

HORSE OF AIR

GARDNER R. DOZOIS

GARDNER R. Dozois was born July 23, 1947, in Salem, Massachusetts, his ancestry conveniently half Irish and the remainder an amalgamation of French, Scottish, Dutch and American Indian. He spent three years of army service as a military journalist in Nuremberg, Germany, and since then he has worked as journalist, radio and TV broadcaster, busboy, IBM card filer, and editorial reader for Dell and Award Books and UPD Magazines. Along the way he took part in amateur theatrics and dabbled in photography, anthropology, sociology, natural history and history, exercising his body in bicycling and swimming and his mind in worrying, and he began to write.

His first story was sold in 1966, and the total now exceeds a baker's dozen. In addition to the science fiction magazines, he has contributed stories to several volumes of the Orbit series, Quark 7, New Dimensions 1 and II, and Universe I. His short story "A Dream at Noonday," was a finalist in the 1970 Nebula Award balloting. Dozois is the editor of a collection of stories, *A Day in the Life* (1972). He is a member of Science Fiction Writers of America and the SFWA Speakers' Bureau, and he has been a guest instructor at the Clarion Writers' Workshop.

In the 1971 Nebula Award balloting his name appeared on the final

ballot twice: with his novelette "A Special Kind of Morning" and with his short story "Horse of Air."

Sometimes when the weather is good I sit and look out over the city, fingers hooked through the mesh.

-The mesh is weather-stained, beginning to rust. As his fingers scrabble at it, chips of rust flake off, staining his hands the color of crusted blood. The heavy wire is hot and smooth under his fingers, turning rougher and drier at a rust spot. If he presses his tongue against the wire, it tastes slightly of lemons. He doesn't do that very often

The city is quieter now. You seldom see motion, mostly birds if you do. AS I watch, two pigeons strut along the roof ledge of the low building several stories below my balcony, stopping every now and then to pick at each other's feathers. They look fatter than ever. I wonder what they eat these days. Probably it is better not to know. They have learned to keep away from me anyway, although the mesh that encloses my small balcony floor to ceiling makes it difficult to get at them if they do land nearby. I'm not ° really hungry, of course, but they are noisy and leave droppings. , I don't really bear any malice toward them. It's not a personal thing; I do it for the upkeep of the place.

(I hate birds. I will kill any- of them I can reach. I do it with my beltbuckle, snapping it between the hoops of wire.) -

-He hates birds because they have freedom of movement, because they can fly, because they- can shift their viewpoint from spot to spot in linear space, while he can do so only- in time and .memory , and that imperfectly. They can fly here and look at him .and then fly away, while he has no volition: if he wants to look at them, he must wait until they decide to come to him. He flicks a .piece of plaster at them, between the hoops

Startled by something, the pigeons explode upward with a whirl of feathers. I watch them fly away: skimming along the side of a building, dipping with an air current. They are soon lost in the maze of low roofs that thrust up below at all angles and heights, staggering toward the Apartment Towers in the middle distance. The Towers stand untouched by the sea of brownstones that break around their flanks, like aloof monoliths wading in a surf of scummy brown brick. Other towers march off in curving lines toward the horizon, becoming progressively smaller until they vanish at the place where a misty sky merges with a line of low hills. If I press myself against the mesh at the far right side of the balcony, I can see the nearest Tower to my own, perhaps six hundred yards away, all of steel and concrete with a vertical line of windows running down the middle and rows of identical balconies on either side.

Nearest to me on the left is a building that rises about a quarter of the way up my Tower's flank: patterns of dark-brown and light red bricks, interlaced with fingers of mortar, weathered gray roof shingles, a few missing here and there in a manner reminiscent of broken teeth; a web of black chimney and sewage pipes crawling up and across the walls like metallic creepers. All covered with the pale splotches of bird droppings. 'Chi Towers are much cleaner; not so many horizontal surfaces. Windows are broken in the disintegrating buildings down there; the dying sunlight glints from fangs of shattered glass. Curtains hang in limp shreds that snap and drum when a wind comes up. If you squint, you can see that the wind has scattered broken twigs and rubbish all over the floors inside. No, I am much happier in one of the towers.

(I hate the Towers. I would rather live anywhere than here.)

-He hates the Towers. As the sun starts to dip below the horizon, settling down into the concrete labyrinth like a hog into a wallow, he shakes his head blindly and makes a low noise at the back of his throat. The shadows of buildings are longer now, stretching in toward him from the horizon like accusing fingers. A deep gray gloom is gathering in the corners and angles of walls, shot with crimson sparks from the foundering sun, now dragged under and wrapped in chill masonry. His hands go up and out, curling again around the hoops of the mesh. He shakes the mesh

violently, throwing his weight against it. The mesh groans in metallic agony but remains solid. A few chips of concrete puff from the places where the ends of the mesh are anchored to the walls. He continues to tear at the mesh until his hands bleed, half-healed scabs torn open again. Tiny blood droplets spatter the heavy wire. The blood holds the deeper color of rust-

If you have enough maturity to keep emotionalism out of it, the view from here can even be fascinating. The sky is clear now, an electric, saturated blue, and the air is as sharp as a jeweler's glass. Not like the old days. Without factories and cars to keep it fed, even the eternal smog has dissipated. The sky reminds me now of an expensive aquarium filled with crystal tropical water, me at the bottom: I almost expect to see huge eyes peering in from the horizon, maybe a monstrous nose pressed against the glass. On a sunny day you can see for miles.

But it is even more beautiful when it rains. The rain invests the still landscape with an element of motion: long fingers of it brushing across the rooftops or marching down in zigzag sheets, the droplets stirring and rippling the puddles that form in depressions, drumming against the flat concrete surfaces, running down along the edges of the shingles, foaming and sputtering from down- .spouts- The Towers stand like lords, swirling rain mists around them as a fine gentleman swirls his jeweled cloak. Pregnant gray clouds scurry by behind the Towers, lashed by wind. The constant stream of horizontals past the fixed vertical fingers of the Towers creates contrast, gives the eye something to follow, increases the relief of motion. Motion is heresy when the world has become a still life. But it soothes, the old-time religion. There are no atheists in foxholes, nor abstainers when the world begins to flow. But does that prove the desirability of God or the weakness of men? I drink when the world flows, but unwillingly, because I know the price. I have to drink, but I also have to pay. I will pay later when the motion stops and the world returns to lethargy, the doldrums made more unbearable by the contrast known a moment before. That is another cross that I am forced to bear.

But it is beautiful, and fresh-washed after. And sometimes there is a rainbow. Rain is the only aesthetic pleasure I have left, and I savor it with the unhurried leisure of the aristocracy.

-When the rain comes, he flattens himself against the mesh, arms spread wide as if crucified there, letting the rain hammer against his face. The rain rolls in runnels down his skin, mixing with sweat, counterfeiting tears. Eyes closed, he bruises his open mouth against the mesh, trying to drink the rain. His tongue dabs at the drops that trickle by his mouth, licks out for the moisture oozing down along the links of wire. After the storm, he sometimes drinks the small puddles that gather on the balcony ledge, lapping them noisily and greedily, although the tap in the kitchen works, and he is never thirsty-

Always something to look at from here. Directly below are a number of weed-overgrown yards, chopped up unequally by low brick walls, nestled in a hollow square formed by the surrounding brownstones. There is even a tree in one corner, though it is dead and its limbs are gnarled and

splintered. The yards were never neatly kept by the rabble that lived there, even in the old days: they are scattered with trash and rubbish, middens of worn-out household items and broken plastic toys, though the weeds have covered much. There was a neat, brightflower bed in one of the further yards, tended by a bent and leather-skinned foreign crone of impossible age, but the weeds have overgrown that as well, drowning the rarer blossoms. This season there were more weeds, fewer flowers—they seem to survive better, though God knows they have little else to recommend them, being coarse and ill smelling.

In the closest yard an old and ornate wicker-back chair is still standing upright; if I remember correctly, a pensioner bought it at a rummage sale and used it to take the sun, being a parasite good for nothing else. Weeds are twining up around the chair; it is half hidden already. Beyond is a small concrete court where hordes of ragged children used to play ball. Its geometrical white lines are nearly obliterated now by rain and wind-drifted gravel. If you look

sharp at this clearing, sometimes you can see the sudden flurry of a small darting body through the weeds; a rat or a cat, hard to tell at this distance.

Once, months ago, I saw a man and a woman there, my first clear indication that there are still people alive and about. They entered the court like thieves, crawling through a low window, the man lowering the girl and then jumping down after. They were dressed in rags, and the man carried a rifle and a bandolier

After reconnoitering, the man forced one of the rickety doors into a brownstone, disappearing inside. After a while he came out dragging a mattress—filthy, springs jutting through fabric—and carried it into the ball court. They had intercourse there for the better part of the afternoon, stopping occasionally while the man prowled about with the rifle. I remember thinking that it was too bad the gift of motion had been wasted on such as these. They left at dusk. I had not tried to signal them, leaving them undisturbed to their rut, although I was somewhat sickened by the coarse brutality of the act. There is such a thing as noblesse oblige.

(I hate them. If I had a gun I would kill them. At first I watch, greedily as they make love, excited, afraid of scaring them away if they should become aware of me watching. But as the afternoon wears on, I grow drained, and then angry, and begin to shout at them, telling them to get out, get the hell out. They ignore me. Their tanned skin is vivid against asphalt as they strain together. Sweat makes their locked limbs glisten in the thick sunlight. The rhythmic rise and fall of their bodies describes parabolic lines through the crusted air. I scream at them and tear at the mesh, voice thin and impotent. Later they make love again, rolling from the mattress in their urgency, sprawling among the lush weeds, coupling like leopards. I try to throw plaster at them, but the angle is wrong. As they leave the square, the man gives me the finger.)

Thinking of those two makes me think of the other animals that howl through the world, masquerading as men. On the far left, hidden by the nearest brownstones but winding into sight further on, is a highway. Once it was a major artery of the city, choked

with a chrome flood of traffic. Now it is empty. Once or twice at the beginning I would see an ambulance or a fire engine, once a tank. A few weeks ago I saw a jeep go by, driving square in the middle of the highway, ridden by armed men. Occasionally I have seen men and women trudge past, dragging their possessions behind them on a sledge. Perhaps the wheel is on the way out.

Against one curb is the overturned, burned-out hulk of a bus: small animals use it for a cave now, and

weeds are beginning to lace through it. I saw it burning, a week after the Building Committee came. I sat on the balcony and watched its flames eat up at the sky, although it was too dark to make out what was happening around it; the street lights had been the first things to go. There were other blazes in the distance, glowing like campfires, like blurred stars. I remember wondering that night what was happening, what the devil was going on. But I've figured it out now.

It was the niggers. I hate to say it. I've been a liberal man all my life. But you can't deny the truth. They are responsible for the destruction, for the present degeneration of the world. It makes me sad to have to say this. I had always been on their side in spirit, I was more than willing to stretch out a helping hand to those less fortunate than myself. I always said so; I always said that. I had high hopes for them all. But they got greedy, and brought us to this. We should have known better, we should have listened to the so-called racists, we should have realized that idealism is a wasting disease, a cancer. We should have remembered that blood will tell. A hard truth: it was the niggers. I have no prejudice; I speak the cold facts. I had always wished them well.

(I hate niggers. They are animals. Touching one would make me vomit.)

-He hates niggers. He has seen them on the street corners with their women, he has seen them in their juke boxed caves with their feet in sawdust, he has heard them speaking in a private language half devised of finger snaps and motions of liquid hips, he has felt the inquiry of their eyes, he has seen them dance. He envies them for having a culture separate from the bland familiarity of his own,

he envies their tang of the exotic. He envies their easy sexuality. He fears their potency. He fears that in climbing up they will shake him down. He fears generations of stored-up hate. He hates them because their very existence makes him uncomfortable. He hates them because sometimes they have seemed to be happy on their tenement street corners, while he rides by in an air-conditioned car and is not. He hates them because they are not part of the mechanism and yet still have the audacity to exist. He hates them because they have escaped-

Dusk has come, hiding a world returned to shame and barbarism. It occurs to me that I may be one of the few members of the upper class left. The rabble were always quick to blame their betters for their own inherent inferiority and quick to vent their resentment in violence when the opportunity arose. The other Apartment Towers are still occupied, I think; I can see the lights at night, as they can see mine, if there is anyone left there to see. So perhaps there are still a few of us left. Perhaps there is still some hope for the world after all.

Although what avail to society is their survival if they are as helpless as I? We may be the last hope of restoring order to a land raped by Chaos, and we are being wasted. We are born to govern, to regulate, prepared for it by station, tradition and long experience: leadership comes as naturally to us as drinking and fornication come to the masses of the Great Unwashed. We are being wasted, our experience and foresight pissed away by fools who will not listen.

And we dwindle. I speak of us as a class, as a corporate "we." But there are fewer lights in the other Towers every month. Last night I counted less than half the number I could see a year ago. On evenings when the wind grows bitter with autumn cold, I fear that I will soon be the only one left with the courage to hold out. It would be so easy to give in to despair; the quietus of hopelessness is tempting. But it is a siren goddess, made of tin. Can't the others see that? To give up is to betray their blood. But still the lights dwindle. At times I have the dreadful fancy that I will sit here one

night and watch the last light flicker out in the last Tower, leaving me alone in darkness, the only survivor of a noble breed. Will some improbably alien archaeologist come and hang a sign on my cage: The Last of the Aristocracy?

Deep darkness now. The lights begin to come on across the gulfs of shadow, but I am afraid to count them. Thinking of these things has chilled me, and I shudder. The wind is cold, filled with dampness. There will be a storm later. Distant lightning flickers behind the Towers, each flash sending jagged shadows leaping toward me, striking blue highlights from every reflecting surface. Each lightning stroke seems to momentarily reverse the order of things, etching the Towers in black relief against the blue-white dazzle of the sky, then the brilliance draining, leaving the Towers as before: islands of light against an inky background of black. The cycle is repeated, shadows lunging in at me, in at me, thrusting swords of nigger blackness. It was on a hellish night like this that the Building Committee came.

It was a mistake to give them so much power. I admit it. I'm not too proud to own up to my own mistakes. But we were tired of struggling with an uncooperative and unappreciative society. We were beaten into weariness by a horde of supercilious bastards, petty and envious little men hanging on our coattails and trying to chivy us down. We were sick of people with no respect, no traditions, no heritage, no proper ambitions. We were disgusted by a world degenerating at every seam, in every aspect. We had finally realized the futility of issuing warnings no one would listen to. Even then the brakes could have been applied to our skidding society if someone had bothered to listen, if anyone had had the guts and foresight to take the necessary measures. But we were tired, and we were no longer young.

So we traded our power for security. We built the Towers; we formed a company, turned our affairs over to them, and retired from the world into our own tight-knit society. Let the company have the responsibility and the problems, let them deal with the pressures and the decisions, let them handle whatever comes; we

will be safe and comfortable regardless. They are the bright, ambitious technicians; let them cope. They are the expendable soldiers; let them fight and be expended as they are paid for doing; we shall be safe behind the lines. Let them have the mime show of power; we are civilized enough to enjoy the best things of life without it. We renounce the painted dreams; they are hollow.

It was a mistake.

It was a mistake to give them the voting proxies; Anderson was a fool, senile before his time. It was all a horrible mistake. I admit it. But we were no longer young.

And the world worsened, and one day the Building Committee came.

It was crisis, they said, and Fear was walking in the land. And the Charter specified that we were to be protected, that we must not be disturbed. So they came with the work crews and meshed over my balcony. And welded a slab of steel over my door as they left. They would not listen to my protest, wrapped in legalities, invulnerable in armor of technical gobbledygook. Protection was a specific of the Charter, they said, and with the crisis this was the only way they could ensure our protection should the outer defenses go down; it was a temporary measure.

And the work crews went about their business with slapdash efficiency, and the balding, spectacled foreman told me he only worked here. So I stood quietly and watched them seal me in, although I was trembling with rage. I am no longer young. And I would not lose control before these vermin. Every one of them was waiting for it, hoping for it in their petty, resentful souls, and I would let myself be flayed alive before I would give them the satisfaction. It is a small comfort to me that I showed them the style with which a gentleman can take misfortune.

(When I finally realize what they are doing, I rage and bluster. The foreman pushed me away. "It's for your own good," he says, mouthing the cliché halfheartedly, not really interested. I beat at him with ineffectual fists. Annoyed, he shrugs me off and ducks through the door. I try to run after him. One of the guards hits me

in the face with his rifle butt. Pain and shock and a brief darkness. And then I realize that I am lying on the floor. There is blood on my forehead and on my mouth. They have almost finished maneuvering the steel slab into place, only a man-sized crack left open. The guard is the only one left in the room, a goggled technician just squeezing out through the crack. The guard turns toward the door. I hump myself across the room on my knees, crawling after him, crying and begging. He plants his boot on my shoulder and pushes me disgustingly away. The room tumbles, I roll over twice, stop, come up on my elbows and start to crawl after him again. He says, "Fuck off, dad," and slaps his rifle, jangling the magazine in the breech. I stop moving. He glares at me, then leaves the room. They push the slab all the way closed. It makes a grinding, rumbling sound, like a subway train. Still on my knees, I throw myself against it, but it is solid. Outside there are welding noises. I scream.)

There is a distant rumbling now. Thunder: the storm is getting nearer. The lightning flashes are more intense, and closer together. They are too bright, too fast, blending into one another, changing the dimensions of the world too rapidly. With the alternating of glare and thrusting shadow there is too much motion, nothing ever still for a second, nothing you can let your eye rest on. Watching it strains your vision. My eyes ache with the motion.

I close them, but there are squiggly white afterimages imprinted on the insides of my eyelids. A man of breeding should know how to control his emotions. I do; in the old circles, the ones that mattered, I was known for my self-discipline and refinement. But this is an unseasonable night, and I am suddenly afraid. It

feels like the bones are rattled in the body of the earth, it feels like maybe it will come now.

But that is an illusion. It is not the Time; It will not come yet. Only I know when the Time is, only I can say when it will come. And it will not come until I call for it, that is part of the bargain. I studied military science at Annapolis. I shall recognize the most strategic moment, I shall know when the Time is at hand for

vengeance and retribution. I shall know. And the Time is not now. It will not come tonight. This is only an autumn storm.

I open my eyes. And find my stare returned. Windows ring me on all sides like walls of accusing, lidless eyes. Lightning oozes across the horizon: miniature reflections of the electric arc etched in cold echoes across a thousand panes of glass, a thousand matches struck simultaneously in a thousand dusty rooms.

A sequence of flares. The sky alternates too quickly to follow. Blue white, black. Blue-white. Black again. The roofs flicker with invested motion, brick dancing in a jerky, silent-movie fashion.

Oh, God, the chimneys, humped against dazzle, looming in shadow. Marching rows of smoky brick gargoyles, ash-cold now with not an ember left alive. The rows sway closer with every flash. I can hear the retch of mortar-footed brick against stile, see the waddling, relentless rolling of their gait. They are people actually, the poor bastard refugees of the rabble frozen into brick, struck dumb with mortar. I saw it happen on the night of the Building Committee, thousands of people swarming like rats over the roofs to escape the burning world, caught by a clear voice of crystal that metamorphosed them with a single word, fixing them solid to the roofs, their hands growing into their knees, their heels into their buttocks, their heads thrown back with mouths gaped in a scream, flesh swapped for brick, blood for mortar. They hump toward me on their blunt knees in ponderously bobbing lines. With a sound like fusing steel, nigger-black shadows humping in at me. Christ hands sealing my eyes with clay stuffing down my mouth my throat filling Oh God oh christ christ christ

It is raining now. I will surely catch a chill standing here; there are vapors in the night air. Perhaps it would be advisable to go inside. Yes, I do think that would be best. Sometimes it is better to forget external things.

-He crawls away from the mesh on his hands and knees, although he is healthy and perfectly able to stand. He often crawls from place to place in the apartment; he thinks it gives him a better perspective. Rain patters on the balcony behind, drums

against the glass of the French windows that open into the apartment. He claws at the framework of the windows, drags himself to his feet. He stands there for a moment, face pressed flat against the glass, trembling violently. His cheeks are wet. Perhaps he has been crying. Or perhaps it was the rain-

I turn on the light and go inside, closing the French windows firmly behind me. It is the very devil of a night outside. In here it is safe, even comfortable. This place is only a quarter of my actual apartment, of course. The Building Committee sealed me in here, cut me off from the rest of my old place, which occupied most of this floor. Easier to defend me this way, the bastards said. So this apartment is smaller than what I'm used to living in, God knows. But in a strange way the smallness makes the place more cozy somehow, especially on a piggish night like this when fiends claw the windowpane.

I cross to the kitchen cubicle, rummage through the jars and cans; there's some coffee left from this week's shipment, I think. Yes, a little coffee left in one of the jars: instant; coarse, murky stuff. I had been used to better; once we drank nothing but fine-ground Colombian, and I would have spat in the face of any waiter who dared to serve me unpercolated coffee. This is one of the innumerable little ways in which we pay for our folly. A thousand little things, but together they add up into an almost unbearable burden, a leering Old Man of the Sea wrapped leech-fashion around my shoulders and growing heavier by the day. But this is defeatist talk. I am more tired than I would allow myself to admit. Here the coffee will help; even this bitter liquid retains that basic virtue in kind with the more palatable stuff. I heat some water, slosh it over the obscene granules into a cup. The cup is cracked, no replacement for it: another little thing. A gust of wind rattles the glass in the French windows. I will not listen to it.

Weary, I carry the steaming cup into the livingroom, sit down in the easy chair with my back to the balcony. I try to balance the cup on my knee, but the damn thing is too hot; I finally rest it on the chair arm, leaving a moist ring on the fabric, but that hardly

matters now. Can my will be weakening? Once I would have considered it sacrilege to sully fine furniture and would have gone to any length to avoid doing so. Now I am too wrapped in lassitude to get up and go into the kitchen for a coaster. Coffee seeps slowly into fabric, a widening brownish stain, like blood. I am almost too tired to lift the cup to my lips.

Degeneration starts very slowly, so deviously, so patiently that it almost seems to be a living thing; embodied it would be a weasel-like animal armed with sly cunning and gnawing needle teeth. It never goes for your throat like a decent monster, so that you might have a chance of beating it down: it lurks in darkness, it gnaws furtively at the base of your spine, it burrows into your liver while you sleep. Like the succubi I try to guard against at night, it saps your strength, it sucks your breath in slumber, it etches away the marrow of your bones.

There is enough water in the tank for one more bath this week;

I should wash, but I fear I'm too tired to manage it. Another

example? It takes such a lot of effort to remain civilized. How

tempting to say, "it no longer matters." It does matter. I say it

does. I will make it matter. I cannot afford the seductive surrender

of my unfortunate brethren; I have a responsibility they don't

have. Perhaps I am luckier to have it, in a way. It is an awesome responsibility, but carrying it summons up a corresponding strength, it gives me a reason for living, a goal outside myself. Perhaps my responsibility is what enables me to hang on, the knowledge of what is to come just enough to balance out the other pressures. The game has not yet been played to an end. Not while I still hold my special card. -

Thinking of the secret, I look at the television set, but the atmospherics are wrong tonight for messages, and it's probably too late for the haphazard programming they put out now. Some nights I leave the test pattern on, enjoying the flickering highlights it sends across the walls and ceilings, but tonight I think it will be more comfortable with just the pool of yellow glow cast by the lamp next to my chair, a barrier against the tangible darkness.

Looking at the television always reawakens my curiosity about the outside world. What is the state of society? The city I can see from my balcony seems to have degenerated into savagery, civilization seems to have been destroyed, but there are contradictions, there are ambiguities. Obviously the Building Committee must still be in existence somewhere. The electric lights and the plumbing still work in the Towers, a shipment of food supplies rattles up the pneumatic dumbwaiter into the kitchen cubicle twice a week, there are old movies and cartoons on television, running continuously with no commercials or live programming, never a hint of news. Who else could it be for but us? Who else could be responsible for it but the Building Committee? I've seen the city; it is dark, broken, inhabited by no one but a few human jackals who eke out a brute existence and hunt each other through the ruins. These facilities are certainly not operated for them—the other towers are the only lighted buildings visible in the entire wide section of city visible from here.

No, it is the Building Committee. It must be. They are the only ones with the proper resources to hold a circle of order against a widening chaos. Those resources were vast. I know: we built them, we worked to make them flexible, we sweated to make them inexhaustible. We let their control pass out of our hands. One never finishes paying for past sins.

What a tremendous amount of trouble they've gone to, continuing to operate the towers, even running a small television station somewhere to force-feed us the "entertainment" specified in the Charter. And never a word, never a glimpse of them, even for a second. Why? Why do they bother to keep up the pretense, the mocking hypocrisy of obeying the Charter? The real power is theirs now, why do they bother to continue the sham and lip service? Why don't they just shut down the towers and leave us to starve in our plush cells? Is it the product of some monstrous, sadistic sense of humor? Or is it the result of a methodical, fussily prim sense of order that refuses to deny a legal technicality even when the laws themselves have died? Do they laugh their young

men's slaughter when they think of the once formidable old beasts they have caged?

I feel a surge of anger. I put the half-emptied cup carefully down on the rug. My hand is trembling. The Time is coming. It will be soon now. Soon they will heap some further indignity on me and force my hand. I will not have them laughing at me, those little men with maggots for eyes. Not when I still have it in my power to change it all. Not while I still am who I am. But not just yet. Let them have their victory, their smug laughter. An old tiger's fangs may be blunt and yellowing, but they can still bite. And even an old beast can still rise for one more kill.

I force myself to my feet. I have the inner strength, the discipline. They have nothing, they are the rabble, they are children trying out as men and parading in adult clothing. It was we who taught them the game, and we still know how to play it best. I force myself to wash, to fold the bed out from the wall, to lie still, fighting for calm. I run my eyes around the familiar dimensions of the apartment, cataloguing: pale blue walls, red draw curtains for the French windows, bookshelves next to the curtains, a black cushioned stool, the rug in patterns of orange and green against brown, a red shaggy chair and matching couch, the archways to the kitchen and bath cubicles. Nothing alien. Nothing hostile. I begin to relax. Thank God for familiarity. There is a certain pleasure in looking at well-known, well-loved things, a certain unshakable sense of reality. I often fall asleep counting my things.

(I hate this apartment. I hate everything in this apartment. I cannot stand to live here any longer. Someday I will chop everything to unrecognizable fragments and pile it in the middle of the floor and burn it, and I will laugh while it burns.)

-He is wakened by a shaft of sunlight that falls through the uncurtained French windows. He groans, stirs, draws one foot up, heel against buttock, knee toward the ceiling. His hand clenches in the bedclothes. The sound of birds reaches him through the insulating glass. For a moment, waking, he thinks that he is elsewhere, another place, another time. He mutters a woman's name

and his hand goes out to grope across the untouched, empty space beside him in the double bed. His hand encounters only the cool of sheets, no answering warmth of flesh. He grimaces, his bent leg snaps out to full length again, his suddenly desperate hand rips the sheet free of the mattress, finding nothing. He wrenches to his feet, neck corded, staggering. By the time his eyes slide open he has begun to scream

... ow it. I will not allow it. Do you hear me, bastards? I will not allow it. I will not stand for it. You've gone too far, I warn you, too far, I'll kill you. D'you hear? Niggers and thieves. The past is all I have. I will not have you touching it, I will not have you sliming and defiling it with your shitty hands. You leave her out of it, you leave her alone. What kind of men are you, using her against me? What kind of men are you? Rabble not worth breath. Defiling everything you touch, everything better than you, finer than you. I will not allow it.

It is time. It is Time.

The decision brings a measure of calm. I am committed now. They have finally driven me too far. It is time for me to play the final card. I will not let them remain unpunished for this another second, another breath. I will call for It, and It will come. I must keep control, there must be no mistakes. This is retribution. This is the moment I have waited for all these agonizing months. I must keep control, there must be no mistakes. It must be executed with dispatch, with precision. I breathe deeply to calm myself. There will be no mistakes, no hesitations.

Three steps take me to the television. I flick it on, waiting for it to warm. Impatience drums within me, tightly reined as a rearing Arabian stallion. So long, so long.

A picture appears on the screen: another imbecilic movie. -I think of the Building Committee, unaware, living in the illusion of victory. Expertly I remove the back of the television, my skilled fingers probing deep into the maze of wires and tubes. I work with the familiarity of long practice. How many hours did I crouch like this, experimenting, before I found the proper frequency of the

Others by trial and error? Patience was never a trait of the rabble; it is a talent reserved for the aristocracy. They didn't count on my patience. Mayflies themselves, they cannot understand dedication of purpose. They didn't count on my scientific knowledge, on my technical training at Annapolis. They didn't count on the resources and ingenuity of a superior man.

I tap two wires together, creating sparks, sending messages into ether. I am sending on the frequency of the Others, a prearranged signal in code: The Time is now. Let It come. Sweat in my eyes, fingers cramping, but I continue to broadcast. The Time is now. Let It come. At last a response, the Others acknowledging that they've received my order.

It is over.

:Vow It will come.

:Vow they will pay for their sins.

I sit back on my heels, drained. I have done my part. I have launched it on its way, given birth to retribution, sowed the world with dragon's teeth. And they laughed. Now it is irreversible. Nothing can stop it. An end to all thieves and niggers, to all little men, to all the rabble that grow over the framework like weeds and ruin the order of the world. I stagger to the French windows, throw them open. Glass shatters in one frame, bright fragments against the weave of the rug. Onto the balcony where buildings press in at me unaware of Ragnarok. I collapse against the mesh, fingers spread, letting it take my weight. No motion in the world, but soon there will be enough. Far north, away from the sight of the city, the spaceships of the Others are busy according to plan, planting the thermal charges that will melt the icecap, shattering the earth-old ice, liberating the ancient waters, forming a Wave to thunder south and drown the world. I think of the Building Committee, of the vermin in the ruins of the city, even of my fellows in the other towers. I am not sorry for them. I am no longer young, but I will take them with me into darkness. There will be no other eyes to watch a sun I can no longer see. I have no regrets. I've always hated them. I hate them all.

(I hate them all.)

-He hates them all-

A moaning in the earth, a trembling, a drumming as of a billion billion hoofs. The tower sways queasily. A swelling, ragged shriek of sound.

The Wave comes.

Over the horizon, climbing, growing larger, stretching higher, filling up the sky, cutting off the sunlight, water in a green wall like glass hundreds of feet high, topped with fangs of foam, the Wave beginning to topple in like the closing fist of God. Its shadow over everything, night at noon as it sweeps in, closes down. The Towers etched like thin lines against its bulk. It is curling overhead is the sky now there is no sky now but the underbelly of the Wave coming down. I have time to see the Towers snapped like matchsticks broken stumps of fangs before it hits with the scream of grating steel and blackness clogs my throat to

(I have destroyed the world.)

-The shadow of the mesh on his face-

Sometimes you can see other people in the other tower apartments, looking out from their own balconies. I wonder how they destroy the world.

-He turns away, dimly remembering a business appointment. Outside the lazy hooting of rush-hour traffic. There is a cartoon carnival on Channel Five-