

COME TO VENUS MELANCHOLY

Thomas M. Disch

Is that you, John? Did someone just come in the door? Of course, it wouldn't be John. Not after all this time. It was because I was startled I said that. If you're there, whoever you are, do you mind if I talk to you?

And if you're not there?

Then I suppose you'll mind even less.

Maybe it was just the wind. Can the wind lift a latch? Maybe the latch is broken. Though it feels all right now. Or maybe I'm hallucinating. That's what happened, you know, in the classic

sense-deprivation experiments. But I guess my case is different. I guess they've rigged me up some way so that can't happen.

Or maybe—Christ, I hope not! Maybe one of those hairy caterpillar things has got inside. I really couldn't stand that—thinking of the whole house, thinking of *me*, crawling with those things. I've always hated bugs. So if you don't mind, I'll close the door.

Have you been trying to talk to me? I should have told you it's no use. I can't hear and I can't see. I'm broken. Do you see, there in the larger room, in each corner, about five feet from the floor, how they've been smashed? My eyes and ears. Can't they be fixed somehow? If it's only a matter of vacuum tubes and diaphragms, there should be things of that sort downstairs. I'm opening the trapdoor now—do you see? And I've turned the lights on in the storeroom.

Oh hell, what's the use?

I mean *you're* probably not there, and even if you are, *he* probably thought to smash any spare tubes that were left. He thought of everything else.

Ah, but he was so handsome, he was really so handsome. He wasn't tall. After all, the ceiling here isn't much over six feet. But he was well-proportioned. He had deep-set eyes and a low brow. Sometimes, when he was worried or puzzled, he looked positively neanderthal.

John George Clay, that was his name. It sounds like part of a poem, doesn't it? John George Clay.

It wasn't so much his features—it was his manner. He took himself so seriously. And he was so dumb. It was that combination—the earnestness and the stupidity—that got to me. A sort of maternity syndrome I guess you'd call it. After all, I couldn't very well be his wife, could I?

Oh, when I think...

Excuse me, I must be boring you. I'm sure you can't be that interested in a machine's love life. Perhaps I could read something aloud? He wasn't able to get at the microfilm library, so there's still plenty of books. When I'm by myself I don't do anything but read. It gets to seem as though the whole world was made of print. I look at it not for what's written there but as though it were a landscape. But I digress.

What do you like; poetry? novels? science textbooks? the encyclopedia? I've read all of it so many times I could puke, if you'll excuse the expression. Whoever selected those books never heard of the twentieth century. There's nothing later than Robert Browning and Thomas Hardy—and would you believe it?—some of *that* has been expurgated? What did they think? That Browning would corrupt my morals? Or John's? Who can understand the bureaucratic mind?

Personally, I prefer poetry. You don't get tired of it so quickly. But maybe there's something you need to know, a point of information? If you could only *talk* to me. There must be some way to fix one of the mikes, there has to. Oh, *please!*

Oh hell.

I'm sorry, but it's just that it's so hard to believe that you're there. It gets to seem that I only talk to hear myself speak. I wish to God I *could* hear myself speak.

Maybe I just sound like static to you. Maybe he smashed the speakers too, I wouldn't be surprised. I don't know. There's no way I can tell. But I try my best, I think each word very slowly and try to enunciate mentally. And that way the caterpillars won't be confused. Ha!

I'm really glad you've come. I've been so long without

company that I'm grateful even for the illusion of it. Don't take offense: since I can't ever be sure that you're there, you can't be more than illusion for me, whether you're real or not. A paradox. I welcome you in either case. With my doors wide open.

It's been fifteen years. Fifteen years, four months, twelve days—and three hours. I've got this built-in clock connected to what used to be the nerves of my stomach. I'm never in doubt about the time. It's always right there—like a bellyache. There've been whole days when I just listen to myself tick.

I was human once, you know. A married woman, with two children and a Master's in English Lit. A lot of good that ever did. My thesis was on some letters Milton wrote when he was Cromwell's Latin Secretary. Dull? You'd better believe it. Only I'll ever know *how* dull.

And yet... now... I'd give this whole damn planet to be back there in the academic squirrel cage, spinning that beautiful, dull wheel.

Do you like Milton? I've got the Complete Works, except for the things he wrote in Latin. I could read you something, if you'd like.

I used to read things to John, but he didn't much appreciate it. He enjoyed mysteries now and then. Or he'd study an electronics text under the scanner. But poetry bored him. It was worse than that: he seemed to hate poetry.

But maybe you're not like that. How can I tell? Do you mind if I just read it aloud for my own sake? Poetry's meant to be read aloud.

Il Penseroso. Do you know it? It gives me goosebumps every time. Figuratively.

Are you listening, caterpillars?

How did you like that?

*These pleasures, Melancholy, give,
And I with thee will choose to live.*

Well, it's all a lot of gas. That's what dear John called it. He called it other things too, and in each case I've come at last to agree. But such lovely gas. John couldn't see that. He was a very simple sort, was John, and blind to the beauty of almost anything except a rip-snorting sunset. And nude women. He was uncomplicated. Without a sense of dialectics. He probably didn't understand half the things I said to him. If ever there was a mismatched couple, it was us.

Spacemen and pioneers, you know, are supposed to be brighter than average. And maybe John's IQ was a bit over one hundred but not by much, not by half a sigma distance. After all, what did he need intelligence for? He was only a glorified fur-trader. He'd go out into the swamp and hunt around for the slugs the caterpillars laid there. He'd find one, maybe two, a day and keep them undernourished so they'd grow slower. Every three weeks the ship would come along, pick up the slugs, and leave supplies.

I don't know what the slugs were for. They secreted something hallucinogenic, but whether they were using it to cure psychoses or produce them, I never found out. There was a war going on then, and my theory was that it all had something to do with bacteriological warfare.

Maybe the war is still going on. But my theory—my *other* theory, I have lots of them—is that the war is over and both sides have killed each other off. Otherwise, wouldn't someone have come here for me by now?

But maybe they have—maybe that’s why *you’re* here! Is it?
Or maybe they don’t care. Maybe I’m considered expendable.
Maybe, maybe, maybe! Oh God I could scream!

There now, I’m better again. These things pass.

Let me introduce myself. I’ve lost my good manners living out here alone like this. My name is Selma Meret Hoffer. Hoffer’s my maiden name. I use it now that I’m divorced.

Why don’t I tell you my story? It will pass the time as well as anything. There’s nothing much to tell about the time I was human. I won’t say I was ordinary—nobody ever believes that of themselves—but I probably didn’t stand out in a crowd. In fact, I tried very hard not to. I’m the introvert type.

I was only thirty-two when I found out I had leukemia. The clinic gave me six months. The alternative was this. Of course I chose this. I thought I was lucky I could qualify. Most people don’t have an alternative. Of those who do, few refuse. In a way it seemed like an afterlife. The operation was certainly a good facsimile of death.

After the surgery they used fancy acids that attacked the body tissues selectively. Anaesthetics didn’t help much then. They whittled me down to the bare nerves and dumped me into this tank and sealed me in.

Voilà—the Cyborg!

Between the sealing-in and the shipping off there were months and months while I was being wired up with the auxiliary memory banks and being taught to use my motor nerves again. It’s quite a traumatic experience, losing your body, and the tendency is to go catatonic. What else is there to *do* after all? Naturally I don’t remember much of that time.

They brought me out of it with shock treatment, and the first thing I remember was this room. It was stark and antiseptic then. I suppose it still is, but then it was starker and more antiseptic. I hated it with a passion. The walls were that insipid creamy-green that's supposed to prevent eyestrain. They must have got the furniture from a fire sale at the Bauhaus. It was all aluminum tubes and swatches of bright-colored canvas. And even so, by some miracle of design the room managed to seem cramped. It's fifteen feet square, but then it seemed no bigger than a coffin. I wanted to run right out of that room—and then I realized I couldn't: I was the room, the room was me.

I learned to talk very quickly so I could give them directions for redecorating. They argued at first. "But, Miss Hoffer," they'd say, "we can't take an ounce more payload, and this furniture is Regulation." That was the name of their god, Regulation. I said if it took an act of Congress they'd redecorate, and at last I got my way. Looking back on it, I suspect the whole thing was done to keep me busy. Those first few months when you're learning to think of yourself as a machine can be pretty rife with horror. A lot of the cyborgs just go psycho—usually it's some compulsion mechanism. They just keep repeating the Star-Spangled Banner or say the rosary or some such thing. Like a machine.

They say it's not the same thing—a cybernetic organism and a machine, but what do they know about it? They're not cyborgs.

Even when I was human I was never any good at mechanical things. I could never remember which way you turned a screwdriver to put in a screw—and there I was with my motor nerves controlling a whole miniature factory of whatsits and thingumbobs. My index finger powered a Mixmaster. My middle toe turned the tumblers that locked the door. My...

That reminds me: have I locked you in? I'm sorry, when I closed the door I locked it without thinking. You wouldn't want to go out now though. According to my stomach, it's the middle of

the night. You're better off in here for the night than in a Venusian swamp, eh?

Well, that's the story of my life. When I had the reflexes of a well-trained rat, they packed me up and shipped me off to Venus at the cost of some few million dollars.

The very last thing I learned before leaping was how to use the microfilm scanner. I read direct from the spindle. By the time I learned how poorly the library had been stocked it was too late to complain. I'd been planted out in the swamp, and John George Clay had moved in. What did I care about the library then? I was in love.

And what do *you* care about any of this? Unless you're a cyberneticist doing a study on malfunction. I should be good for a chapter, at least.

Excuse me, I'm probably keeping you awake. I'll let you get some sleep. I have to sleep sometimes myself, you know. Physically I can go without, but I still have a subconscious that likes to dream—

*Of forests and enchantments drear,
Where more is meant than meets the ear.*

And so good night.

Still awake?

I couldn't go to sleep myself, so I've been reading. I thought maybe you'd like to hear a poem. I'll read you *Il Penseroso*. Do you know it? It's probably the finest poem in the language. It's by John Milton.

Oh dear, did I keep you up with that poem last night? Or did I only dream that I did? If I was noisy, you'll excuse me, won't you?

Now if you were John, you'd be raging mad. He didn't like to be woken up by—

*Such notes as, warbled to the string,
Drew iron tears down Pluto's cheek
And made Hell grant what Love did seek!*

Indeed he didn't. John had a strange and fixed distaste for that wonderful poem, which is probably the finest in the language. He was, I think, jealous of it. It was a part of me he could never possess, even though I was his slave in so many other ways. Or is "housekeeper" a more polite expression?

I tried to explain the more difficult parts to him, the mythology and the exotic words, but he didn't *want* to understand. He made fun of it. He had a way of saying the lines that made them seem ridiculous. Mincingly, like this:

*Come, pensive Nun, devout and pure,
Sober, steadfast, and demure.*

When he'd do that, I'd just ignore him. I'd recite it to myself. He'd usually leave the house then, even if it was night. He knew I worried myself sick when he was away. He did it deliberately. He had a genius for cruelty.

I suppose you're wondering if it worked both ways—whether

he loved me. The question must have occurred to you. I've given it quite a lot of thought myself, and I've come to the conclusion that he did. The trouble was he didn't know how to express it. Our relationship was necessarily so *cerebral*, and cerebration wasn't John's *forte*.

That was the idea behind throwing us together the way they did. They couldn't very well send a man off by himself for two years. He'd go crazy. Previously they'd sent married couples, but the homicide rate was incredible. Something like 30 per cent. It's one thing for a pioneer family to be off by itself in, say, the Yukon. It's something else here. In a social vacuum like this, sex is explosive.

You see, apart from going out for the slugs and nursing them in the shed outside, there's nothing to do. You can't build out here. Things just sort of sink into the mud unless, like me, they're built like a houseboat. You can't grow things—including children. It's a biologist's paradise, but they need hundreds of slug stations and there aren't biologists available in that quantity. Besides, all the *good* biologists are in Venusburg, where there's research facilities. The problem then is to find the minimum number of personnel that can man a station for two years of idleness without exploding. The solution is one man and one cyborg.

Though not, as you can see, an infallible solution. I tried to kill him, you know. It was a silly thing to do. I regret it now.

But I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind.

You've been here two days now—fancy that!

Excuse me for keeping to myself so long, but I had a sudden, acute attack of self-consciousness, and the only cure for that is solitude. I invoke Milton's lovely Melancholy, and then everything is better. The beasts quiet down. Eurydice is set free again. Hell freezes over. Ha!

But that's a lot of nonsense. Let's not talk always about me. Let's talk about *you*. Who are you? What are you like? How long will you be staying here on Venus? Two days we've been together and still I know nothing about you.

Shall I tell you what I imagine you to be like? You're tall—though I hope not so tall as to find that low room uncomfortable—with laughing blue eyes and a deep spaceman's tan. You're strong yet gentle, gay yet basically serious. You're getting rather hungry.

And everywhere you go you leave little green slugs behind you that look like runny lime Jell-O.

Oh hell, excuse me. I'm always saying excuse me. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of half-truths and reticences.

Does that frighten you? Do you want out already? Don't go now—I've just *begun* to fight. Listen to the whole story, and then—maybe—I'll unlock the door.

By the way, in case you are getting hungry there may still be some rations left down in the storeroom. I don't want it to be said that I'm lacking in hospitality. I'll open the trapdoor and turn on the light, but you'll have to look for them yourself. Of course, you're worried that I'll lock you in down there. Well, I can't promise that I won't. After all, how do I know you're *not* John? Can you prove it? You can't even prove you exist!

I'll leave the trapdoor open in case you should change your mind.

For my next number I'd like to do *Il Penseroso* by John Milton. Quiet down, caterpillars, and listen. It's the finest poem in the language.

How about that? Makes you want to go right out and join a Trappist monastery, doesn't it? That's what John once said.

I'll say one thing for John: he never tattled. He could have had me taken away and turned to scrap. All he had to do was give the word when the ship came down to pick up the slugs, but when there was company he could always put a good face on things. He was a gentleman in every sense of the word.

How did it happen then—if he was a gentleman and I was a lady? Whose fault was it? Good God, I've asked myself that question a hundred times. It was both our faults and neither's. It was the fault of the situation.

I can't remember now which of us was the first to start talking about sex. We talked about everything that first year, and sex is very much a part of everything. What harm could there be in it, after all, with me sealed in a steel tank? And how could we *avoid* the subject? He'd mention an old girlfriend or tell a slightly shady joke, and I'd be reminded of something by degrees...

The thing is that there's an immense curiosity between the sexes that almost never is satisfied. Things that men never know about women, and vice versa. Even between a man and a wife, there is a gulf of unmentionables. Maybe especially between a man and a wife. But between John and me there seemed to be nothing to prevent perfect candor. What possible harm could it do?

Then... the next thing... I don't remember which of us started that either. We should have known better. The borderline between perfect candor and erotic fantasy is no wider than an adjective. But it happened imperceptibly, and before we knew quite what we were doing, it had been done. It was already a habit.

When I realized exactly what we were doing, of course, I laid down the law. It was an unhealthy situation, it had to stop. At first John was agreeable. He was embarrassed, like a little boy who's been found out in some naughtiness. We told each other it was over and done with.

But it had become, as I've said, a habit. I have a rather more

vivid imagination than John and he had grown dependent on me. He asked for new stories, and I refused. He got angry then and wouldn't speak to me, and finally I gave in. I was in love with him, you see, in my own ectoplasmic way, and this was all I could do to show it.

Every day he wanted a new story. It's hard to make the same tired old tale seem new in every telling. Scheherazade was supposed to have stood up for a thousand and one nights, but after only thirty I was wearing thin. Under the strain I sort of retreated into myself.

I read poetry, lots of poetry, but mostly Milton. Milton has a very calming effect on me—like a mil-town if you'll excuse the pun.

The pun—that's what did it. It was the last turn of the screw, a simple pun.

It seems that when I read, I sometimes read aloud without realizing it. That's what John has told me. It was all right during the day when he was off in the swamp, and when he was here in the evenings we'd talk with each other. But he needed more sleep than I did, and when I was left on my own, after he'd gone to bed, I'd read. There was nothing else to do. Usually I'd read some long Victorian novel, but at the time I'm speaking of, I mostly read *Il Penseroso*.

He *shouldn't* have made fun of it. I guess he didn't realize how important it had become to me. It was like a pool of pure water in which I could wash away the grime of each day. Or else he was angry for being woken up.

Do you remember the part, right near the beginning, where it says:

*‘But hail, thou goddess sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy’?*

Of course you do. You probably know the whole thing as well as I do by now. Well, when John heard that he broke out laughing, a nasty laugh, and I, well, I couldn't really stand that, could I? I mean Milton means so *much* to me, and the thing was that he began to sing this *song*. This awful song. Oh, it was a clever idea, I suppose, when first he thought of it, but the combination of that vulgar tune and his perversion of Milton's noble words—though he claims that's how he understood the words when I first read them to him, and I still maintain that the second *i* in divinest is pronounced like a long *e*—it was aggravating in the extreme, I can't tell you how much it upset me.

Do I *have* to repeat them?

Come to Venus, Melancholy Baby.

Cuddle up and don't be shy.

And so on. It's not only a bad pun—it's a misquotation as well. It should be *Hail*, not *Come*. So vulgar. It gives me goosebumps even now.

I told him to leave the house right that minute. I told him not to come back till he was ready to apologize. I was so angry I forgot it was the middle of the night. As soon as he was out the door, I was ashamed of myself.

He came back in five minutes. He apologized outside the door, and I let him in. He had the large polyethylene bag over his shoulder that he uses to gather up the slugs, but I was so relieved I

didn't think anything of it.

He put them on the visual receptors. There must have been twenty, all told, and each one was about a foot long. They fought each other to get right on the lens because it was slightly warmer there. There were twenty of them, foul, gelatinous slugs, crawling on my *eyes*, oh God! I shut off my eyes and I shut off my ears, because he was singing that song again, and I locked the doors and I left him like that for five days while I recited *Il Penseroso*.

But whenever I came to that one line, I could never say it.

It was perhaps the hallucinogens, though he might just as well have done it in his right mind. He had every reason to. But I prefer to think it was the hallucinogens. He had been all that time with nothing else to eat. I've never been five days without food, so I don't know how desperate that would make one.

In any case, when I came to myself again and opened my eyes I found I had no eyes to open. He'd smashed every receptor in the room, even the little mobile attachment for cleaning. The strange thing was how little I cared. It seemed hardly to matter at all.

I opened the door for five minutes so he could get out. Then I closed it so no more caterpillars could get in. But unlocked. That way John was free to come back.

But he never did.

The supply ship was due in two days later, and I guess John must have spent that time in the shed where he kept the slugs. He must have been alive, otherwise the pilot of the supply ship would have come in the door to look for him. And nobody ever came in the door again.

Unless you did.

They just left me here, deaf and blind and half-immortal, in the middle of the Venusian swamp. If only I could starve to

death—or wear out—or rust—or really go insane. But I'm too well made for that. You'd think after all the money they spent on me, they'd want to salvage what they could, wouldn't you?

I have a deal to make with you. I'll let you out the door, if you'll do something for me. Fair enough?

Down in the storeroom there are explosives. They're so safe a child could use them. John did, after all. If I remember rightly, they're on the third shelf down on the west wall—little black boxes with DANGER written on them in red. You pull out the little pin and set the timing mechanism for anything from five minutes to an hour. It's just like an alarm clock.

Once they're set, just leave them in the storeroom. They'll be nearer to me down there. I'm over the storeroom. Then run like hell. Five minutes should be time enough, shouldn't it? I'll only want to read a bit of *Il Penseroso*.

Is it a deal? The trapdoor is open, and I'm opening the outside door now just to show you I'm in earnest.

While you set to work, I think I'll read something to pass the time.

Hello? I'm waiting. Is everything all right? Are you still there? Or were you ever there? Oh please, *please*—I want to explode. That would be so wonderful. Please, I *beg* of you!

I'm still waiting.