT.
 (GUARD YOUR QUEEN). (KNIGHT TO KING-2). A WELL-ADJUSTED PERSONALITY.
 A #3 PHRASE FOR 2 FRIENDLY CLICHES FOR A MISINFORMED DISILLUSIONMENT.
 I'LL GIVE YOU A BETTER LIFE IF YOU'LL SHOW ME HOW TO LIVE. I'LL FOLLOW YOU AROUND IF YOU'LL
 I'LL BE CREATIVE IF YOU'LL BE DOGMATIC. (BISHOP TO 2). LEAD ME TO GREENER PASTURES.
 A PARANOID PREOCCUPATION FOR A SCHIZOPHRENIC SOCIETY? MY INNER PSYCHE FOR
 A CONSTIPATED CONCEPTION FOR A DILAPIDATED DECEPTION? YOUR TESTICLES?
 I'LL HATE YOUR MOTHER IF YOU'LL HATE MY FATHER. (PAWN UP). CHECK. I'LL BE YOUR MOTHER
 I'LL BE WORLD-WEARY IF YOU WON'T LAUGH AT MY ACNE.. IF YOU'LL BE MY FATHER.
 (LOOK TO BISHOP'S SQUARE). I'LL COME BACK TO YOU IF YOUR HEART'S
 GROWN FONDLE.
 I'LL GIVE YOU ANYTHING YOU WANT SINCE
 RECEIVE ANYTHING. GIVING IS MORE SATISFYING THAN RECEIVING.
 YOU GIVE SINCE I'LL BE GIVING YOU THE PLEASURE OF GIVING
 THAT WAY.....

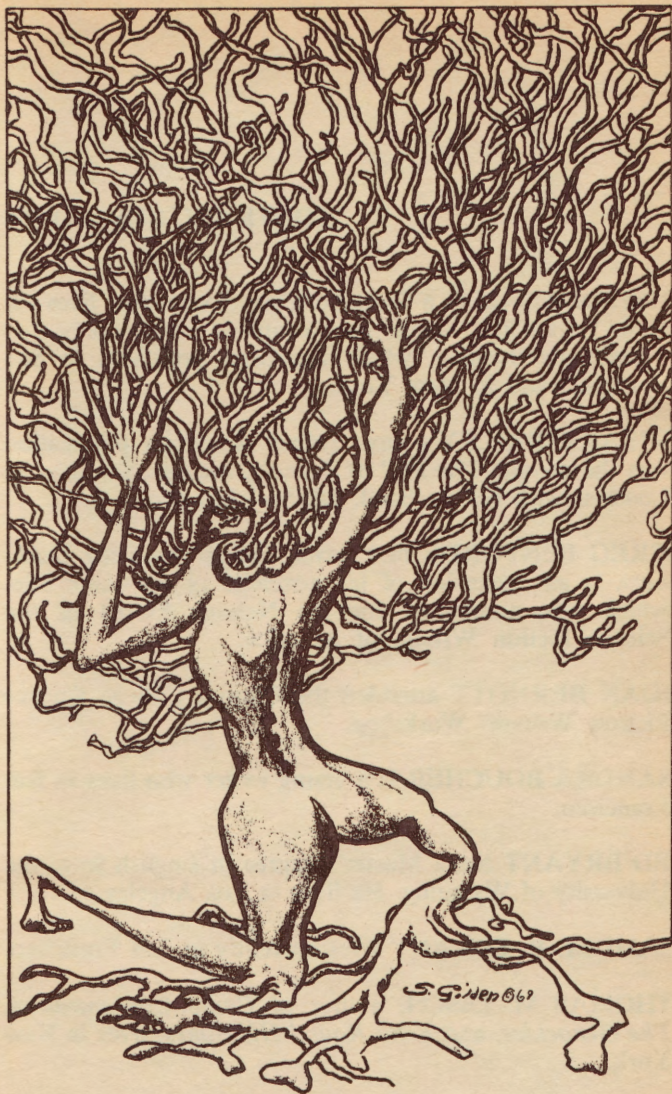


"CHESS MESS"



S. J. den

"YE OLDE ALICE"



"TREE LADY"

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