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DEATH AND DESIGNATION AMONG THE ASADI MICHAEL BISHOP

Being sundry notes for an abortive ethnography of the Asadi of BoskVeld, fourth planet of the Denebolan system, as compiled from the journals (both private and professional), official reports, private correspondence, and tapes of Egan Chaney, cultural xenologist, by his friend and associate, Thomas Benedict.

Preliminaries: reverie and departure

From the private journals of Egan Chaney: There are no more pygmies. Intellectual pygmies perhaps, but no more of those small, alert, swaybacked black people of necessarily amenable disposition who lived in the dead-and-gone Ituri rain forests—a people, by the way, whom I do not wish to sentimentalize (though perhaps I may). Pygmies no longer exist—they have been dead for centuries. But on the evening before the evening when Benedict dropped me into the singing fronds of the Synesthesia Wild under three bitter moons they lived again for me. I spent that last evening in base camp rereading Turnbull's *The Forest People*. Dreaming, I lived with the people of the Ituri. I underwent *nkumbi*, the ordeal of circumcision. I dashed beneath the belly of an elephant and jabbed that monstrous creature's flesh with my spear. Finally I took part in the festival of the *molimo* with the ancient and clever BaMbuti. All in all, I suppose, my reading was a sentimental exercise. Turnbull's book had been the first and most vivid ethnography I had encountered in my undergraduate career—and even on that last night in base camp on the hostile world of BoskVeld, a planet circling the star Denebola, his book sang in my head like the forbidden lyrics of the pygmies' *molimo*, like the poignant melodies of BoskVeld's moons.

A sentimental exercise.

What good my reading would do me among the inhabitants of the Synesthesia Wild, I had no idea. Probably none. But I was going out there and on the evening before my departure, the day before my submersion, I lost myself in the forests of another time—knowing that for the next several months I would be the waking and wakeful prisoner of the hominoids who were my subjects. We had killed off all the primitive peoples of Earth, but on paradoxical BoskVeld I still had a job. And when Benedict turned the copter under those three antique-gold moons and flew it back to base camp like a crepitating dragonfly, I knew that I had to pursue that job. The jungle, however, was bleak—and strange—and nightmarishly real; and all I could think was, *There are no more pygmies, there are no more pygmies, there are no*

Methods: a dialogue

From the professional notebooks of Egan Chaney: I was not the first Earthman to go among the Asadi, but I was the first to live with them for an extended period of time. The first of us to encounter the Asadi was Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier, the man who gave these hominoids their name—perhaps on analogy with the word *Ashanti*, the name of an African people who still exist, but more likely from the old Arabic word *asad* meaning lion.

Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier had reported that the Asadi of BoskVeld had no speech as we understood this concept, but that at one time they had possessed a "written language." He used both these words loosely, I'm sure, and the anomaly of writing without speech was one that I hoped to throw some light on. In addition, Frasier had said that an intrepid ethnographer might hope to gain acceptance among the Asadi by a singularly unorthodox stratagem. I will describe this stratagem by setting down here an imaginary conversation that I could have had with Benedict (but didn't).

BENEDICT: Listen, Chaney [I, by the way, am Egan Chaney], what do you plan on doing after I drop you all by your lonesome into the Synthesia Wild? You aren't thinking of using the standard anthropological ploy, are you? You know, marching right into the Asadi hamlet and exclaiming, "I am the Great White God of whom your legends foretell."

CHANEY: Not exactly. As a matter of fact, I'm not going into the Asadi clearing until morning.

BENEDICT: Then why the hell do I have to copter you into the Wild in the middle of the goddamn night?

CHANEY: To humor a lovable eccentric. No. No, Benedict, don't revile me. The matter is fairly simple. Frasier said that the Asadi community clearing is absolutely vacant during the night—not a soul remains there between dusk and sunrise. The community members return to the clearing only when Denebola has gown fat and coppery on the eastern horizon.

BENEDICT: And you want to be dropped at night?

CHANEY: Yes, to give the noise of your copter a chance to fade and be forgotten and to afford me the opportunity of walking into the Asadi clearing with the first morning arrivals. Just as if I belonged there.

BENEDICT: Oh, indeed—yes. You'll be very inconspicuous, Chaney. You'll be accepted immediately—even though the Asadi go about naked, have eyes that look like the murky glass in the bottoms of old bottles and boast great natural collars of silver or tawny fur. Oh, indeed —yes.

CHANEY: Well, Frasier called the stratagem that I hope to employ "acceptance through social invisibility." The principle is again a simple one. I must feign the role of an Asadi pariah. This tactic gains me a kind of acceptance because Asadi mores demand that the pariah's presence be totally ignored. He is outcast not in a physical sense, but in a psychological one. Consequently my presence in the clearing will be a negative one, an admission I'll readily make—but in some ways this negative existence will permit me more latitude of movement and observation than if I were an Asadi in good standing.

BENEDICT: Complicated, Chaney, very complicated. It leaves me with two burning questions. How does one go about achieving pariahhood and what happens to the anthropologist's crucial role as a gatherer of folk material —songs, cosmologies, ritual incantations? I mean, won't your "invisibility" deprive you of your cherished one-to-one relationships with those Asadi members who might be most informative?

CHANEY; I'll take your last question first. Frasier told us that the Asadi don't communicate through speech. That in itself pretty well limits me to observation. No need to worry about songs or incantations. Their cosmologies I'll have to infer from what I see. As for their methods of interpersonal communication—even should I discover what these are, I may not be physically equipped to use them. The Asadi aren't human, Ben.

BENEDICT: I'm aware. Frequently, listening to you, I begin to think speechlessness might be a genetically desirable condition. All right. Enough. What about attaining to pariahhood?

CHANEY: We still don't know very much about which offenses warrant

this extreme punishment. However, we do know how the Asadi distinguish the outcast from the other members of the community.

BENEDICT: How?

CHANEY: They shave the offender's collar of fur. Since all Asadi possess these manes, regardless of sex or age, this method of distinguishing the pariah is universal and certain.

BENEDICT: Then you're already a pariah?

CHANEY: I hope so, I just have to remember to shave every day. Frasier believed that his hairlessness—he was nearly bald—was what allowed him to make those few discoveries about the Asadi we now possess. But he arrived among them during a period of strange inactivity and had to content himself with studying the artifacts of an older Asadi culture, the remains of a huge winged pagoda in the Synesthesia Wild. Too, I've heard that Frasier didn't really have the kind of patience that's essential for field work.

BENEDICT: Just a minute. Back up a little. Couldn't one of the Asadi be shorn of his mane accidentally? He'd be an outcast through no fault of his own, wouldn't he? An artificial pariah?

CHANEY: It's not very likely. Frasier reported that the Asadi have no natural enemies—that, in fact, the Synesthesia Wild seems to be almost completely devoid of any life beyond the Asadi themselves. In any case, the loss of one's collar through whatever means is considered grounds for punishment. That's the only offense that Frasier pretty well confirmed. What the others are, as I said, we really don't know.

BENEDICT: If the jungles are devoid of other life—save inedible botanicals—Chancy, what do the poor Asadi live on?

CHANEY: We don't know that either.

BENEDICT: Well, listen, Chaney—what do you plan to live on? I mean, even Malinowski condescended to eat now and again. At least, that's what I hear.

CHANEY: That's where you come in, Ben. I'm going to carry in sufficient rations to see me through a week. But each week for the next several months you'll have to make a food and supply drop in the place where you first set me down. I've already picked the spot—I know its distance and direction from the Asadi clearing. It'll be expensive, but the people in base camp—Eisen in particular—have agreed that my work is necessary. You won't be forced to defend the drops.

BENEDICT: But why so often? Why once a week?

CHANEY: That's Eisen's idea, not mine. Since I told him I was going to refuse any sort of contact at all during my stay with the Asadi—any contact with you people, that is—he decided that the weekly drop would be the best way to make certain, occasionally, that I'm still alive.

BENEDICT: A weapon, Chaney?

CHANEY: No, no weapons. Besides food I'll take in nothing but my notebooks, a recorder, some reading material, and maybe a little something to get me over the inevitable periods of depression.

BENEDICT: A radio? In case you need immediate help?

CHANEY: No. I may get ill once or twice, but I'll always have the flares if things get really bad. Placenol and bourbon, too. Nevertheless, I insist on complete separation from any of the affairs of base camp until my stay among the Asadi is over.

BENEDICT: Why are you doing this? I don't mean why did Eisen decide we ought to study the Asadi so minutely. I mean, why are you, Egan Chaney, committing yourself to this ritual sojourn among an alien people? There are one or two others at base camp who might have gone if they had had the chance.

CHANEY: *Because, Ben, there are no more pygmies ...*

End of simulated dialogue on initial methods. I suppose I have made Benedict out to be a much more inquisitive fellow than he actually is. All those well-informed questions! In truth, Ben is taciturn and sly at once. But when you read the notes from this ethnography, Ben, remember that I let you get in one or two unanswered hits at me. Can friendship go deeper? As a man whose life's work involves accepting a multitude of perspectives, I believe I have played you fair, Ben.

Forgive me my trespass.

Contact and assimilation

From the private journals of Egan Chaney: Thinking There are no more pygmies there are no more pygmies there are no ... I lay down beneath a tree that resembled an outsized rubber plant and I slept. I slept without dreaming—or else I had grotesque nightmares that, upon waking, I suppressed. A wrist alarm woke me. The light from Denebola had begun to copper-coat the edges of the leaves in the Synesthesia Wild. Still, dawn had not quite come. The world was silent. I refused to let the Wild distort my senses. I did not wish to cut myself on the crimsons and the yellows

and the orchid blues. Neither did I have any desire to taste the first slight treacherous breeze nor to hear the dawn detonate behind my retinas. Therefore I shook myself awake and began walking. Beyond the brutal need of having to maintain my direction I paid no attention to my surroundings. The clearing where the Asadi would soon congregate compelled me toward it That fateful place drew me on. Everything else slipped out of my consciousness—blazing sky, moist earth, singing fronds. Would the Asadi accept me among them —on external signs alone—as they negatively accept their outcasts? Upon this hope I had founded nearly six months of future activity—not a whit of my master strategy had I based on the genuine substance of this condition. Externality vs. substance. It was too late to reverse either my aims or the direction of my footsteps. Let the doubt die. Pattern the sound of your footfalls after the pattern of falling feet—those falling feet that converge with you upon the clearing where the foliage parts and the naked Asadi assemble like a convention of unabashed mutes. I so patterned the sounds of my footfalls. Glimpsed through rents in the fretwork of leaves, an Asadi's flashing arm. Seen as a shadow among other shadows on the ground, the forward-moving image of an Asadi's maned head. The Wild trembled with morning movement. I was surrounded by unseen and half-seen communicants, all of us converging. And then the foliage parted and we were together on the open jungle floor—the Asadi clearing, the holy ground perhaps, the unadorned territory of gregariousness and communion, the focal point of Asadi life. The awesome odor of this life—so much milling life—assailed me. No matter. I adjusted. Great gray-fleshed creatures, their heads heavy with violent drapings of fur, milled about me, turned about one another, came back to me, sought confirmation of my essential whatness. I could do nothing but wait. I waited. My temples pulsed. Denebola shot poniards of light through the trees. Hovering, then moving away, averting their murky eyes the Asadi—individual by individual, I noticed—made their decision and that first indispensable victory was in my grasp: I was ignored!

Xenology: in-the-field report

From the professional tapes of the library of the Third Denebolan Expedition: I have been here two weeks. Last night I picked up the second of Benedict's food drops. It is fortunate that they come on time, that they arrive on the precise coordinates where Benedict first set me down. The Asadi do not eat as we do and the Synesthesia Wild provides me with foodstuffs neither in the way of edible vegetation nor in that of small game

animals. I cannot tolerate the plants. As the biochemists in base camp predicted, they induce almost immediate vomiting or their furry bitterness dissuades me from swallowing them. There are no animals. The jungle is alive, but with writhing fronds and with the heat, the steam, the infrasonic vibrancy of continual photosynthesis. Rainwater I can drink. Thank God for that, even though I boil it before truly considering it potable.

I have reached a few purely speculative conclusions about the Asadi.

With them nothing is certain, nothing is fixed. Their behavior, though it must necessarily have a deep-seated social function, does not make sense to me. At this stage, I keep telling myself, that's to be expected. You must persist, you must refuse to be discouraged. Therefore, I extrapolated from my own condition to theirs. I asked myself, *If you can't subsist on what BoskVeld gives you— how do the Asadi?* My observations in this area (and for fear of Benedict's kindly ridicule I hesitate to put it this way) have borne fruit, have given me the intellectual nourishment to combat despair. Nothing else on BoskVeld has offered me consolation.

In answer to the question, *What do the Asadi eat?* I can say, quite without fear of contradiction, *Everything that I do not.* They appear to be herbivorous. In fact, they go beyond the unsurprising consumption of plants: they eat wood. Yes, wood. I have seen them strip bark from the rubber trees and ingest it without qualm. I have watched them eat pieces of the very heart of young saplings, wood of what we would consider a prohibitive hardness—even for creatures equipped to process it internally.

Three days ago I boiled down several pieces of bark, the sort of bark that I had seen many of the young Asadi consume. I boiled it until the pieces were limply pliable. I managed to chew the bark for several semi-profitable minutes and, finally, to swallow it. Checking my stool nearly a day later I found that this meal had gone right through me. What, after all, does bark consist of? Cellulose. Indigestible cellulose. And yet the Asadi, who possess teeth not much different from ours, eat wood and also digest it. How?

Again I have to speculate. I am hindered by my lack of detailed knowledge about anything other than human beings. Nevertheless, hankering here on the edge of the Asadi clearing as the dusk grows more and more ominous, hunkering here and talking into a microphone (*Testing, one—two—three, testing, testing*), I will offer all you hypercritical and exacting people in the hard sciences an analogy. A ridiculous analogy perhaps. If you don't like it I'll undoubtedly defer to your judgment and back off. But just as primitive shamans must attempt

to explain the world in their own terms, I, Egan Chaney, isolated from my fellows, must conjure up explanations of *my* own. Here is one: I believe that the Asadi digest wood in the same manner as Earthly termites—that is, through the aid of bacteria in their intestines, protozoa that break down the cellulose. A symbiosis, Eisen would say. And let that be a lesson to us all. It's time that people learned to get along with one another. Bacteria and Chinamen, legumes and pygmies.. ..

This is later. Tonight I have to talk, even if it's only to a microphone. With the coming of darkness the Asadi have disappeared again into the jungle and I'm alone.

For the first three nights that I was here I, too, returned to the Wild when Denebola set. I returned to the place where Benedict dropped me, curled up beneath the overhanging palm leaves, slept through the night, and then joined the dawn's inevitable pilgrimage back to this clearing. Now I remain here through the night. I sleep on the clearing's edge, just deep enough into the foliage to find shelter. I go back into the jungle only to retrieve my food drops.

Although the Asadi disapprove of my behavior, I am an outcast and they can do nothing to discipline me away from my unacceptable conduct without violating their own injunction against acknowledging a pariah's existence. As they depart each evening a few of the older Asadi, those with streaks of white in their mangy collars, halt momentarily beside me and breathe with exaggerated heaviness. They don't look at me because that's taboo. But I, in turn, don't look at them—I ignore them as if they were the pariahs. As a result I've been able to dispense altogether with those senseless and wearying treks in and out of the clearing that so exhausted me at first.

My behavioral studies during the day, however, go on unabated.

To absolve myself of what may seem a lack of thoroughness I ought to mention, I suppose, that on my fourth and fifth nights here I attempted to follow two different Asadi specimens into the jungle in order to determine where they slept, how they slept, and what occupied their waking time away from the clearing. I was unsuccessful in these attempts.

When evening comes the Asadi disperse. This dispersal is complete. No two individuals remain together, not even the young with their parents. Each Asadi finds a place of his own, a place utterly removed from that of any other member of his species. (This practice, by the way, runs counter to my experience with every other social group that I've ever studied.) On the fourth and fifth nights, then, I was humiliatingly outdistanced by the

objects of my pursuit. Nor can I suppose that I'd have any greater success with different specimens, since I purposely chose to follow an aged and decrepit-seeming Asadi on the first evening and a small prepubescent creature on the second. Both ran with convincing strength, flashed into the trees—as if still arboreal by nature—and then flickered from my vision.

All three moons are up, burnt-gold and unreal, I'm netted in by shadows and my growing loneliness. Field conditions, to be frank, have never before been quite so austere for me and I've begun to wonder if the Asadi were *ever* intelligent creatures. Maybe I'm studying a variety of Denebolan baboon. Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier, though, reported that the Asadi once had both a written "language" and a distinctive system of architecture. He didn't bother to tell us how he reached these conclusions— but the Synesthesia Wild, I'm certain, contains many secrets. Later I'll be more venturesome. But for the present I've got to try to understand those Asadi who are alive today. They're the key to their own past.

One or two things—final ones—before I attempt to sleep.

First, the eyes of the Asadi. These are somewhat as Benedict briefly described them in the imaginary dialogue that I composed a week ago today. That is, like the bottoms of thick-glassed bottles. Except that I've noted that the eye really consists of two parts—a thin transparent covering, which is apparently hard, like plastic, and the membranous organ of sight that this covering protects. It's as if each Asadi were born wearing a built-in pair of safety glasses. Frasier's impression of their eyes as murky is one not wholly supported by continued observation. What he saw as "murkiness" probably resulted from the fact that the eyes of the Asadi, behind the other lens or cap, are constantly changing colors. Sometimes the rapidity with which a sienna replaces an indigo—and then a green the sienna, and so on—makes it difficult for a mere human being to see any particular color at all—maybe this is the explanation for Frasier's designation of their eyes as "murky." I don't know. I am certain, though, that this chameleonic quality of the Asadi's eyes has social significance.

And a second thing: Despite the complete absence of a discernible social order among the Asadi I may today have witnessed an event of the first importance to my unsuccessful, so far, efforts to chart their group relationships. Maybe. Maybe not. Previously, no real order at all existed. Dispersal at night, then congregation in the morning—if you choose to call that order. But nothing else. Random milling about during the day, with no set times for eating, sex, or their habitual bloodless feuds; random plunges into the jungle at night. Upon Denebola's setting no creature ever

heads in the same direction twice.

What's a humble Earthman to make of all this? A society held together by institutionalized antisocialness? What happened today leads me irrevocably away from that possibility.

Maybe.

This afternoon an aged Asadi whom I had never seen before stumbled into the clearing. His mane was grizzled, his face wizened, his hands shriveled, his gray body bleached to a filthy cream. But so agile was he in the Synesthesia Wild that no one detected his presence until his incongruously clumsy entry into the clearing. Then everyone fled from him. Unconcerned, he sat down in the center of the Asadi gathering place and folded his long naked legs. By this time all of his kinsmen were in the jungle staring back at him from the edge of the clearing. Only at sunset had I ever before seen the Asadi desert the clearing *en masse*. Hence my certainty that what happened today is of prime importance to my mission here.

But I haven't yet exhausted the strangeness of this old man's visit. You see, Moses, he came accompanied. And not by another Asadi.

He came with a small purplish-black creature perched on his shoulder. It resembled a raven, a bat, and a deformed homunculus all at once. But whereas the old man had great round eyes that changed color extremely slowly, if at all, the creature on his shoulder had not even a pair of empty sockets—it was blind. It lacked any organs of sight. It sat on the aged Asadi's shoulder and manipulated its tiny hands compulsively, tugging at the old man's mane, opening and closing them on empty air, then tugging again at its protector's grizzled collar.

Both the old man and his beastlike/ manlike familiar had a furious unreality. They existed at a spiritual as well as a physical distance and I noted that the rest of the Asadi—those who surrounded and ignored me on the edge of the "communion" ground—behaved not as if they feared these sudden visitors but rather as if they felt a loathsome kinship with them. This is difficult to express. Bear with me, Eisen.

Maybe another analogy will help.

Let me say that the Asadi behaved toward their visitors as a fastidious son might behave toward a father who has contracted venereal disease. Ambivalence is all in such cases. Shame and respect, distance and intimacy, love and loathing.

But the episode concluded abruptly when the old man rose from the

ground, oblivious to the slow swelling and sedate flapping of his *huri* (that's a portmanteau word for *fury* and *harpy* that I've just coined) and stalked back into the Wild, scattering a number of Asadi in his wake.

Then everything went back to normal. The clearing filled again and the ceaseless and senseless milling about resumed.

God, it's amazing how lonely loneliness can be when the sky contains three jagged, nuggetlike moons and the human being inside you has involuntarily abdicated to the essence of that which should command only your outward life. That's a mouthful, isn't it? What I mean is that there's a small struggle going on between Egan Chaney, the cultural xenologist, and Egan Chaney, the quintessential man. No doubt it's the result more of environmental pressure than of my genetic heritage.

That's a little anthropological allusion, Benedict. Don't worry about it. You aren't supposed to understand it.

But enough. Today's atypical occurrence has sharpened my appetite for observation—it has temporarily calmed my internal struggle. I'm ready to stay here a year if need be, even though the original plan was only for six months —because a self divided against its stand cannot state. No, it can't. At least, not without fear of contradiction.

Hey ha and hey nonny, I'm going to bed. I may not touch my good old Yamaga mike for a week.

Dear God, look at those moons!

The Asadi clearing: a clarification

From the professional journals of Egan Chaney: My greatest collegiate failing was an inability to organize. I am pursued by that specter even today. Consequently, a digression of sorts. In looking over these quirkish notes for my formal ethnography, I realize that I may have given the student the completely false idea that the Asadi clearing is a small area of ground, say, fifteen by fifteen, measuring in meters. Not so. As well as I am able to determine there are approximately a thousand Asadi individuals on hand daily—this figure includes mature adults, the young, and those intermediate between age and youth. Of course, during all my time in the Synesthesia Wild I've never been completely sure that the same individuals return to the clearing each morning. It may be that some sort of monumental shift takes place in the jungle, one group of Asadi replacing another each day. But I doubt it. The Wild encompasses a finite area, after all, and I have learned to recognize a few of the more distinctive

Asadi (more on this point later, gentle reader). A thousand still seems about right to me: a thousand gray-fleshed creatures strolling, halting, bending at the waist and glaring at one another, eating, participating in random sex acts, grappling like wrestlers, obeying no time scheme, sequence, or apprehensible rationale. Such activity requires a little space. Therefore the reader may not cheerfully assume that the Asadi communion ground is a five-by-eight mud flat between BoskVeld cypress and a malodorous sump hole. Not at all. Their communion ground has both size and symmetry and the Asadi maintain it discrete from the encroaching jungle by their unremitting daily activity. I will not quote you dimensions, however. I will say only that the clearing has the rectangular shape, the characteristic slope, and the practical roominess of a twentieth-century football field. Pure coincidence, I'm sure. Astroturf and lime-rendered endzones are conspicuously absent.

A dialogue of self and soul

From the private correspondence of Egan Chaney: The title of this exercise is from Yeats, dear Ben. The substance of the dialogue, however, has almost nothing to do with the poem of the same name.

I wrote this imaginary exchange in one of my notebooks while waiting out a particularly long night on the edge of the Asadi clearing (just off the imaginary thirty-yard line on the south end of the field, western sideline) and I intend for no one to read it, Ben, but you. Its lack of objectivity and the conclusions drawn by the participants make it unsuitable for any sort of appearance in the formal ethnography that I have yet to write.*

*Even though we lived only a building away from each other in base camp, Chaney "mailed" me this letter and I received it in my postal box for probeship dispatches. We never discussed the "letter" contents. *Thomas Benedict.*

But you, Ben, will understand that a scientist is also a man and may perhaps forgive me. Since even *futbol* fanatics of Century XX required announcers to describe the action or binoculars through which to see it, I herewith provide a program. You can't tell the players without a program. The numbers on the backs of the players' metaphysical jerseys are Self and Soul.

PROGRAM

Self = The Cultural Xenologist
Soul = The Quintessential Man

Manager(s): Egan Chaney

SELF: This is my eighteenth night in the Synesthesia Wild.

SOUL: I've been here forever. But let that go. What have you learned?

SELF: Most of my observations lead me to state emphatically that the Asadi are not fit subjects for anthropological study. They manifest no purposeful social activity. They do not use tools. They have less social organization than did most of the extinct Earthly primates. Only the visit, four days ago, of the old "man" and his frightening companion indicates even a remote possibility that I am dealing with intelligence. How can I continue?

SOUL: You will continue out of contempt for the revulsion that daily grows in you. Because the Asadi are, in fact, intelligent—just as Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier said they were.

SELF: But how do I know that, damn it, how do I know what you insist is true? Blind acceptance of Frasier's word?

SOUL: There are signs, Dr. Chaney. The eyes, for instance. But even if there weren't any signs you'd know that the Asadi are as intelligent in their own way as you or I. Wouldn't you, Egan?

SELF: I admit it. Their elusive intelligence haunts me.

SOUL: No, now you've misstated the facts. You've twisted things around horribly.

SELF: How? What do you mean?

SOUL: You are not the one who is haunted, Egan Chaney, for you're too rational a creature to be the prey of poltergeist. I am the haunted one, the bedeviled one, the one ridden by every insidious spirit of doubt and revulsion.

SELF: Revulsion? You've used that word twice. Why do you insist upon

it? What does it mean?

SOUL: That I hate the Asadi. I despise their every culturally significant—or insignificant—act. They curdle my essence with their very alienness. And because they affect me so you, too, Dr. Chaney, hate them—for you are simply the civilized veneer on my primordial responses to the world. You are haunted not by the Asadi, friend, but by me.

SELF: While you in turn are haunted by them? Is that how you view it?

SOUL: That's how it is. But although you're aware of my hatred for the Asadi, you pretend that that portion of my hatred which seeps into you is only a kind of professional resentment. You believe that you resent the Asadi for destroying your objectivity, your scientific detachment. In truth this detachment does not exist. You feel the same powerful revulsion for their alienness that works in me like a disease, the same abiding and deep-seated hatred. I haunt you.

SELF: With hatred for the Asadi?

SOUL: Yes. Admit it, Egan. Admit that even as a scientist you hate them.

SELF: No. No, damn you, I won't. Because we killed the pygmies, every one of them. How can I say, *I hate the Asadi, I hate the Asadi*. . . when we killed every pygmy? Even though, my God, I do.

Daily life: in-the-field report

From the professional tapes of the library of the Third Denebolan Expedition: Once again it's evening. I've a lean-to now. It protects me from the rain much better than did the porous roof of the forest. I've been here twenty-two days. My flesh has mildewed. Beneath this mildewed flesh my muscles crawl like the evil snakes that BoskVeld doesn't possess. I am saturated with Denebola's garish light. I am Gulliver among the Yahoos and even my own familiar voice speaking into this familiar little recorder doesn't comfort me.

This, however, isn't what you want to hear.

You want facts. You want my conclusions about the behavior of the Asadi. You want evidence that we're studying a life-form with at least a fundamental degree of the ability to ratiocinate. The Asadi have this ability, I swear it. I know it. But in my first week or two here my knowledge stemmed almost entirely from a hunch, a conviction with no empirical basis.

But slowly the evidence for intelligence has begun to accumulate.

OK. Let me, then, deliver myself of an in-the-field report as an objective scientist and forget the hunches of my mortal self. Somebody in grad school used to say that, I'm sure. At any rate, the rest of this tape will deal with the daily life of the Asadi.

A day in the life of. A typical day in the life of.

Except that I'm going to cap my reporting of mundane occurrences with the account of an extraordinary event that took place just this afternoon. Like Thoreau, I'm going to compress time to suit my own artistic/ scientific purposes. So hang on, gang.

At dawn the Asadi return to their football field. For approximately twelve hours they mill about in the clearing doing whatever they care to do. Sexual activity and quirkish staring matches are the only sorts of behavior that can in any way be called "social"—unless you believe milling about in a crowd qualifies. I call their daylight way of life Indifferent Togetherness.

But when the Asadi engage in coitus, their indifference dissolves and gives way to a brutal hostility—both partners behave as if they desire to kill the other and frequently this is nearly the result. (I haven't yet witnessed the birth of an Asadi, in case you're wondering. Maybe the bearing of young occurs only in the Synesthesia Wild, the female self-exiled and unattended. I can't yet say for certain.) As for the staring matches, they're of brief duration and involve fierce gesticulation and mane-shaking. In these head-to-head confrontations the eyes change color with astonishing rapidity, flashing through the entire visible spectrum—and maybe beyond—in a matter of seconds.

I'm now prepared to say that these instantaneous changes of eye color are the Asadi equivalent of speech. I'm sure that you, Eisen, would have ventured this theory much sooner than I have, had you been here—but I'm uneasy about the biological aspects of any cultural study and must go slow. Three weeks of observation have finally convinced me that the adversaries in these staring matches control the internal chemical changes that trigger the changes in the succeeding hues of their eyes. In other words, patterns exist. And the minds that control these chemical changes cannot be primitive ones. Nor can I believe that the changes in eye color result from involuntary reflex. The alterations are willed. They're infinitely complicated.

Old Oliver Bow Aurm was right The Asadi have a "language."

Still, for all the good it does me they might as well have none. I continue

to go through each day as if I were an amateur naturalist charting the activities of the inhabitants of my ant-farm rather than a cultural xenologist attempting to find an ally against the monumental wilderness of space. One day is agonizingly like another. And I can't blame my pariahhood, for the only things even a well-adjusted Asadi may participate in are sex and staring. It doesn't pain me overmuch to be outcast from participation in these. To some extent, I'm not much more of a pariah than any of these creatures. We're all outcast from life's feast, so to speak, with no bridge clubs, Saturday-night dances, or home-study groups to enliven our lives.

Unlike every other society I've ever seen or read about, the Asadi don't even have any meaningful communal gatherings, any festivals of solidarity, any unique rituals of group consciousness. They don't even have families. The individual is the basic unit of their "society." What they have done, in fact, is to institutionalize the processes of alienation. Their dispersal at dusk simply translates into physical distance the incohesiveness by which they live during the day. And have we not learned over long centuries that such alienation is soul-destroying? How do the Asadi continue to live as a people? For that matter, why do they do so?

But enough questions. As I mentioned earlier, something out of the ordinary happened today. It happened this afternoon. (It's still happening, I guess.) And although this occurrence poses more questions than it answers, it had rescued me from the vitiating sameness of Asadi daily life. As before, this strange event involves the old man who appeared in the clearing over a week ago. Him and with him, of course, the blind reptilian creature perched on his shoulder like a curse—the huri.

Until today I'd never seen two Asadi eat together. As an Earthman from a Western background, I find the practice of eating alone a disturbing one. Disturbing and depressing. After all, I've been eating alone for over three weeks now, and I long to sit down in the communal mess with Benedict and Eisen, Morrell and Jonathan, and everyone else at base camp. My training in strange folkways and alien cultural patterns hasn't weaned me away from this longing. As a result, I've watched with interest, and a complete lack of comprehension, the Asadi sitting apart from their fellows and privately feeding— sucking on roots, chewing up leaves, and, as I reported a week ago, actually consuming the bark and heartwood of the trees. But doing so alone, apart, as a seemingly necessary exercise in isolation.

Today this changed.

At the beginning of the hour before the fall of dusk, the old man

staggered into the clearing under the burden of something damnably heavy. I was aware of the commotion at once. Like last time, every one of the Asadi fled from the floor of the assembly ground to the edge of the jungle. I observed from my lean-to. My heart, dear Ben, thrumped like a toad in a jar. I had wondered if the enigmatic old boy would ever return and now he was back. The huri on his shoulder scarcely moved—it appeared bloated and insentient, a rubber doll without a trace of life. During the whole of the old man's visit it remained in this virtually comatose state, upright but un-moving.

The aged Asadi (whom I've begun to regard as some sort of aloof and mysterious chieftain) paused in the center of the clearing, looked about him and then struggled to remove the burden from his back. It was slung over his shoulder blades by means of two narrow straps.

Straps, Eisen: S-T-R-A-P-S.

Can you understand how I felt? Nor did the nature of the burden itself cause my wonder to fade. For, you see, what the old man was lowering to the ground was the rich, brownish-red carcass of an animal. The meat glistened with the falling light of Denebola and its own internal vibrancy. The meat had been dressed, Eisen, it had been prepared and the old man was bringing it to the clearing as an offering to his people.

He set the carcass on the dusty assembly floor and withdrew the straps from the incisions in the meat. Then he stood back five or six steps. Slowly a few of the adult males began to stalk back into the clearing. They approached the old man's offering with diffident steps, like thieves in darkened rooms. I noticed that their eyes were furiously changing colors—they were speaking to one another with the urgency of a hundred electric kaleidoscopes.

All but the old man who had brought the offering. I could see him standing away from the meat and his eyes —like unpainted china saucers—were the color of dull clay.

His eyes didn't alter even when several of the Asadi males fell upon the meat and began ripping away beautifully veined hunks, silently pushing and elbowing and clawing at one another. Then more and more of the Asadi males descended upon the carcass and all about the fringes of the clearing the females and the young made tentative movements out of the shadows. I had to leave my lean-to to see what was going on. And ultimately I couldn't see anything but bodies and manes and animated discord.

Before most of the Asadi were aware, Denebola had set.

Awareness grew, beginning with the females and the young on the edges of the clearing and then burning inward like a grass fire. The first individuals to become aware flashed into the Wild. Others followed. Eventually, in a matter of only seconds, even the strongest males raised their bloody snouts to the sky and scented their predicament. Then they bounded toward the trees, disappearing in innumerable directions— like the dying light itself.

But here is the strange part. The old man didn't follow his people back into the Synesthesia Wild.

He's sitting out there in the clearing right now.

When all the Asadi had fled he found the precise spot where he had placed his offering, hunkered down, lowered his buttocks, crossed his legs, and assumed sole ownership of that sacred piece of stained ground. I can see him out there now, damn it. The moons of BoskVeld throw his shadow in three different directions and the huri on his shoulder has begun to move a little, rustling its wings and nodding its blind head.

This is the first night since I came here that I haven't been alone and—I don't like it. No, indeed, fellows, I don't like it at all.

Personal involvement: The Bachelor

From the private notebooks of Egan Chancy: My meetings of The Bachelor, as I called him almost from the beginning, represented an unprecedented breakthrough. It came on my 29th day in the field—although, actually I had noticed him for the first time three days prior to his resolute approach and shy touching of my face. That touch, which I permitted solely out of respect for Mother Science, frightened me more than anything else that had happened to me in the Wild. As far removed from a threat as a woman's kiss, that touch frightened me more than the first appearance of the old chieftain, more than the nightmare shape of the huri, more even than the chaos of rending and eating that followed the old man's gift of the flame-bright carcass. I had been alone for weeks. Now, without much preamble, one of the Asadi had chosen to acknowledge my presence by touching me. Touching me!

I must back up a bit. I must back up to the night that the Asadi chieftain, against all custom, stayed in the clearing. My first realization that he intended to stay was another moment of minor terror, I'll confess, but the implications of his remaining overrode my fear. Wakeful and attentive, I sat up to study his every movement and to record anything

that might conceivably be construed as significant.

The old man didn't move. The huri grew restive as the night progressed, but it didn't leave the old man's shoulder. The pair of them stayed in the clearing all that night and all the following day. They sat on the stained ground. When twilight came on that second day they departed with all the rest.

I despaired. How many days would I have to suffer through before something else unusual occurred? Would I spend the next five months watching the Asadi engage in brutal sex and senseless staring matches?

But on my 26th day on the edge of the clearing in the Synesthesia Wild, I saw The Bachelor. As far as I know I saw him for the first time. Certainly, if I had ever seen him before I had paid no attention. This anomalous event again broke the tedium for me—even though I didn't then fully understand what was happening. I knew only that the endless shuffling back and forth of the Asadi had given way momentarily to an instant of almost pure communion.

The Bachelor was a completely unprepossessing specimen.

I judged him to be three or four years beyond Asadi adolescence. Gray-fleshed and gaunt, he had a patchy silver-blue mane of so little length that the others surely considered him a virtual outcast. In fact, in all the time I knew him he never once took part in either coitus or the ritualized staring of the full-maned Asadi. When I first felt his eyes upon me The Bachelor was on my imaginary twenty-yard line, looking toward my lean-to from a pocket of his ceaselessly moving brethren: He had chosen me to stare at. The fact that he did not receive a cuffing for violating the one heretofore inviolable Asadi taboo confirmed for me the negligibility of his tribal status. It was he and I who were brethren, not he and the creatures whom he genetically resembled.

But in one extremely salient particular he didn't resemble the vast majority of Asadi. His eyes; his hard, emotion-veiling eyes. These were exactly like the old chieftain's— translucent but empty, enameled but colorless, fired in the oven of his mother's womb but brittle like sun-baked clay. Never did The Bachelor's eyes flash through the rainbow spectrum as did the prismatic eyes of his comrades. They remained clayey and cold, a shade or two lighter than his flesh.

And it was with these eyes, on my 26th day in the field, that The Bachelor took my measure. The noonday heat held us in a shimmering mirage, our gazes locked.

"Well," I shouted, "don't just stand there making faces. Come over here

where we can talk."

My voice had no effect on the teeming Asadi—it had NO effect on The Bachelor. His posture unchanged, he regarded me with no more—and no less—interest than before. Of course, he could not "talk" with me. My human eyes don't even have the virtuosity of traffic lights—and since The Bachelor's never changed color, he couldn't even communicate with his own kind. He was, for all intents and purposes, a mute. But when I called out to him, I believed that his dead eyes indicated a complete lack of intelligence. It did not then occur to me that they might be the external sign of a physical handicap, just as dumbness in human beings may be the result of diseased or paralyzed vocal cords. Instead I decided that The Bachelor was stupid. I'm still not entirely certain that this initial judgment was not correct.

"Come on over here," I said again. "It doesn't bother me that you're mentally deficient."

The Bachelor continued to stare. He didn't approach. The distance between us measured almost thirty meters and occasionally a roving Asadi would intervene, its body blocking our vision.

"Even if you had a thumbnail for a brain," I mumbled, "you wouldn't be at a terrible disadvantage among this crew, old boy. I haven't seen anyone but the old chieftain even attempt to test their intelligence. And untested intelligence, like a cloistered virtue, isn't worth a—" I used an ancient and revered obscenity. The singing fronds of the Synesthesia Wild did not censure me for so saying. Some forty-odd light-years and a half dozen or so centuries had invested the word with a mystic respectability and I was too tired to be more profane.

The Bachelor didn't respond to my inaudible cynicism. He stared at me for the rest of the afternoon. I tried to occupy myself with note-taking, then with a lunch of some of the rations Benedict had dropped, and finally with cursory observations of other Asadi. Anything to avoid that implacable gaze. It was almost a relief when dusk fell. But that evening my excitement grew and I realized that something monumental had happened—I had been acknowledged.

The next day The Bachelor paid me little heed. He wandered forlornly in and out of the slow aimless files of his aimless kindred, a lanky gray clown unheeded by everyone but me. I was disappointed that The Bachelor did not demonstrate the same interest in me that he had shown the day before.

On the 28th day he resumed his shameless staring and I was gratified.

He followed a procedure different from his stationary strategy of the first day—he moved tirelessly about the clearing, weaving in and out of the clusters of Asadi, but always staying close enough to the western sideline to be able to see me. His eyes remained as dead as the insides of two oyster shells.

I felt better the following morning, the morning of the 29th day—something was happening. The light from glowering Denebola seemed softer, the tropic heat less debilitating. I left my lean-to and went out on the assembly ground.

Bathed in the pastel emptiness of dawn, I stood there as the Asadi came flying through the tendrils and fronds of the Synesthesia Wild to begin another day of Indifferent Togetherness. Their bodies broke through the green veils on the clearing's edge like a thousand swimmers diving into a spring and soon I was surrounded. Surrounded but ignored. Great ugly heads with silver or blue or clay-white or tawny manes bobbed around me, graceless and unsynchronized. And above us the sky of BoskVeld stretched out into the attenuated vastness of a universe infinitely less caring than even those dancing heads.

The sun burned the morning away and at last I found The Bachelor.

Undoubtedly he had had me in his sight all that morning—but, moving with circumspection among his fellows, he had not permitted me to see him. I had fretted over his apparent absence.

Then Denebola was directly overhead and The Bachelor threaded his way through a dissolving clump of bodies and stopped not five yards from me, atremble with his own daring. I, too, trembled. I feared that at any moment The Bachelor would fall upon and devour me—instead he steeled himself to the task he had set and began his approach. I stood my ground. The gray head, the patchy silver-blue mane, the twin carapaces of his eyes—all moved toward me. Then the long gray arm rose toward my face and the humanoid hand touched the depression under my bottom lip, touched the most recent of my shaving cuts, touched me without clumsiness or malice.

And I winced.

A running chronology: weeks pass

Day 29: After achieving this unusual one-to-one contact with the Asadi native (hereafter referred to as The Bachelor) I did my best to find some method of meaningful communication. Nothing worked. Not words, of

course. Not hand signals. Not signs in the dirt. Not even awkward charades. Nevertheless, The Bachelor could not be dissuaded from following me about. Once when I left the clearing for lunch he very nearly followed me into my lean-to. I was almost surprised when, at the fall of dusk, he left with the others—he had been so doggedly faithful all afternoon. Despite this desertion I'm excited about my work again. Tomorrow seems a hundred years off and I can't believe that I ever thought seriously about scrapping the first painful returns from my presence here.

Day 35: Nothing. Nothing at all. The Bachelor continues to follow me around, never any more than eight or nine paces away—his devotion is such that I can't urinate without his standing guard at my back. He must think that he's found an ally against the indifference of the others, but what his listless devotion gains for either of us, I can't say. All I know is that I've begun to tire of his attentions, just as he seems to have tired of the monotonous routine that he will not, for anything, abandon. . . . Life in the clearing goes on as always. The others ignore us.

Day 40: I am ill. The medicine Benedict dropped me during an earlier bout with diarrhea is almost gone. It's raining. As I write this, I'm lying on my pallet in my lean-to and watching the Asadi slog back and forth across the floor of their assembly ground. The odor of their morose gray dampness assaults me like a poison, intensifies my nausea. In and out the Asadi go, in and out and back and forth....

I have formulated the interesting notion that their entire way of life, in which I have had to struggle to see even one or two significant patterns, is itself the one significant and ongoing ritual of their species. Formerly I had been looking for several minor rituals to help me explain their society—it may be that *they are the ritual*. As the poet asked, "How tell the dancer from the dance?" But having formulated this new and brilliant hypothesis about the Asadi I'm still left with the question: *What is the significance of the ritual that the Asadi themselves are?* An existential query, of course. Maybe my illness has made me think this way. Maybe I'm going melodramatically insane.

The Bachelor sits cross-legged in the dripping, steam-silvered foliage about five yards from my lean-to. His mane clings to his skull and shoulders like so many tufts of matted, cottony mold. Though he's been dogging my footsteps for eleven days now, I haven't been able to induce him to enter this ramshackle shelter. He always sits outside and stares at me from beneath an umbrella of shining fronds—even when it's raining. As it is now. His reluctance to come under a manufactured roof may be

significant. If only I could make the same sort of breakthrough with two or three others that I've made with The Bachelor.

Day 46: A tinge of my illness remains. So does the Bachelor. The two have begun to get mixed up in my mind. . . . Nothing else to report. In and out, in and out. Daybreak and sunset, sunset and daybreak. The Great Shuffle goes on.

Day 50: After the Asadi fled into the jungle last night, I trudged toward the supply pickup point where Benedict leaves my rations of food and medicine each week. The doses of Placenol that I've been giving myself lately, shooting up the stuff like a skidrow junkie (figuratively speaking, of course), have gotten bigger and bigger—but Eisen, at the outset of this farcical expedition, assured me that P-nol in any quantity is absolutely nonaddictive. What amazes me beyond this sufficiently amazing attribute of the drug, however, is the fact that Benedict has been dropping more and more of it each week, providing me with a supply almost exactly commensurate with my increasing consumption.

Or do I use more because they drop more?

No, of course not. Everything goes into a computer at base camp, A program they ran weeks ago probably predicted this completely predictable upsurge in my "emotional" dependency on P-nol. At any rate I'm feeling better. I've begun to function again.

While I trudged, a haunting uneasiness seeped into me from the fluid shadows of the rubber trees. I heard noises. The noises persisted all the way to the drop point—faint, unidentifiable, frightening. Let me record this quickly: I believe that The Bachelor lurked somewhere beyond the wide leaves and trailing vines where those noises originated. Once, in fact, I think I saw his dull eyes reflect a little of the sheen of the evening's first moon. But he never completely revealed himself to me—if, indeed, he was there at all.

A typed note on the supply bundle: "Look, Chancy, you don't have to insist on 100% nonassociation with us. You've been gone almost two months. A conversation or two with genuine hoo-man beans won't destroy your precious ethnography. Let us drop you a radio. You can use it in the evenings. If you want it, send up a flare tomorrow night before all three moons have risen and I'll copter it out to the drop point the next day. So, how about it, Egan? Your Friend, Beneficent Ben." But of course I don't want a radio. Part of this business is the suffering. I knew that before I came out here. I won't quit until things have at last begun to make a little sense.

Day 57 (Predawn): I haven't been asleep all night. Yesterday evening, just six or seven hours ago, I went into the jungle to retrieve Benedict's eighth supply drop. Another typed note on the bundle; "Chancy, you're a pigheaded ninny. You don't even know how to conjugate your own first name. It should have been Ego instead of Egan. I hope you've learned how to talk Asadi. If you haven't I'm certain that you'll have gone mad by now and started preaching neopentecostal sermons to the trees. What a picture. Send up a flare if you want anything. Ben." I wouldn't've thought Ben quite so sardonically literate.

On the way back to the clearing I heard noises again. The Synesthesia Wild echoed with the plunging grayness of an indistinct form. I am certain (I think) that it was The Bachelor spying on me, retreating clumsily before my pursuit. Yes, even with a backpack of new supplies weighting me down I determined to follow these noises, these suspicious tickings of leaf and twig. And although I never overtook my prey, I was able to keep up! It had to be The Bachelor, that half-seen grayness fleeing before me— none of his fellows would have permitted me so much as a glimpse of the disturbed foliage in the wake of their disappearance. I went deeper and deeper into the Wild, away from the assembly ground. Splotches of moonlight fled across the jungle with us.

When, panting, I broke into an opening among the trees I all at once realized that the noises drawing me on had ceased. I was alone. Lost, maybe. But filling the clearing, rising against the sky like an Oriental pagoda, there loomed over me the broad and impervious mass of something built, something made.

The resonances of Time dwarfed me. Thunderstruck, I felt panic climbing up the membranous ladder in my throat. My own startled gasp startled me again. . . . *It's hard to accept the fact that I've seen what I've seen. But that pagoda, temple, whatever, is actually out there! Old Oliver Bow Aurm studied the ruins of one of these structures—he learned only that the Asadi may have once had a civilization of some consequence. From this intact pagoda, however, I'll undoubtedly learn things that will eclipse even Frasier's discoveries. But God knows when I'll get out there again. ...* I stared up at the lofty wings of this sudden artifact, then turned, plunged back into the jungle and raced wildly away, my backpack thumping

Where was I going? Back to the assembly ground. Which way to run? I didn't have to answer this question. Blindly I moved in the direction of the suspicious tickings of leaf and twig that had resumed shortly after I fled the pagoda. The Bachelor again? I don't know. I saw nothing. But in two

hours' time I had regained the safety of my lean-to. . . . Now I'm waiting for the dawn, for the tidal influx of Asadi.

I'm exhilarated and I haven't even touched my new supply of Placenol.

Day 57 (Evening): They're gone again. But I've witnessed something important and unsettling. The Bachelor did not arrive this morning with the others. At least he didn't take up his customary position eight or nine paces behind me.

That sort of peripatetic vigilance does not go unnoticed and this morning I missed it. Totally ignored, I wandered through the Asadi, looking for The Bachelor. He was nowhere among them. Could he have injured himself in our midnight chase through the Wild?

By noon I was both exhausted and puzzled—exhausted by my search and my lack of sleep, puzzled by The Bachelor's apparent defection. I came to my lean-to and lay down. In a little while I had fallen asleep, though not soundly. Tickings of leaf and twig made my eyelids flicker. I dreamed that a gray shape came and squatted on the edge of the clearing about five yards from where I lay. Like a mute familiar, the shape watched over me. .

..

Kyur-AAAAACCCCK!

Groans and thrashings about. Thrashings and hackings. The underbrush beside my lean-to crackled beneath the invasion of several heavy feet. Bludgeoned out of my dream by these sounds, I sat up and attempted to reorient myself to the world. I saw The Bachelor. I saw three of the larger and more agile males bear him to the ground and pinion him there. They appeared to be cooperating in the task of subduing him!

I watched their actions intently. What they did next confirmed my spur-of-the-moment evaluation. Cooperation it was indeed. The three males, who ignored me with all the contemptuous elan of aristocrats, picked up The Bachelor and bore him to the center of the clearing. I followed this party onto the assembly floor. As they had done during the old chieftain's two unexpected visits, the Asadi crowded to the sidelines—but they did not disappear into the jungle. They remained on the field, buffeting one another like the rabid spectators at one of those near-legendary "bowl" games. I was the only individual other than the four struggling males out in the center of the assembly floor. I looked down at The Bachelor. His eyes came very close to changing colors, going from their usual clay-white to a thin, thin yellow. But I couldn't interfere.

They shaved his mane. A female carrying two flat, beveled stones came out of the crowd on the eastern perimeter of the field—she gave the stones

to the males. With them the males scraped away the last sad mangy tufts of The Bachelor's silver-blue collar. Just as they were about to finish, he gave a perfunctory kick that momentarily dislodged one of his tormentors, then acquiesced in his shame and lay on his back staring at Denebola. The entire operation had taken only about ten minutes. The three males sauntered off from their victim—and the satisfied spectators, aware that the bartering was over, strolled leisurely and with all their former randomness back into the clearing. Now, of course, they ignored The Bachelor with a frigidity they had once reserved for me.

I stood in the center of the clearing waiting for The Bachelor to get to his feet, the two of us a blurred focal point on the slowly revolving wheel of the Asadi Dance of Indifference. But for a long time he didn't move. His narrow head, completely shorn, scarred by their barbering stones (the first tools I had seen any of them but the chieftain employ), looked unnaturally fragile.

I leaned down and offered him my hand. A passing Asadi jostled me. Accidentally, I think. The Bachelor rolled to his stomach, rolled again to avoid being stepped on, curled into the fetal position—then unexpectedly sprang out of the dust and dodged through a broken file of his uncaring kinsmen. Did he wish to attain the edge of the Wild? Intervening bodies blocked my view of him, but I suppose he disappeared into the trees and kept on running.

All extremely interesting, of course. What does it signify? My hypothesis this evening is that the Asadi have punished The Bachelor for leading me last night, whether he did so inadvertently or on purpose, to the ancient pagoda in the Synesthesia Wild. His late arrival in the clearing may have been an ingenuous attempt to forestall this punishment. I can't think of any other reasons why the Asadi should have moved to make him even more of an outcast than he already was.

All this ambivalence mystifies me. It also convinces me that I can't permit the monotony of nine-tenths of their "daily life" to becloud my eyes to the underlying meaning of it all. Patience, dear God, is nine-tenths of cultural xenology. And the punishment of weariness (since I'm discussing punishments, cruel and otherwise) runs concurrently with the xenologist's term of patience. Consequently and/or hence, I'm going to bed.

Day 61: The Bachelor has not returned. Knowing that he's now officially a pariah, he chooses to be one on his own terms. During his absence I've been thinking about two things: (1) If the Asadi did in fact punish The Bachelor because he led me to the pagoda, then they realize full well that I am not simply a maneless outcast. They know that I'm genetically

different, a creature from elsewhere, and they consciously wish me to remain ignorant of their past. (2) I would like to make an expedition to the pagoda. With a little perserverance it shouldn't be exceedingly difficult to find, especially since I plan to go during the day. Unusual things happen so rarely in the Asadi clearing that I can afford to be gone from it for a little while. One day's absence should not leave any irreparable gaps in my ethnography. If the expedition goes well that absence may provide some heady insights into the ritual of Asadi life. I wish only that The Bachelor would return.

Day 63: Since today was the day of Benedict's ninth scheduled drop I decided to make my expedition into the Wild early this morning. I would be "killing two birds," as Ben himself might well put it. First: I would search for the lost pagoda. Second: if I failed to find it I would salvage some part of the day by picking up my new supplies. Therefore, before dawn, off I went.

The directional instincts of human beings must have died millennia ago—I got lost. The Wild stirred with an inhuman and gothic calm that tattered the thin fabric of my resourcefulness.

Late in the afternoon Benedict's helicopter saved me. It made a series of stuttering circles over the roof of the jungle—at one point I looked up and saw its undercarriage hanging so close to the treetops that a spy monkey might have been able to leap aboard. I followed the noise of the helicopter to our drop point. From there I had no trouble getting back to the clearing.

Today, then, marks the first day since I've been in the Wild that I've not seen a single member of the Asadi. I miss The Bachelor as I would miss a prodigal child. I await each dawn with newly rekindled expectations. But the entire night lies before me and the only way to get through it is to sleep.

Day 68: Even though I could not justify an excursion on the basis of another drop (the next one is still two days away), I went looking for the pagoda again. The last four days have been informational zeroes. I had to get away from the clearing, had to take some kind of positive action, no matter how foolish that action might seem. And it was passing foolish—I got lost again, terrifyingly so. Green creepers coiled about me—the sky disappeared. And this time I knew that Benedict's helicopter would not fly overhead—not unless I could wait another two days for it. How, then, dear diary, did our hero get home? Once again, the suspicious tickings of leaf and twig. I simply followed them. Now I'm back in my lean-to again, confident that The Bachelor is still out there and steadfast in my decision

to make no more expeditions until I have help.

Day 71: The Bachelor is back!

Day 72: Yesterday I could record nothing but the simple fact of the Bachelor's appearance in the clearing. This evening I'll note only three or four concomitant facts. The Bachelor still has very little mane to speak of and the Asadi treat him as a total outcast. These last two days he has demonstrated a considerable degree of independence in his relations with me. He continues to follow me about, but less conspicuously and with occasional side trips that remove him altogether from my sight. He no longer hunkers beside my lean-to at all. A made dwelling-place may put him uncomfortably in mind of the pagoda to which he led me and for whose discovery to an outsider he was publicly humiliated. I find this new arrangement a felicitous one, however. A little privacy is good for the soul.

Day 85: The note on yesterday's supply bundle: "Send up a flare tomorrow night if you wish to remain in the Wild. Eisen is seriously considering hauling you out of there. Only a flare will save you. The flare will mean, 'I'm learning things. Don't remove me from my work.' No flare will mean either that your stay has stopped being profitable or that you've reached your limit. My personal suggestion, Egan, is that you do nothing, just sit tight and wait for us. OK? Your friend, Ben." I've just sent up two goddamn flares. Day 85 will go down in cultural-xenological history as Egan Chaney's personal Fourth of July.

Day 98: I'm holding my own again. Thirty days ago I made my second excursion into the Wild to find the elusive pagoda. I've survived almost an entire month without venturing away from the assembly ground.

Most of my time in the clearing has been devoted to noting individual differences among the Asadi natives. Since their behavior for the most part manifests a bewildering uniformity I've necessarily turned to the observation of their physical characteristics. Even in this area, however, most differences are more apparent than real—I've found few useful discriminators. Size has some importance.

The ability of the eyes to flash through the spectrum is another discriminator of sorts. But the only Asadi who don't possess this ability in a complete degree are the old chieftain and The Bachelor.

Nevertheless, I can now recognize on sight several Asadi other than these prominent two. I've tried to give descriptive names to these recognizable individuals. The smallest adult male in the clearing I call Turnbull, because his stature puts me in mind of Colin Turnbull's account of the pygmies of the Ituri. A nervous fellow with active hands I call Benjy,

after Benedict. The old chieftain continues to exert a powerful influence on my thinking. His name I derived by simple analogy. Him I call Eisen Zwei.

The Bachelor now seems intent on retaining his anonymity —his mane has grown very little since the shaving. I would almost swear that he plucks it at night in the Wild, keeping it short on purpose. Who is to say? These last few days he's avoided even me; that is, after he ascertains my whereabouts in the morning and then again in the evening, as if this simple knowledge suffices to maintain him secure all day and then through the uncertainty of night on BoskVeld. The bloom, I suppose, has gone off our romance. Good. We're both more comfortable.

Today was another drop day. I didn't go out to retrieve my parcels. Too weary, too bloodless. But I've sworn off Placenol and the attendant psychological lift has made my physical weakness bearable. My parcels will be out there tomorrow.

Tonight I'm going to read Odegaard's official report on the Shamblers of Misery. And then sleep. Sleep sleep sleep.

Day 106: Eisen Zwei, the old chieftain, came back today! In thumbing through this notebook I find that I first saw him enter the clearing exactly ninety days ago. Has a pattern begun to emerge? If so, I can't interpret its periodicity. I don't even know, come to think of it, what sort of life-span the Asadi have. It might be that a man would have to stay out here centuries in order to unravel a mere sleeve of the garment of their existence. God forbid.

This visit of Eisen Zwei—to return to the issue at hand —proceeded in a manner identical to that of his first one.

He came into the clearing with the huri on his shoulder, sat down, remained perhaps an hour, then stalked back into the Wild. The Asadi, of course, fled from him—motivated, perhaps, more by loathing than fear.

How long will I have to wait until ole E.Z. returns?

Day 110: The behavior of the Asadi—all of the Asadi— has undergone a very subtle alteration, one I can't account for. Nothing in my previous association with them gives me a basis for evaluating its import. Even after 110 days in the field I'm a slave to purely human concepts of causality—behavior changes for certain reasons, not from mere whim. But out here reasons elude me in the same way that the Asadi pagoda, about which I now only dream, once eluded me.

Let me state what I have observed. For the last two days every member of this insane species has taken great pains to avoid stepping into a rather

large area in the center of the clearing. As a result the Asadi have crowded themselves into two arbitrary groups at opposite ends of the field. These "teams" do not comport themselves in exactly the same way as did the formerly continuous group. Individuals on both sides of the silently agreed-upon No Man's Land exude an air of heightened nervousness. They crane their heads about, clutch their arms across their chests, sway, suffer near-epileptic paroxysms as they weave in and out, in and out, among their fellows. Watching them I sometimes believe that they writhe to the music of an eerie flute played deep in the recesses of the jungle.

Sometimes staring matches will take place between individuals on opposite sides of the imaginary chasm. Eyes change color, bodies bend, and limbs flail. But neither participant puts a foot inside the crucial ring of separation, which is about thirty yards long and almost—but not quite—the entire width of the clearing. Not quite, mind you, because there's a narrow strip of ground on each sideline through which the two "teams" may exchange members, one member at a time. These exchanges occur infrequently, with a lone Asadi darting nervously out of his own group, down one of these unmarked causeways and into the "enemy" camp. Why do they avoid the center of the clearing? The only reason my Earthman's mind can settle on is that the clearing's center marks that area of fearsome ground where an offender has been humiliated, blood spilled, and flesh consumed. But all these things happened a good while ago. Why this fastidiousness now? Why this separation?

The Bachelor has reacted to it all by climbing into the branches of a thick-boled tree not ten meters from my lean-to. From dawn to sunset he sits high above his inscrutable kinsmen, watching, sleeping, maybe attempting to assess the general mood. At times he looks in my direction to see what I make of these new developments. I don't make much of them.

Day 112: It continues, this strange bipartite waltz. The dancers have grown even more frantic in their movements. Anxiety pulses in the air like electricity. The Bachelor climbs higher into his tree, struggling to the topmost branches where his hold is precarious—he wedges himself in place. In the last three days I can't recall having seen any of the dancers eat—none have engaged in sex. Even their staring contests have virtually ceased, though those that do occur are fierce and protracted. The nonexistent flute that plays in my head has grown stingingly shrill and I cannot guess what the end of this madness must be.

Day 114: Events culminated today in a series of bizarre developments that pose me a conundrum of the first order. What will happen tomorrow?

I can't imagine any sort of follow-up to what I raptly watched today.

It began early. Eisen Zwei came into the clearing an hour after the arrival of the Asadi. As on his second visit, he bore on his back the dressed-out carcass of an animal. His huri, though once again upright on the old man's shoulder, looked like the work of a rather inept taxidermist—lopsided, awkwardly posed, and inanimate. The people in the clearing deserted their two identically restive groups, fleeing to the jungle around the assembly ground. I could not help thinking, *How strange, how ironic, that the force that momentarily reunifies the Asadi is a shared loathing.*

The Bachelor, half-hidden by great lacquered leaves and unsteady in the fragile upper branches, leaned out over the clearing's edge and gazed down from his empty clay-white eyes. I clutched the bole of his tree, surrounded now by the curious, loathing-filled Asadi who had crowded into the jungle. They ignored me. Unaware of him, they ignored The Bachelor, too—but together we all watched the spectacle proceeding in the Center Ring.

Eisen Zwei lowered the burden from his back. He undid the straps that had held the meat in place. But now, instead of stepping away and permitting a few of the braver males to advance, he took the near-unconscious huri from his shoulder and set it upon the bleeding lump of meat. The huri's blind head did not move, but even from where I stood I could see its tiny fingers rippling with slow but well-orchestrated malice. Then this hypnotic rippling ceased and the huri sat there looking bloated and dead, a plaything for the children of scabrous witches.

Without a farewell of any sort Eisen Zwei turned and stalked back into the Synesthesia Wild. Where he left the clearing, foliage clattered from the efforts of several Asadi to get out of his way.

Silence fell again.

And now no one left the security of the assembly ground's edge to challenge the huri's ownership of this new and sorely tempting carcass—despite the fact that I had not seen any of the Asadi take food in almost five days.

Denebola, fat and mocking, crossed a small arc of the sky and made haloes dance in a hundred inaccessible grottos of the Wild.

An hour passed, and Eisen Zwei returned! He had simply left the huri to guard his first offering. Yes, first. For the old chieftain had come back with still another carcass slung across his bony shoulders, another dressed-out and flesh-strapped carcass. He set it down beside the other.

The huri animated itself just long enough to shift its weight and straddle the two contiguous pieces of meat. Then the old Asadi departed again, just as before.

In an hour he returned with a third piece of meat—but this time he entered the clearing from the west, about twenty yards up from my lean-to. I realized that he had first entered from the east, then from the south. *A pattern is developing, I thought. Now he'll depart once more and reenter from the north.* After all, even the most primitive peoples on Earth had ascribed mystical characteristics to the four points of the compass and I was excited by the prospect of my being able to draw a meaningful analogy.

Of course, Eisen Zwei saw fit to shatter my hopes by remaining on the assembly floor—he did not leave again at all. (In fact, as on my 22nd night in the Wild, he still has not left. Under a triangle of copper-green moons the old chieftain and his huri squat on the bleak, blood-dampened ground waiting for Denebola's first spiderwebblings of light.) He made one complete circuit around the clearing instead, walking counterclockwise from his point of entrance. The huri did not move.

This done, Eisen Zwei rejoined his noxious familiar at midfield.

Here the second stage of this new and puzzling ritual began. Without taking the third carcass from his back, E.Z. bent and picked up the huri and put it in its accustomed place on his shoulder. Kneeling, he tied straps through the two pieces of meat over which the huri had kept watch. Next he began to drag these marbled chunks of brown and red slowly through the dirt. He dragged the first into the southern half of the clearing and set the huri down once more as his guardian. This procedure he duplicated in the northern half of the clearing, except that here he himself stood guard over the second offering. The final carcass he still bore on his back.

Outlined in the dust were two distinct drag marks, inward-looping circles that delineated the chieftain's progress from the original resting place of the meat. The coil in the dust of the northern half of the field was single; that in the southern, double. The Asadi tensed.

Eisen Zwei stepped away from the second offering. Deep in his throat he made a noise that sounded like a human being, a grown man, trying to fight down a sob. This sound I suppose I should add, is the first and so far the only example of voiced communication—discounting involuntary groans and a few guttural, growl-like mumblings—that I've heard among the Asadi. The huri responded to Eisen Zwei's plaintive "sobs"—undoubtedly a signal—by hopping, practically falling off the

object of its guardianship and then scrabbling miserably through the dust toward its master. Its rubbery wings dipped, twisted, folded upon themselves. (I've almost decided that the huri is incapable of flight, that its wings represent an anatomical holdover from an earlier stage of its evolution.) When both Eisen Zwei and his wretched huri had reached their sacred patch of ground at midfield the old Asadi picked up the beast and let it close its tiny hands over his discolored mane.

The two of them held everyone's attention.

Then the wizened old chieftain extended his arms, tilted back his head and, staring directly at the sun, made a shuddering inhalation of such piteous depth that I thought either his lungs would burst or his heart break. The clearing echoed with his sob.

At once the Asadi poured out of their hiding places onto the assembly ground—not simply the adult males but individuals of every sex and age. Even now, however, in the middle of this lunging riot, the population of the clearing divided into two groups, each one scrimmaging furiously, intramurally, in its own cramped plot of earth. Teeth flashed, manes tossed, bodies crumpled, eyes pin-wheeled with inarticulate color. The hunger of the Asadi, like mid-August thunder, made low sad music over the Wild.

In this hunger neither The Bachelor nor I shared. We merely watched, he from aloft, I from the trembling shadows.

It did not take long for the Asadi, slashing at one another and sometimes half-maiming themselves, to devour the two carcasses. Perhaps five minutes. *Like piranhas*, I thought, *quick, voracious, brutal*.

And then Eisen Zwei inhaled his grief-shot moan and the confusion ceased. Every lean gray snout turned toward him. The dying went off to die alone, if any were in fact at the point of death. I saw no one depart, but neither did I see anyone prostrate in the dirt—as unlikely as it may sound. Death, like birth, the Asadi must choose to experience in the intimate privacy of the jungle and the night—in my months here I've not seen a single tribesman die in the clearing. Illness, accident, and age apparently have no sting here. And, believe it or not, I've only just now realized this. Does it mean anything? Sure. (But what?) All eyes upon him, silence stemming out of the very earth, Eisen Zwei made preparations for the third and final act of today's unanticipated, unexpectedly baroque ritual.

He lowered the burden from his back, sat down beside it and—in full view of his benumbed tribesmen—ate. The creature on his shoulder leaned into his mane and I thought that the old chief might feed the huri, give it

something for its contribution to the festivities; He gave it nothing. Inert but clinging, the huri did not protest this oversight.

An hour passed. Then two. Then three.

By this time I had long since retired to the shade of my lean-to, emerging at fairly frequent intervals to check the goings-on in the clearing. By the second hour the Asadi had begun to move about within their separate territories. By the third hour these territories had merged so that I could no longer distinguish the two distinct "teams" of previous days. The pattern of the Daily Life of my first 109 days in the clearing had reasserted itself—except that now the Asadi moved with incredible sluggishness, suspiciously regarding their chieftain and refusing to encroach upon a rather large unmarked circle containing him.

I decided that the ritual was about to conclude. Out among the Asadi, trying to feel through my pores the prevailing mood, I noticed that the Bachelor had come down out of his tree. But I didn't see him in the clearing. All I saw was old E.Z., isolated by a revolving barricade of legs, chewing with an expression of stupid pensiveness. The huri flapped once or twice as the afternoon progressed, but the old chieftain still did not feed it.

Finally, sunset.

The Asadi fled, dispersing as they always have—but Eisen Zwei, no doubt as surfeited as a python that has just unhinged its lower jaw to admit a fawn, slumped in his place and did not move.

Now three alien moons dance in the sky and I'm left with one question, the one question that I'm frightened to ask, so stark and self-evident is its answer: *From what sort of creature did the old chief obtain and dress out his ritual offerings?* Once before I didn't ask this question at all—I couldn't ask it. But now, huddled beneath the most insubstantial of roofs, I am unable to fend off the terrible ramifications of the Asadi way of death.

Speculations on cannibalism: an extemporaneous essay

From the unedited in-the-field tapes of Egan Chaney: It's a beautiful day. Just listen. Let me hold the microphone out for you—hear that? Nothing but a thousand pairs of feet (minus six or eight feet, I suppose) slogging back and forth through a quarter inch of hot dust. Nothing but that and the soulful respiration of the Asadi and —somewhere beyond these scarcely tangible sounds—the stillness of all BoskVeld. A beautiful day, just beautiful.

And here I am, your roving reporter, Egan Chaney, right out here where the action is, thoroughly prepared to give you the latest and most comprehensive coverage of each new development in the clearing. Unfortunately, Eisen, I still do more waiting around than adrenalin-powered summaries of the ongoing news. It's four days since your counterpart, Eisen Zwei, stirred things up with his disorderly three-course banquet.

Since then, nothing.

As a consequence, I'm now going to switch hats, doffing my correspondent's chapeau in favor of the dignified visor of a senior news editor. I'm walking. I'm walking among the Asadi. They fail to see me even though I'm just as solid, just as real, as they are. Even the ones I've given names to refuse to grant me the fact of my existence.

I've just walked by Werner. The configuration of his features give him a gentle look, like that of a Quaker wearing a parka. His seeming gentleness leads me to the topic of this commentary—how could a creature of Werner's mien and disposition actually eat the flesh of one of his own kind? God help me if these aliens are sentient, my good base-camp buggers, because I'm walking among cannibals!

They encircle me. They ensorcel me. They fill me with a sudden dread, an awe such as the awe of one's parents that consumes the child who has just learned the secret of his own conception and birth. Exactly thus, my dread of the Asadi, my awe of their intimate lives....

Turnbull is missing. Do you remember him? I named him Turnbull because he was small, like the pygmies the first Turnbull wrote about. Now I can't find him. Since the ritual of Day 114, I've been through this clearing a hundred times—from sideline to sideline, from endzone to endzone—searching for him with all the devotion of a father. Little Turnbull, squat and sly, is nowhere among these indifferent, uncouth beings. I'd have found him by now, I know I would. He was my pygmy, my little pygmy, and now these aloof bastards—these Asadi of greater height than Turnbull himself possessed—have eaten him! Eaten him as though he were a creature of inferior status—a zero in a chain of zeroes as long as the diameter of time! May God damn them!

A lengthy pause during which only the shuffling of the Asadi can be heard.

—I think my shout unsettled some of them. A few of them flinched. But they don't look at me, these cannibals, because a cannibal may not go too far toward acknowledging the existence of another of his kind, so

uncertain is his opinion of himself. A cannibal is always afraid that he'll ascribe more importance to himself than he deserves. In doing so, he discovers—in a moment of hideous revelation—where his next meal is coming from. He always knows where it's coming from and he's therefore nearly always afraid.

Yes, yes, I was philosophical, but I told you a moment ago that this was an editorial, not a news report. You've got to expect shallow profundities in these things. Shallow profundities and forthright circumlocutions. OK? I don't want to disappoint anyone.

As a result (if I may continue) cannibals are the most inwardly warring schizophrenics in all of Nature. The dichotomy between the two self-contained personalities shines as clean and coppery as Denebola at dawn. The pattern of indifferent association during the day and compulsive scattering at night—as they flee from themselves—lends further credence, I think, to my interpretation of their dichotomy of soul. After all, who is more deluded than the cannibal? His every attempt to achieve unity with his kind results in a heightened alienation from himself.

So it is with the Asadi. So it is with—

Damn it, I agree! I'm talking sense and rubbish at the same time.—But it's hot out here, and they ignore me. They go by, they go by, revolving about me like so many motorized pasteboard cut-outs. . . . And Turnbull's not among them, he doesn't revolve anymore, he's been butchered and consumed. Butchered and consumed; do you hear? With the same indifference that we used to poison the Ituri and rout out the people who lived there. Turn-bull's dead, base-camp buggers, and *There are no more pygmies there are no more pygmies there are no*

The Ritual of Death and Designation

From the final draft of the one complete section of Egan Chaney's otherwise unfinished ethnography:

PART ONE—DEATH. On Day 120 the old chieftain, whom I called Eisen Zwei, took ill. Because it had been several days since he had gorged himself during the "feast," I then supposed that his sickness was not related to his earlier intemperance. I am still of this mind. For five days he had eaten nothing, although the rest of the Asadi refused to observe his

fast and began eating whatever herbs, roots, flowers, bark, and heartwood they could find—just as they had done before their ritual feast. They ignored the old chief and the old chief's huri, much in the way they ignored The Bachelor and me. * *

* *Several explanatory footnotes were provided with the published fragment. I wrote the introduction to the fragment, and the footnotes that follow this one are all from my hand. *Thomas Benedict*.

Eisen Zwei's sickness altered the pattern, altered it more violently than had his several appearances in the clearing. On the afternoon of the first day of his illness he abruptly rose from his reserved center plot and made the horribly glottal, in-sucking noises that he had used to summon his people to the meat six days before.

I came running from my lean-to.

The Asadi moved away from the old chieftain, stopped their shuffling and shambling and stared from great platter-like eyes, the lenses of which had stalled on a single color. This delicate stasis reigned for only a moment. Then the in-sucking noises were replaced by a spastic rumbling. As I broke into the clearing I saw the old man bent over at the waist, his arms above his head, heaving and again heaving until it seemed that he would soon be vomiting into the dust the very lining of his bowels. I turned away, abashed by the sight, but since the Asadi stared on, fascinated, I turned back around to observe their culture in action. It was at that moment, if at no other, that I earned the Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier Memorial Fillet, which the Academy has since bestowed upon me.***

***This sentence did not appear in the published fragment. Egan Chaney has never received this award, though I believe he deserved it. According to Academy President Isaac Wells, he is not now, nor has he ever been, under consideration for the award.

The chieftain's huri flew up from his shoulder and flapped in the somnolent air like a small wind-collapsed umbrella. I had never seen it fly before—I was surprised that it was capable of flight. Its ungainly flapping excited the already well-aroused population of the assembly ground, and

together we watched the huri rise above tree level, circle back over the clearing, and dip threateningly toward the branches of the trees on the clearing's western edge. The old chief and his vehement, body-racking convulsions seemed forgotten. Every pair of color-stalled eyes followed the uncertain aerial progress of the huri. It plummeted, noisily flapping, toward that precariously forked perch where The Bachelor sometimes sequestered himself.

But The Bachelor was not there. I did not know where he was.

The huri crashed downward through the branches, caught itself up, struggled flapping out of the jungle, and returned with blind devotion to the air space over its master. I thought that at last it was going to feed, that its sole diet might well consist of Eisen Zwei's vomitings. I expected the starved creature to fall upon these—but it did not. Somehow it kept itself aloft, flapping—flapping—waiting for the old man to finish.

And when the old chief had completely emptied himself and fallen exhausted to his knees, it was not the huri that waded into the vile pool of vomit but the old man's shameless compatriots.

Now I did not even think of returning to my lean-to. My curiosity overcame my revulsion and I watched the Asadi carry away the half-digested mass as if each semi-solid piece were an invaluable relic. There was no fighting, no elbowing, no eye-searing abuse. Each individual simply picked out his relic, took it a short distance into the jungle, and deposited it in some hidden place for safekeeping.

All during this solemn recessional the huri quickened the air with its heavy wings and an anonymous Asadi supported Eisen Zwei by tenderly clutching the old chief's mane. When everyone had taken away a chunk of regurgitated flesh the chieftain's attendant laid him down out of the sphere of hallowed spew, and the huri descended to squat by its master's head. This newest ritual was over, all over.

I should mention, however, that The Bachelor appeared in the mourning throng to select and depart with some memento of Eisen Zwei's illness, just as the others had. He came last, took only a palm-sized morsel and retreated to the clearing's edge. Here he climbed into the tree above which the huri had flown its nearly disastrous mission only minutes before. Until sunset The Bachelor remained here, observing and waiting—as I, as a cultural xenologist, must always do.

On Days 121, 122, and 123 Eisen Zwei continued in his illness and the Asadi paid him scant attention, their chief ministrations consisting of bringing him water twice a day and refraining from stepping on him. The

huri sat by the old chieftain's head. It shifted from one foot to the other and waited—smugly, I thought—for its master to die. It never ate.

At night the Asadi deserted their dying leader without a glance, without a twinge of doubt, and I was afraid that he would die while they were gone. Several times, looking out at his inert silhouette, moonlight dripping through the fronds, I thought he had died, and a mild panic assailed me. Did I have a responsibility to the corpse? Only the responsibility, I decided, to let it lie and observe the reactions of the Asadi when they came back at dawn.

But the old chief did not die during any of these nights and on Day 124 another change occurred. Eisen Zwei sat up and stared at Denebola as it crossed the sky—but he stared at the angry sun through the spread fingers of both his hands, hands he crooked into claws and tore impotently through the blur of light that Denebola must have seemed to him. The huri did not move. As always, it sat smug and blindly knowing. But the Asadi noticed the change in their leader and reacted to it. As if his writhing dissatisfaction with the sun were a clue, they divided into two groups again and formed attentive semicircles to the north and south of Eisen Zwei. They watched his challenge to the sun, his wrestling with its livid corona, his tearing at its indistinct streamers of gas with gnarled hands.

At noon the old chief rose to his feet. He stretched out his arms. Sobbing, he clawed at the sky, suddenly gave up, and sank back to his knees.

Without any sort of visible prompting a pair of Asadi from each group went to his aid. They lifted him from the ground. Others on the clearing's edge selected large, lacquered fronds from the rubber trees and passed these over the heads of their comrades to the place where their leader had collapsed. The men supporting Eisen Zwei took these fronds, arranged them into a regal pallet, and then placed the fragile body on the bed they had made.

For only the second time that I could remember the Asadi had cooperated to bring about a desired end. (The other occasion, of course, had been the shaving of The Bachelor's mane.) But, like ancient papyrus exposed to the air, their cooperation disintegrated as soon as Eisen Zwei was stretched full-length on his pallet.

Each of the groups maintained a semblance of its former integrity, but aimless shambling replaced chieftain-watching as the primary activity within each group. Denebola, finally free of the old man's gaze, fell toward

the horizon.

I walked unimpeded through the clearing and bent down over the dying chieftain, careful to avoid the huri that watched me from its uncanny, socketless face. I shrugged off the creature's literally blank stare and looked into the genuine eyes of its master.

I experienced a shock, a physical jolt.

The old man's eyes were burned out, blackened holes in a humanoid mask. It now made little difference that even before his staring match with the sun his eyes had not possessed the Asadi ability to run through the spectrum—for now, burned out, blackened, they were utterly dead, two char-smoked lenses waiting for the old man's body to catch up with their lifelessness.

And then the diffused red light that signaled sunset in this forested region of BoskVeld was pouring through the Wild.

The clearing emptied.

Alone with Eisen Zwei and his huri, I knew that it would be during this night that the old man died. I tried to find some intimation of life in his blackened eyes, saw none, and withdrew to the cover of the Wild and the security of my lean-to. I did not sleep. But my worst premonitions betrayed me and in the morning I looked out to see Eisen Zwei sitting cross-legged on his pallet, the huri once again perched on his shoulder.

And then the tenuous yellow light that marked sunrise and rejuvenation on BoskVeld filtered through the jungle.

The Asadi returned, filled the clearing with their lank bodies, and once again took up their positions to the north and the south of the dying chieftain.

Day 125 had begun. And, finally, the ritual that I had decided the Asadi *were* resolved itself into a lesser ritual in which they merely participated—the grandest, strangest, and most highly ordered ceremony in their culture. I call the events of Day 125, taken as a cumulative whole, the Ritual of Death and Designation. I believe that we will never fully understand the narrowly "political" life of the Asadi until we can interpret, with precision, every aspect of this ritual. Somewhere in the context of the events of Day 125 lies the meaning of it all. And how terrible to be confronted with an elusive truth!

The color of the eyes of every Asadi in the clearing (The Bachelor's excepted) declined into a deep and melancholy indigo. And stalled there. The effect of solemn uniformity struck me as soon as I stepped onto the

assembly floor—even though I had intended to look first at Eisen Zwei and not at his mourners. Profound indigo and absolute silence. So deeply absorbent were the eyes of the Asadi that Denebola, rising, could cast no glare, could throw out not a single dancing, shimmering, uncapturable ray. Or so it seemed. The day was an impressionist painting rendered in flat pastels and dull primaries—a paradox.

Then the heads in which the indigo eyes so intriguingly reposed began to rock from side to side, the chin of each Asadi inscribing a small figure eight in the air. The heads moved in unison. This went on for an hour or more as the old chieftain, as blind as his companion, sat cross-legged on his pallet, nodding, nodding in the monumental morning stillness.

Then, as if they had inscribed figure eights for the requisite period, the Asadi broke out of their separate groups and formed several concentric rings around the old man. They did so to the same lugubrious rhythm that they had established with their chins; they dragged their long bodies into place. The members of each ring continued to sway. The inaudible flute which I had once believed to be in the Wild had now certainly been exchanged for an inaudible bassoon. Ponderously, the Asadi swayed. Ponderously, their great manes undulated with a slow and beautifully orchestrated grief. And The Bachelor (all by himself, just beyond the outermost ring) swayed also in cadence with the others.

Now I was the sole outcast among this people, for I alone observed and did not participate.

The rhythmic swaying lasted through the remaining hours of the forenoon and on toward the approach of evening.

I retired to my lean-to, but thought better of just sitting there and climbed the tree in which The Bachelor often perched. I forgot about everything but the weird ceremony in the clearing. I did not eat. I did not desert my station. Neither did I worry about my separation from the members of the Third Denebolan Expedition in base camp— it was for this moment, I instinctively understood, that I had refused any but the most essential contacts with other human beings. Leaning out over the clearing I gave myself up completely to the hypnotic movements of the shaggy-headed players that a generous universe had permitted me to study. No, thank merciful God, Egan Chaney had not been born too late.

I nodded but I did not sleep.

Suddenly Eisen Zwei gave a final sob, maniacal and heartrending, and grabbed the beast that clung with evil tenacity to his mane. He seized it with both palsied hands. (This was near the end of the day—I could feel

the last dull rays of Denebola caressing my back, covering me like a threadbare blanket, unevenly warm.) Eisen Zwei exerted himself to what seemed his last reserve of strength and, strangling the huri, lurched out of the dust to his feet. The huri flapped, twisted, freed one wing, and flapped harder. The old chief squeezed his hands together and attempted to grind the life out of the creature. He was not successful. The huri beat the air with its wings, beat the chieftain about the face, and finally used its tiny hands to scour fine crimson wounds in Eisen Zwei's withered cheeks and buckled forehead.

During this struggle the Asadi stopped swaying, they looked on with eyes that gradually fell away from indigo toward a paler blue. Eisen Zwei drew a deep breath and shook the belligerent huri back and forth, up and down, like a bartender mixing an exotic drink.

But the huri flapped out of his grasp and rose to tree level. I feared that it would dive upon me in my borrowed perch, but it skirted the inside perimeter of the clearing— dipping, banking, silently cawing. Its imaginary screams replaced the distant but just as imaginary bassoon in my consciousness. Meanwhile Eisen Zwei, finding his hands empty, relaxed and dropped back onto his pallet. His body fell across it sideways, and his burned-out eyes fixed themselves—coincidentally, I'm sure—on me.

The Asadi chieftain was dead. He died just at sunset.

I waited for his people to flee into the Wild, to leave his brittle corpse in the clearing for an Earthman's astonished scrutiny. They did not flee. Even though the lethal twilight was gathering about them, they stayed. The attraction of the old one's death outweighed their fear of exposing themselves in an open place to the mysteries of darkness.

In my arboreal lookout I realized that I had witnessed two things I had never before seen among the Asadi: Death and a universal failure to repair. What would the night bring? The featureless, unpredictable night?

PART TWO: DESIGNATION. The Ritual of Death and Designation had passed into its second major stage before I truly comprehended that stages existed. I ignored my hunger. I put away the thought of sleep.

As I did so the Asadi converged upon the old man's corpse and those of smallest size were permitted to crowd into the center of the clearing and lift the dead chieftain above their heads. The young, the deformed, the weak, and the congenitally slight of stature formed a double column

beneath the old man's outstretched body and began moving with him toward the northern endzone.

Arranged in this fashion, they forced a startling revelation upon me—these were the Asadi whose manes were a similar color and texture, a stringy detergent-scum beige. But they bore the corpse of Eisen Zwei with uncomplaining acquiescence. The larger, sleeker specimens of Asadi (those with luxuriant silver, silver-blue, or golden manes) formed single columns on each side of their lackluster counterparts and together these two units, like water inside a moving pipe, flowed toward the north—

—the one direction that Eisen Zwei had not entered from on the day he brought those three dressed-out, provocative carcasses into the clearing.

I recalled that driver ants in Africa had used just this sort of tubular alignment when they wished to move great distances as a group, the workers inside the column, the warriors without. And nothing on that immense dark continent was more feared than driver ants on the march—with, of course, the exception of man.

Almost too late I realized that the Asadi would be out of the clearing and beyond my reach unless I got out of The Bachelor's tree. Nearly falling, I scrambled down. The twilight glittered with the dust of the departing columns, and the foliage through which the mourners marched gave off a soft gauzy glow, as if viewed through a photographer's filter. I ran. I found that I could keep up with very little effort, so cadenced and funereal was the step of their procession. I slowed to a walk behind it.

Trudging in the wake of the mourners, incorrigibly hangdog in his pariahhood, was The Bachelor. As the huge gray procession snaked into the Synesthesia Wild, I noted that the circumstances of this march had reversed our roles—now I was following him. Three or four steps behind it all, Egan Chaney—the consummate outsider ridiculously hoping to learn the door-opening arcana of a group that had excluded him.

And all the while the twilight glittered, thickened, reverberated with the footfalls and leaf nudgings of a thousand single-minded communicants.

Before we had got completely out of the clearing, I looked around for the huri. I saw it flying above that part of the procession where its master was being borne forward on the shoulders of the smaller Asadi. Avoiding branches, the huri turned an inadvertent cartwheel in the air, righted itself, and landed on Eisen Zwei's bony chest. Here, conspicuous above the heads of its master's people, it did a little preening dance. It looked like an oil-coated rooster wooing a hen.

Then the column snaked to the left. The Wild closed off my view of the

marchers and darkness began drifting in like black confetti.

I dogged The Bachelor's footsteps and waited for a new revelation.

How long we trudged through the singing fronds, the perfumed creepers, the blades of blue air, I don't know. Nor will I attempt to estimate.

There in the clearing, rising against the sky like an Oriental pagoda, loomed the broad and impervious mass of something *built*, something *made*. By now all three moons were up and the solid black bulk of this structure was spotlighted in the antique-gold claret that the three moons together shed. Even before those of us at the end of the procession were out of the jungle, we could see the lofty, gemlike wings of this sudden artifact—and I may not have been the only one whose first inclination was to flee, to plunge back into the nightmare forest.

As we approached, members of both the inner and the outer columns began to sway from side to side, marching and swaying at once. The Bachelor's head, in fact, moved in wide arcs and his whole marching body trembled as if from the paroxysms of ague. If he had been punished for leading me to this place, perhaps he trembled now from fear. On the other hand, if the Asadi wished this temple kept inviolate, wouldn't they somehow punish me once they discovered my presence?

I did have the good sense to get out of the way. I climbed a tree on the edge of the clearing that fronted the pagoda. From this vantage point I watched the proceedings in relative safety.

Gray forms moved in the deep shadow that the Asadi temple cast. Suddenly two violently green flames burned in the iron flambeaus on either side of the top step of the immense tier of stone steps that led to the temple's ornate doorway. The two torchlighters—formerly the moving gray forms—came back down the steps. Never before had I seen the Asadi make use of fire—this sophisticated use both of flambeaus and a starting agent that I could not even guess at destroyed a multitude of my previous conclusions about them. Meanwhile the four columns of Asadi had ranged themselves in parallel files before the stairway of the ancient pagoda and six beige-maned menials bore the corpse of Eisen Zwei, now an uncanny apple-green in the torchlight, up the broad stone steps to the stone catafalque before the door. Here they set the corpse down and lined up behind it, staring out over their waiting kinsmen, facing the cruel ambivalence of the Wild, three on each side of the old man. I was not accustomed to such spectacle, such tawdry grandeur, and I began to think that perhaps Placenol did flow in my veins —Placenol or something more

sinister.

The moons cried out with their silent mouths. The flambeaus uttered quick screamings of unsteady light.

But the ritual did not conclude. The night drew on—the moons rolled and the four files of Asadi tribesmen shuffled in their places. They pulled at their manes. They looked up at the leaf-fringed sky. They looked down at their feet. Some stretched out their hands and fought with the tumbling moons just as Eisen Zwei had wrestled with Denebola, the sun. But none left the clearing, though I felt many would have liked to.

Instead, wrestling with their own fears, they waited. The pagoda and the corpse of their chieftain commanded them—while I, wedged like a spike into my tree, was commanded by their awesome patience. Then the last of the three moons fell into the farthest jungle of BoskVeld. The two iron torches guttered like spent candles. The Bachelor fidgeted.

Two vacuums existed. One, the vacuum in nature between the end of night and the beginning of day. The other, the vacuum in the peculiar hierarchy of the Asadi tribal structure, the vacuum that Eisen Zwei had so oddly filled—until his struggle with the sun and his subsequent death. Night and death. Two vacuums in search of compensatory substance.

Up in the air, clinging to two willowy tree branches, I made cursory mental notes in regard to this undoubtedly significant parallelism. When would dawn break? How would the Asadi designate their dead chieftain's successor?

A commotion in the clearing interrupted these transcendent speculations. Looking down, I saw that the four neat files of Asadi had dissolved into a single disorganized mass of milling bodies—as on their original assembly ground. A chaos. An anarchy. A riot of unharnessed irrationality. How could a vacuum of "leadership" exist in such an arbitrary melange of unrelated parts? Only the pagoda had solidity; only the pagoda did not move.

Then, looking up, I saw the old man's huri floating high above this disorder, floating rather than flailing, a gyr-falcon rather than a pelican. It rode the prismatic, predawn breezes with uncommon grace and skied off so effortlessly that in a moment it had dwindled to a scrap of light, picking up some predawn reflection, far beyond the temple's central spire.

Watching it, I grew dizzy.

Then the huri folded its wings behind it and plummeted down, dizzily down, through the roseate sky. I almost fell. My feet slipped

through the fork that had supported me and I was left dangling, arms above my head, over one edge of the pagoda's front yard. The anxiety-torn communicants were too caught up in their panic to notice me.

Meanwhile the huri rocketed earthward.

It dived into the helpless crowd of Asadi and skimmed along their heads and shoulders with its cruel, serrated wings. Dipping in and out, the huri once again flapped like a torn window shade—all its ephemeral grace was gone, turned to crass exhibitionism (I don't know what else to call it) and unwieldy flutterings. But the creature did what it sought to do, for in that predawn dimness I could see that it had scarred the faces of several of the Asadi.

Nevertheless, a few of the tribesmen tried to capture the huri—while, more reasonably, others ducked out of its way, fell to the ground, clutched their knees, crawled between the scrambling legs, or threw up their arms to ward it off. The huri did not discriminate. It scarred all of those who got in the way of its bladed Wings, whether they attempted to catch it or to flee. And the eyes of the harassed Asadi flashed through their individual spectrums. The heat from so many changes made the clearing phosphorescent with shed energy.

I caught sight of The Bachelor and saw that his eyes had not changed. They were still mute, devoid of all intellect or passion. He stood apart from his panicked comrades and observed, neither grappling for nor fleeing from the huri. As for the noxious beast, it flew up, flew down, performed wobbly banking movements, and slashed with its terrible pinions at everything living. Finally it shot up through the shadow of the pagoda, wildly flapping, then pitched over and dived upon The Bachelor. It flew into his face. It drove him to the ground and battered him with countless malicious thrashings.

To the last individual the Asadi quieted, queued up randomly, and watched this unpredictable denouement, the penultimate act in their day-long ritual. It took me a moment to understand. Then I realized:

The Bachelor was the designee, the chosen one, the chieftain elect. Somehow it seemed an inevitable choice.

My arms aching, I dropped from the tree onto the floor of the clearing. In front of me were the backs of twenty or thirty Asadi. I could not see The Bachelor at all, though I could still hear the churning of the huri's wings and the newly modulated breathing of the tribesmen. Then a figure, insanely rampant, flailing its arms, disrupted the smooth surface of the crowd and darted through a quickly closing gap of bodies to my right. I

knew that The Bachelor had regained his feet and was trying to fight off the huri. The two of them thrashed their way up the tier of steps in front of the temple and soon were on the paving beside the catafalque where Eisen Zwei still rested.

Now I could see as well as anyone, and there on that sacred, high place The Bachelor capitulated to the inevitable.

He went down on his knees, lowered his head, and ceased to resist. The huri, sensing its victory, made an air-pummeling circuit over the body of the dead chieftain. It sawed devilishly at the faces of the corpse-bearers and rippled like dry brown paper. Then it settled on The Bachelor's head. Beating its wings for balance, it faced the onlooking multitude of Asadi—and me—with blind triumph.

No one moved, no one breathed, no one acknowledged the dawn as it revealed the caustic verdigris coating the pagoda like an evil frost—like the rime on the forehead of antiquity.

Slowly, after a moment twice as ponderous as the pagoda's antiquity, The Bachelor rose to his feet. He was draped in his own resignation and the invisible garb of an isolation even more pronounced than that he had suffered as an outcast.

He was the designee, the chosen one, the chieftain elect.

The huri dropped from The Bachelor's head to his shoulder and entwined its tiny fingers in the tufts of his butchered mane. There it clung, once again inanimate and scabrous.

Now the Ritual of Death and Designation was nearly over and two of the corpse-bearers on that highest tier moved to complete it. They touched the head and the feet of Eisen Zwei with the tips of the two great flambeaus, and instantly the old man's body raged with green fire. The raging flame leaped up the face of the temple as if to abet the verdigris in its patient efforts to eat the building away. The Bachelor stood almost in the very blast of this conflagration and I feared that he, too, would be consumed. But he was not. Nor was the huri. The fire died, Eisen Zwei had utterly disappeared, and the corpse-bearers came back down the steps and joined the anonymity of their revitalized people.

The Ritual of Death and Designation had ended.

For the purposes of this ethnography I will minimize the significance of what then occurred and report it as briefly as I am able.

Several of the Asadi turned and saw me in the pagoda's clearing. They actually looked at me. After having been ignored for over six months I did

not know how to react to the signal honor of abrupt visiblens. Out of monumental surprise I returned their stares. They began advancing upon me, hostility evident in the rapid blurring of colors that took place in their eyes. Behind me, the Synesthesia Wild. I turned to escape into its vegetation. Another small group of Asadi had insinuated themselves into the path of my intended escape—they blocked my way.

Among this group I recognized the individual whom I had given the name Benjy. Cognizant of nothing but a vague paternal feeling toward him, I sought to offer him my hand. His own nervous hand shot out and cuffed me on the ear. I fell. Dirt in my mouth, gray faces descending toward me, I understood that I ought to be terrified. But I spat out the dirt—the faces and manes retreated as quickly as they had come and my incipient terror evaporated like alcohol in a shallow dish.

Overhead, a familiar flapping.

I looked up and saw the huri as it returned to The Bachelor's outstretched arm. He had released the creature upon his fellows in order to save me. This simple action, however, illustrates the mind-boggling complexity of the relationship between the Asadi chieftain and his huri. Which of them rules? Which submits to command?

At that moment I didn't very much care. Denebola had risen and the Asadi had dispersed into the Wild leaving me dwarfed and humble in the presence of their crumbling pagoda and the reluctant chieftain who stared down from its uppermost tier. Although he remained aloof, before the day was out The Bachelor had led me back to the original assembly ground—for I would have never found it on my own.

The admittedly banal lesson that I learned from this experience, members of the Academy, is that even for a cultural xenologist—perhaps especially for a cultural xenologist—it pays to make friends.

Thomas Benedict speaking: a brief interpolative note

I have put this paper together out of a simple sense of duty. As one of the few people Egan Chaney permitted to get close to him, I am perhaps the only man who could have undertaken this task. The section you have just read—The Ritual of Death and Designation—Chaney wrote in our base-camp infirmary while recuperating from exposure and a general inability to reorient himself to the society of human beings. In one of our conversations he compared himself to Gulliver after his return from the land of the Houyhnhnms. At any rate, beyond Death and Designation

Chaney never wrote anything about the Asadi for publication, although immediately after his release from the infirmary I believe he intended to begin a book about them.

As I've already said, then, I undertook this compilation of disparate notes out of a sense of duty, a twofold duty: the first to Egan Chaney, who was my friend—the second to the vast numbers of concerned humanity who wish to understand our neighbors on other worlds in order better to understand themselves. Chaney's failure need not be our own.

Upon his return to the original assembly ground of the Asadi after the Ritual of Death and Designation, Chaney stayed two more weeks in the Synesthesia Wild. On Days 126 and 133 I made supply drops, but, just as Chaney had requested, did not fly over the clearing in the vain hope of spotting him and thereby determining the state of his health. It was enough, he told me, to verify his robustness from the fact that each week when I coptered in his supplies I could note that not a scrap of paper from the previous shipment littered the drop point. The argument that he was not the only creature in the Wild capable of hauling away the goods intended for him impressed Chaney not at all.

"I might as well be," he wrote on one of his infrequent notes left in a Minister at the drop point. "The Asadi have all the initiative of malaria victims. More horrible than this, friend Ben, is the face-slapping truth that there is no one else in the Wild—no one else at all!"

I am now the sole owner of the personal effects of Egan Chaney; these include both his private and professional journals, a number of unfiled "official" reports, a series of in-the-field tapes, and a small bit of correspondence (alluded to in an early footnote). Those records concerning the Asadi that I don't own myself, I have access to as a result of my association with the Third Denebolan Expedition. I tell you this only because I know for an incontrovertible fact that during his last fourteen days in the Wild, either Chaney did not make a single entry in any of his journals or notebooks or he so completely effaced these dubious entries from our material realm that they may as well never have existed.

We have only one complete report of any kind in regard to these last two weeks. It is a tape, a remarkable tape, and I believe that Chaney would have destroyed it, too, had we not taken his recorder from him the instant we picked him out of the jungle.

I have listened to this tape many times—in its entirety, I should add,

since doing so is a feat which few other men would have the patience for. Once I attempted to discuss the tape with Chaney (this was several days after his release from the infirmary, when I believed that he could handle the terror of the experience with a degree of objectivity), but he protested that I had imagined the contents. He said that he had never recorded the least word in the tape's running account of The Bachelor's "—metamorphosis?" he asked. "Is that the word you used?"

I promptly played the tape for him. He listened to ten minutes of it, then got up and shut it off. His face had gone unaccountably lean and bewildered. His hands trembled.

"Oh, that," he said, not looking at me. "That was all a joke. I made it up because there was nothing better to do."

"The sound-effects, too?" I asked incredulously.

Not looking at me, he nodded—even though the circumstance of his pickup belied this clumsy explanation, exploded it, in fact, into untenable shrapnel. Chaney remained mute on this subject. In all of his writings and conversations in those last three months among us he never mentioned or even alluded to the sordid adventure of his final two nights. I present here a transcript, somewhat edited, of the tape in question. This final virtuoso section of our collaboration, our patchwork ethnography that I call..

Chaney's monologue: two nights in the Synesthesia Wild

Hello all! What day is it? A day like any other day, except YOU ARE HERE! Here with me, that is. I'm leading you on an expedition But forgive my initial lie—it isn't a day like any other day at all. How often do I lead you on expeditions?

It's Day 138, I think, and yesterday The Bachelor returned to the clearing—the first time he's been back since the day the huri anointed him, so to speak, with the fecal salve of chieftainship. I'd almost given him up. But he came back into the clearing yesterday afternoon, the huri on his shoulder, and squatted in the center of the assembly ground just as old Eisen Zwei used to do. The reaction among his Asadi brethren was identical to the one they always reserved for E.Z. Everybody OUT of the clearing! Everybody OUT! It was old times again, gang, except that now the actor holding down center stage was a personal friend of mine—who, by the by, had saved my life several times. Yes, sir.

After the heat, the boredom, and eight or a hundred sticky rainfalls—my

lean-to leaking like a colander—I couldn't have been more gratified.

Following the pattern old E.Z. established on one of his visits, The Bachelor spent the entire afternoon in the clearing, all of last night and maybe an hour or so this morning. Then he got up to leave.

I've been following him ever since. By the sun it's about noon.

Yes, The Bachelor permits me to follow him. Moreover, it's easy. As you can tell I'm not even breathing hard. I'm recording as we walk. If this were a Terrestrial wood, you could hear birdsong and the chitterings of insects. As it is, you'll have to content yourselves with the sounds of my footfalls and the rustlings of leaf and twig. ... Here's a little rustle for you now.

(The sound of a branch or leaf snapping back. General background noises of wind and, far less audibly, distant running water.)

The Bachelor is several yards ahead of me but you may not be able to hear him—he walks like a stealthy animal. *Pad pad pad*. Like that, only softer. I don't care to be any closer than I am because the huri's riding The Bachelor's shoulder, clinging to his mane. It is not a winsome creature, base-campers—no, indeed it's not. Since it hasn't any eyes you can't tell whether it's sleeping—or awake and plotting a thousand villainies.

That's why I'm happy back here.

Let me impress you with my cleverness. *(A heavy thump.)* That's my backpack. I've brought provisions for three or four days. You see, I don't know where we're going or how long we'll be there. But in The Bachelor I trust. Up to a point, at least. My cleverness, though, doesn't consist solely of hauling along some supplies. The backpack also houses my recorder, Morrell's miniaturized affair, the one that has a tape capacity of 240 hours, or, as Benedict would phrase it, ten solid days of Chaney's uninterrupted blathering.

I've rigged it so that my voice will trigger the recording mechanism whenever I speak and so that the absence of my voice for a ten-minute period automatically shuts it off. That's to conserve recording time—not that I plan on talking for ten straight days—and to keep me from fiddling with buttons when there might be other things to do. Of course, I can always go manual if I have to, countermanding the exclusive lock on my own voice, but so far none of the Asadi have been particularly voluble. Only Eisen Zwei. And his voice would not be apt to woo the ladies. Ergo, I'm once again your reporter in the field, your objective observer, your unbiased eyes.

I've been thinking. Yes, I have, too. And what I wouldn't give for a copy

of one of the ancient works that no one reads anymore—*The Brothers Karamazov*. Surely The Bachelor is none other than the Asadi equivalent of Pavel Smerdyakov, the illegitimate son who destroys himself out of his innate inability to reconcile the spiritual and the intellectual in his nature. Such passionate despondency! He cannot escape, nor accept, the dictum that the individual is responsible for the sins of all...****

****There follows a totally irrelevant analysis of the ways in which The Bachelor resembles the character of Smerdyakov in Dostoevski's novel. To spare the reader I've deleted it. I believe that the passage which follows was recorded approximately six hours later.

1 CHANEY (*whispering*): It's quiet in here, as still as the void. And though you probably can't believe it, I've held my peace for an entire afternoon. Maybe I said "Damn!" two or three times after scraping my shin or tripping over a partially exposed root—but that's all. In here I scarcely feel that it's kosher to talk, to raise my voice even to this hoarse whisper.

(Chaney clears his throat. There is an echo, a hollow sound which fades.)

We—the three of us—are inside the pagoda, in front of which The Bachelor became the designated "leader" of his people. I feel free to talk only because he and the huri have gone up a narrow iron stairway inside this pyramidal structure toward the ceiling—toward the small open dome from which the exterior spire rises. I can see them from here. The stairway spirals up and The Bachelor climbs it. The huri—no kidding, I'm not kidding at all—flies up through the center of the spiral, staying even with The Bachelor's head, but I can't—absolutely can't—hear its wings flapping.

In this place, that's strange. But it's preternaturally cold in here—maybe the cold has something to do with it—cold and dead, like no building ever erected in a tropical rain forest. No, damn it, even my whispers echo.

It's nearly dark outside. At least it was nearly dark twenty minutes ago when we came in through the heavy doors that the Asadi—two weeks past—didn't even open. Now the moons must be up. Maybe a little moonlight falls through the dome overhead. . . . Oh, no, Chaney—the light in here comes from those three massive globes in the metal ring suspended several feet below the dome. The Bachelor's climbing toward

that huge ring, the stairway rises toward it, it looks like a spartan chandelier, the globes like white-glowing dead-fish lamps Listen. Listen to the light fall....

(There is no sound for several minutes, perhaps a slight amplification of Chaney's breathing. Then his voice descends conspiratorially.)

Eisen, Eisen, another paradox for you physics majors. I think—I don't know, mind you, but I think that *both* the chill *and* the luminosity in here originate—emanate, so to speak—from those globes up there. It's just a feeling I have. Winter sunlight. The *texture* of the luminosity in here reminds me of the glow around probeship ALERT and EVACUATE signs, a deadly sort of lambence. Just listen. Hear that livid glow, that livid hell-sheen? All right, let's move to where we can see.

(Silence. Rhythmic breathing. Footfalls echoing hollowly off polished stone.)

I'm looking straight up the well of the stairway. *(An echo: Way way way way . . .)* C'mon, Egan, keep it down, keep it down . . . better, much better. I can see the huri flapping up there noiselessly—The Bachelor's legs ascending the spiral. The staircase seems to terminate in a glass platform off to one side and just a little below the suspended ring of the "chandelier." The Bachelor is ascending to this platform—there's nowhere else he can go. I'm looking up through the axis of the dome, right up through the chandelier ring.

Outside, above the dome, is a spire pointing up at BoskVeld's sky. Inside the dome, depending from its apex, there's a sort of plumbline—of what looks like braided gold—that drops down the central shaft of the pagoda to a point. . . just about a foot above the suspended ring. A foot, I think. Can't tell for certain. Been in the jungle so long my depth perception's shot—just as the Ituri pygmies used to have trouble adjusting vision to open savannah.

I apologize for the complicated description of the upper recesses of this temple, but the arrangement is intricate and that's where The Bachelor's going. I can make sense neither of the architecture nor of his intentions. . . . And my neck's getting sore, tilted back....

2 CHANEY *(conversationally, but still in something of a whisper)*: Me again. The Bachelor reached the glass platform beneath the chandelier ring about an hour ago. He's been standing up there like a Pan-Olympic diver ever since, except that he's looking—as far as I can tell—at the

braided gold plumbline that hangs slightly above him from the temple's dome. He can't quite reach it from the platform he's on. Would he like to? I don't know ... no, he can't reach it. Not without a trapeze, daringly, could he reach that gilded pendulum. And then, what for?

As the channel announcers on the telecom operas would say, "Let's leave Billy Bachelor high atop the Callisto Medcenter, lamenting the lost Lenore, and follow E. G. Chanwick as he goes spelunking through the mysterious satellite's caverns of steel in his ongoing, bi-weekly endeavor to unravel the Secret of the Universe."

(Unsuccessfully stifled snickers. Resultant echoes. Footfalls.)

I'll be your tour guide, base-campers. Follow me. This pagoda seems to be a museum. Or a mausoleum perhaps. At any rate, a monument to a dead culture. The walls around three sides of the bottom of this place are lined with tall spindly cabinets, display cases of a wildly improbable design. Each one consists of fan-shaped shelves that fold out from a central axis and lock into place on different levels from one another. *(Chaney blows.)* Dust.

Dust on everything. But not particularly thick. On the shelves—the shelves have the fragile warmth of mother-of-pearl—are specimens of implements and art work.

(A click, like stone on stone. Chaney's breathing.) I'm holding a statue about a foot-and-a-half high. It represents an Asadi male, full-maned and virile. But the statue depicts him with a kind of cape around his shoulders and a cruel pair of fangs such as the Asadi—those of today, at any rate—don't possess. *(Repetition of previous sound, followed by a metallic ping.)* Here's an iron knife, with a wooden handle carved so that the top resembles some animal's skull. Everything else in the cabinet looks like a weapon or a heavy tool, the statue's definitely an anomaly here.

I'm going across the chamber—to the wall without any cabinets on it. *(Footfalls. Echoes.)* The Flying Asadi Brothers are still up there, more rigid than the statue I just picked up. I'm passing directly beneath them now, directly beneath the dome, the iron ring, the energy globes, the weighted golden cord that falls from the dome. . . . Dizzy . . . the dimness and the distance up there make me dizzy.

Don't look at them, then, Chaney. Just keep moving— moving toward the opposite wall. Through an opening in the lower portion of the helical stairway. Toward the horn-colored wall on which there are no cabinets, gang, just rows upon rows of—damn this light, this hollowness ... let me get closer—of what look like tiny plastic wafers . . . rows of wafers hung

from a couple thousand silver rods protruding for about five or six inches at right angles from the wall. The wall's just one big elegant pegboard glowing like a fingernail with a match behind it. The rows of these wafers—cassettes, cigarette cases, match boxes—whatever you want to call them—begin at about waist-level and go up two or three feet higher than I can reach. Asadi height, I suppose.

(Five or six minutes, during which only Chaney's breathing can be heard.) Interesting. I think I've figured this out, Eisen, I want you to pay attention. I've just unfastened the carved wingnut from the end of one of these narrow silver rods and removed the first of several tiny cassettes hanging from it. Wafer was a serendipitous word choice, these little boxes are as thin as two or three transistor templates welded together. The faces of the things are about two inches square. I counted fifty of them hanging from this one six-inch rod and there are probably three thousand rods on this wall. That's about 150,000 cassettes altogether and this section of the pagoda, more than likely, is just a display area.

But I want to describe the one I've got in my hand. I want to tell you how it works and maybe—if I can restrain myself—let you draw your own conclusions. In the center of this wafer—which does seem to be made of some kind of plastic, by the way—there's an inset circle of glass with a diameter of less than half an inch. A bulb or an eye, call it. Beneath this eye is a rectangular tab, flush with the surface of the cassette. Above the bulb, directly under the hole through which the wall rod passes, is a band containing a series of different-colored dots, some of the dots touching each other, some not. The spacing of them probably has significance—or so I'd guess. *(A chuckle.)*

And here's how this little cracker box works ... oh, Eisen, don't you wish you were here instead of me? I do, too. I really do. . . . It's purposely simple, I think. All you do is hold your thumb over the right half of the tab at the bottom of the cassette. Then the fireworks begin. *(A pleased laugh; subsequent echo.)*

Right now the eye in the center of the wafer is flashing through an indecipherable program of colors. Reds, violets, greens. Greens, sapphires, pinks. All premeditatedly interlaced with pauses—pregnant pauses, no doubt. . . . In this dimness my hands are alternately lit and shadowed by the changing colors. Beautiful, beautiful. That's just it, in fact. The entire system probably sacrifices a degree of practicality on the altar of beauty.

There—I've shut it off. All you do is cover the left half of the control rectangle with your thumb. It may be possible to reverse the program—replay it back to a desired point, so to speak—but I haven't

stumbled on the method yet. At least I don't think I have. It's impossible for me to remember the sequences of colors—though it probably wasn't a bit difficult for the Asadi who composed, manufactured, and used these things, however long ago that may have been.

(A thumping noise.) I'm pocketing five of these cassettes, putting them in my backpack. For the greater glory of science. To set the shirrtails of old Oliver Bow Aurm's ghost aflame with envy. So Eisen and Morrell will have something to put their screwdrivers to.

(Musingly.) Look at that wall. Can you imagine the information on hand here? The level of technology necessary to devise a storage and retrieval system for a "language" that consists of complicated spectra patterns? By the way, what do you suppose I was "reading"? I'd guess that the band of colored dots above the eye is the description of the contents. The title, so to speak. Maybe I was scanning *Fornications and Deflowerings* by the Marquis de Asadi. *(A chuckle.)* I noticed that my hands had begun to sweat while the program was running.

(Sober again.) No, the eyebook—let's call them eye-books—was the first one on that particular rod. Maybe it's their *War and Peace*, their *Brothers Karamazov*, their *Origin of the Species*, their *Golden Bough*. And what the hell have they done with it? Stuck it in a crumbling godforsaken temple in the middle of the Synesthesia Wild and forgotten about it! What colossal waste—what colossal arrogance!

(Shouting) WHERE THE HELL DO YOU GET OFF DESTROYING THE ACCUMULATED KNOWLEDGE OF MILLENNIA? LETTING IT SIT UNUSED AND ROTTING!

(A cacophony of echoes, a painful ringing.)

(A whisper, scarcely audible.) That's right, you two, you Bungling Brothers aerialists, pretend I don't exist. Pretend you can't hear me. Ignore the millennia. Ignore your ancestors whispering to you from their deaths. *(Venomously.)* And damn you both to hell!

3 CHANEY *(in a lifeless monotone)*: I think I slept for a while. I went to sleep under the rows and rows of eye-books. Maybe for an hour. Not any more than that. I can tell time with the bottoms of my feet—by the warmth of the depression in the backpack where I put my head. A noise woke me, a ringing of iron. Now I'm on the helical stairway high above the museum floor. I'm in a curve of the stairway a little below and opposite the glass platform where The Bachelor was standing. He isn't there

anymore. A moment ago he chinned himself up to the cold ring of the chandelier, gained his feet and balanced on the ring, then reached out and grabbed the plumbline that drops down from the dome.

The huri? The huri squats on the globe, in the triangle of globes, pointing toward the front of the temple—he got off The Bachelor's shoulder a good while ago.

After grabbing the gold braid The Bachelor fashioned a noose and slipped his neck into it. Then he swung himself out over the floor so that his feet—right now, at this very moment—are hanging a little below the ring of the chandelier. I'm watching him hang there, his feet turning, inscribing an invisible circle inside the larger circle of the globe-set fixture.

But he isn't dead. No, he's not a bit dead. The noose is canted so that it catches him under the throat in the plush of his mane. In the two weeks since his designation his mane has thickened considerably, especially along his jaws and under his throat, and the new fur cushions the steadily constricting braid. So now he's just hanging jthere. The dangling man.

(Listlessly.) A pretty damn interesting development, I suppose. At least the huri acts like it's interesting. The huri's watching all this with either excitement or agitation, beating its wings sporadically and skittering to stay atop the globe it's perched on. *(A bump. Unintelligible mumbling.)* See if you can hear it. I'll hold the microphone out for you. *(Silence, vaguely static-filled.)* That's it, the huri's claws scrabbling on the globe—the sound of The Bachelor's feet turning north, northeast, east, southeast, south, south-southwest

(After almost ten minutes of near-silence.) A while ago I saw that The Bachelor had begun to drool. A thin thread of something milky glistened on his bottom lip as he turned, his feet revolving first to the right and then back to the left. I saw his mouth working—almost like an insect's mouth. The strand of drool got longer, it didn't drop away into the abyss of the stairwell, it kept growing and growing, lengthening like a somehow milky extension of the gold plumbline.

Now the strand has fallen down the center of the helix so that it's a little below the place where I'm sitting. I can see that it's not a liquid at all, not any sort of spittle or vomit. It's a fiber, something spun from The Bachelor's gut and paid out through his mouth. *(Unawed.)* Beautiful and grotesque at once—and I'll bet you think I'm drunk or drugged. Making silk out of a souse's fears, so to speak. But I've imbibed no bourbon, laddies, played with no Placenol—and I wish you were sitting on this

cramped iron stairway watching this disgusting show, this ritual unraveling of The Bachelor's innards. Gut-strands. Beautiful and grotesque gut-strands.

(Unemotionally.) God, but my patience has been tried....

(Several more minutes pass. A faint flapping commences, continues for a while, then ceases.)

The Bachelor's been paying out silk as if he were made of it. The single strand I told you about a while ago, well, it damn near reached the floor. Then he started working with his hands, reeling it back in and making his body turn faster in the canted noose. He's wrapping himself in the stuff, like an Egyptian king who's decided to be a mummy *before* he dies. Meanwhile he makes more and more cloudy thread.

Guess who's gotten into the act, gang? Right again. The huri flew off its globe when The Bachelor began reeling in his gut-strand and caught up a section of the strand in its claws. Then, with both its claws and hands, flapping in higgledy-ziggledy circles, it covered The Bachelor's feet, his ankles, and his shins. After that it settled on the old boy's wrapped feet. Now, its wings outspread, its claws probably hooked into The Bachelor's flesh, the huri's hanging up there like a bat and still wrapping its master in gut-extruded cable. And the damn thing's blind, mind you, blind as—a drunken xenologist. Good boy, Chaney.

I don't know how long it'll take, but in a while The Bachelor will be encased—completely encased, it seems—in a murky chrysalis. The huri looks as if it would like to finish and tie off the job as soon as it can. It's already binding in the Asadi's hands, pulling thread around his thighs, clawing up his long body inch by inch like a freakish circus performer. Then The Bachelor will be nothing but a lopsided pupa hanging from a gold cord inside the loft of his ancestors' rickety barn—I guess.

(Chaney grunts. Shuffling sounds; perhaps the shifting of a burden.)

I guess. Don't ask me. I won't watch any more of this foolishness. I'm dizzy. I'm fed up with this nonsense. If I can make it down these steps in this hell-glow I'm going to lie down beside the wall of eyebooks and go to sleep. Directly to sleep.

(Footfalls on the iron steps. Unintelligible mumbling.)

Interlude: early afternoon of Day 139*****

*****From the end of the previous section to the beginning of this one Chaney engaged in a great deal of "irrelevant blathering." I have deleted it. Altogether, about twelve or fourteen hours of real time passed, time during which Chaney also slept and ate. In this "Interlude" I have taken the liberty of borrowing small sections from the deleted passages in order to provide a continuity which would not otherwise exist. For simplicity's sake, these insertions are not marked.

CHANEY (*speaking conversationally*): Hello. I'm talking to Benedict alone now. Ben? Ben, you're supposed to make a drop tomorrow. Your twentieth. Can you believe that? I can't either. It doesn't seem like more than ten or twelve years that I've been out here. Twenty drops. Well, I may not pick up this latest one. Not for a while, anyway. God knows when The Bachelor will want to lead me out of here and back to the clearing. At the moment he's occupied. Let me tell you how.

First, let me tell you what's going on. I'm standing here by one of the dusty display cases. All its shelves are folded up against the central axis, like the petals of a flower at night. But it's early afternoon, Ben—dull light is seeping through the dome. Even so, every cabinet in the place is shut up like a new rose. Every one of them. It happened, I guess, while I was sleeping. The globes overhead, the three globes in the chandelier up there—their fires have gone out of them, they're as dead and as mutely mottled as dinosaur eggs. I don't know exactly when that happened, either. One other thing—the eyebooks don't work today. I've fiddled with twenty or thirty of them, holding my thumb over the rectangular tab beneath the eye—but nothing, not even two colors in a row, not so much as a glimmer.

Today the pagoda's dead. That's all there is to it: the pagoda's dead. And I have the feeling that it won't come alive again until Denebola has set and darkness sits on BoskVeld like the shadow, the crumpled shadow, of the huri's wings.

But The Bachelor—the cocoon—you want to know what happened to him. To it. Again, I don't know exactly. During the night the plumbline from which he fashioned the noose—the line from which he then hung out over the pagoda's floor while the huri wrapped him in the false silk of his own bowels—that golden line, I tell you, has lengthened and dropped through the ring of the chandelier so that it's now only a few feet from the floor. It descended, I suppose, of its own accord. (*A chuckle.*) I'd estimate that between the floor and the bottom of The Bachelor's chrysalis there's

now only enough space to wedge a small stool. A very small footstool . . . and now the ungainly pupa hungs in the daylight gloom of this chamber and turns slowly, slowly, first to the right, then to the left, like the gone-awry pendulum in a grandfather clock. That's it, Ben, brawny Big Ben, this whole building's just an outsized timepiece. You can hear BoskVeld ticking in its orbit—Listen

As for the huri, it crouches on the uppermost node of the pupa—the point at which the braid breaks through— and rides The Bachelor's mummified head as it used to ride his shoulder. Each time the wrapped body turns this way I feel that the huri's staring at me, taking my measure. If I had a pistol, I'd shoot the damn thing—I swear I would. Even if it meant that the concussion would split the seams of this temple and send it crashing down on my ears—every fragile cabinet shattering, every eyebook bursting open. So help me, I would—which is probably why I didn't bring a pistol, a hand-laser, or a light-cannon out here in the first place. But now the little beastie is clawing nervously at the silken membrane, unhinging its wings and shaking their outstretched tips a little—I think, gang, we're going to get some action, give me a few minutes, just a few....

(Later.) Action, indeed. The huri's moving in its own catch-as-catch-can fashion down the swaying cocoon that houses The Bachelor. As it moves it peels back pieces of the membrane, snips them off with its feet, transfers the pieces to its greedy hands, and eats them. That's right, eats them. I had been wondering what the little bugger subsisted on and this apparently is the answer—it feeds on the husk of the Asadi chieftain's metamorphosis, it feeds on the rind of its master's involuntary change. That's phrasing it a little philosophically, I suppose, but I can't help thinking that the huri's eating The Bachelor's former self. It's crab-walking in a spiral down the cocoon—a spiral that mirrors the great corkscrew of the pagoda's staircase—and it furiously gobbles up the membrane that it has snipped away.

The beast is at the hollow of The Bachelor's chest and I can see my old friend's head. I mean that I can see the outline of his head—because even though the silken covering has been eaten away, a milk-blue film remains. It clings to his features like a thin hood. It's moist and trembly and through it I can see the death-mask of his face.

Ben, Ben, you can't expect me to stay here and watch this. Tell the others not to expect that of me. The bitch-goddess of xenology has worked me over too many times already and I'm nauseated with fatigue. With disgust. It's worse than last night. There's an odor in the temple, a smell

like excrement and rot and the discharges of the glands—I don't know what....

(A retching sound. Then a rapid succession of foot-falls, suggestive of running.)

4 CHANEY (*his voice thin but genial*): We're in the Wild again. Out in the open. Out among the singing leaves, the dancing moons, the glittering winds, the humidity is horrible. It makes my nose run. But after spending one sore-necked night in the refrigerated vault of that Asadi warehouse—and one stomach-turning day in it when it changed from a warehouse into a charnel house—well, the humidity's a welcome relief. Yes, indeed. Let my nose run as it may, where it may—even though I don't know where the hell the face it's running on is running to. Actually, we're not running at all. We're moving quite leisurely, the Bachelor and me and the huri—in no hurry at all.

(Clinically.) I feel pretty well now. The horror of this afternoon has evaporated. I don't know why it made me ill. It wasn't that bad, really, I should have stayed and watched everything. That's what I came out here for. But when the smell in there got so bad—my system's been under a strain. I had to get out of there.

I bolted for the pagoda's entrance, pushed the heavy doors aside, ran down the tier of steps. The sunlight increased my nausea—but I couldn't go back inside, Ben, so I'm not entirely certain what the final circumstances of The Bachelor's removal from the cocoon were. Like a little boy waiting for the library to open, I sat on the bottom step of the pagoda and held my head in my hands. I was ill. Really ill. It wasn't just an emotional thing. But now I feel better and the night—the stars twinkling up there like chipped ice—seems like my friend.

(Wistfully.) I wish I could navigate by those stars— but I can't. Their patterns are still unfamiliar to me. Maybe we're going back to the clearing. Maybe I'll be able to pick up tomorrow's drop after all. I know I feel well enough now to try.

The Bachelor is striding ahead of me; the huri's on his shoulder. I know—

(The sound of wind and leaves corroborates Chaney's testimony that they are out of doors, out of the temple.)

—I know, you're wondering what he looks like, what his disposition is, what his metamorphosis accomplished for him. Well, gang, I'm not sure.

You see, he looks about the same. As I said, I didn't go back into the museum. I waited outside until the sun had set, thinking all the while that I would go back up the steps when the darkness was complete. I knew that my two charming friends couldn't get out any other way, that I wouldn't be stranded there alone. At least I hadn't seen any other doors while I was inside. The ancient Asadi apparently didn't see any need to leave themselves a multitude of outs. The end they've come to supports that hypothesis. But before I could steel myself to reentering the pagoda—just as the twilight had begun to lose its gloss—The Bachelor appeared on the highest step.

And came down the steps.

And walked right by me. He didn't look at me. The huri, clinging to his mane, had the comatose appearance that I remember its possessing when Eisen Zwei came into the Asadi clearing for the second time. Now I know why it looked so bloated and incapable of movement—it had just ingested the old man's pupa, if Eisen Zwei could have so encased himself. So help me, I still haven't figured this out. I may never figure it out. Anyhow, I noticed only two small changes in The Bachelor as he stalked past me into the jungle. First, his mane is now a full-grown collar of fur—still a little damp from the filmy blue substance that lined the chrysalis. And second, a thin cloak of this film stretches between The Bachelor's naked shoulder blades and falls in folds to the small of his back. Probably, it just hasn't dropped away yet

And that's it. His eyes are still as mute, as white, as uncommunicative as they had ever been.

We're in a tunnel, sort of. We've been walking, slipping beneath the vines, about thirty or forty minutes. A while ago we came upon a kind of footpath, a beaten trail that permits us to walk upright—just as if we were in a recreation park. The only such trail I've seen in the Synesthesia Wild, ever. The Bachelor's moving down it easily and once again I'm having no difficulty keeping up.

But I'm lost.

(A considerable pause during which the sounds of the Wild assert themselves: wind through the leaves, distant water, the soft shushing of feet in the dirt.)

(Pensively.) All the time I've spent in the Asadi clearing, all that time watching them amble around and wear down their heels to no purpose—it seems like centuries ago. No kidding, Ben, Eisen. That time in the clearing just doesn't exist right now. Lost as I am, I feel like I could follow The

Bachelor down this narrow trail forever.

But his metamorphosis—or lack of it—bothers me. I've been thinking about it. My considered, but not necessarily considerate, opinion is that the old chieftain is exactly what he used to be. Anatomically speaking, that is. Maybe the very brief time he spent hibernating in that homemade sleeping bag of his altered him psychologically rather than physically.

(Ten minutes of wind, water, and shush-shushing feet.)

5 CHANEY (*whispering*): There's something in the trees ahead of us. A crouched, dark shape. The Bachelor just turned on me—he wouldn't let me approach with him. If I don't stay fairly close, I'll be lost out here. Damn you, you hulking boonie, I won't let you leave me. We're off the trail. We've been off it a good while and the trees, the vines, the twisted roots—everything looks the same; one spot is like another. I'm disobeying the bastard. I'm staying close enough to keep him in sight every second. He's out there in a ragged hallway of leaves moving toward the thing in the tree. I know that it's there because he knows that it's there. It's like a tumor in the branches, a lump to which the moonlight gives a suspicious fuzziness.

You should see the way he's approaching that thing. He's spread his arms out wide and is taking one long step at a time, one long easy step. Like an adagio S.S. man. The membrane between his shoulder blades has opened out, too, so that it makes a fan-shaped drapery across his back. Shadows shift across it, shadows and moonlight ... What a weird boonie. You should see him. He's a kind of moving, blown-up version of the drunken huri clinging to his mane. We're closer now. That thing up there, whatever it is, it's either dead or inanimate or hypnotized—hypnotized, I think. I'm sure that it's one of the Asadi. A gray shape. Ordinarily, you don't get this close at night, you just don't. The Bachelor's hypnotized it with his slow-motion goose step, the filmy rippling of the membrane across his back and arms—maybe even with his empty eyes . . . now we're just waiting, waiting. I'm as close as I can get without jeopardizing the purity of this confrontation. I can see eyes up there. Asadi eyes, stalled on a sickly pink. (*Aloud, over a sudden thrashing.*) The damn thing's just jumped out of the branches! It's one of the Asadi all right, a lithe gray female. The Bachelor's wrenching her backward to the ground, the huri's fallen sidelong away from him, fluttering, fluttering in the thicket under the tree!

(A heavy bump; continued thrashing.) (Chaney's voice skyrockets to

an uncontrolled falsetto) I KNEW IT, I KNEW WHAT YOU WERE! DEAR LORD, I WON'T PERMIT IT IN FRONT OF ME! I WONT PERMIT YOUR EVIL TO FLOURISH! (*Scuffing. Then, weakly.*) Leave me alone, leave me.

(Violent noises; then a hum of static and low breathing.)

6 CHANEY (*panting*): My head aches—I've been ill again. But it's sweet here; I'm kneeling in grass under the trees by the edge of the pagoda's clearing. . . . I've been ill again, yes, but I've done heroic things. I'm doing a damn heroic thing right now. You can hear me, can't you? I'm talking out loud OUT LOUD, DAMN IT! And he's not about to stop me—he's just going to sit there opposite me with his long legs folded and take it Aren't you, boonie? Aren't you? That's right, that's a good boonie. ... He can't believe the deed I've done, Ben. He can't believe I've freed him from that scabby little battlecock. There's blood on the grass. Dark sweet blood. Too sweet, Ben. I've got to get up

(Chaney moans. A rustling of clothes—then his strained voice.) OK. Fine. A little bark to lean against here, a tree with spiny shingles. (*A stumping sound.*) Good, good—I refused to let myself get disoriented, Ben. We came marching—slogging, more like—right through that opening there, that portal of ferns and violet blossoms ... oh, hell, you can't see where I'm pointing, can you? You wouldn't see, probably, even if you were here. But we slogged to this place from that direction I'm pointing and I kept my head about me all the way. My head, by the way, aches because he bashed me down—he elbowed me in the eye. They always elbow, the Asadi— they think elbows were given to them to jab in other people's ribs and faces, even The Bachelor. He knocked me down, bloodied me, damn him, when I tried to stop him from slaughtering this poor woman here, the one, that lies here butchered in the grass. He knocked me down and I couldn't stop him. Then he whirled her up over his shoulder, grabbed the huri out of the bushes by its feet. Took off through the jungle, the Wild ringing like a thousand wind chimes because of my head, my aching eye. To keep from getting lost, I had to follow him. Dear God, I had to hobble along after that crazy crew. Then when we reached this little patch of grass among the trees—the pagoda's right over there—he threw the dead woman on the ground and disemboweled her. I saw him doing it as I came up through the jungle after him. . . you see, I got here three or four minutes after he did. I collapsed, I collapsed and watched. I held my bad eye and squinted through the other ... in ten or twelve minutes I'd forgotten what it all meant, and the woman didn't look like an Asadi

anymore. Now the grass is littered with her—and The Bachelor didn't even have to strike me to keep me from interfering. But, Ben, I couldn't help that; it was all owing to my head and my fatigue—I wasn't thinking straight. I didn't realize he was butchering the creature. As soon as I could I remedied the situation. And that's why I'm still a little sick. But my head's clear now; it aches but it's clear. And the boonie isn't about to strike me again. Are you, boonie? All he can do is sit and stare at me. I've intimidated the hell out of him. He thought I was some kind of maneless Asadi vermin and he can't reconcile himself to this new image of me. Poor mute bastard. My heroic deed kicked him right in his psychological solar plexus.

(Almost pompously.) As the moons are my witness, I killed the huri. I killed the huri! No, no, the boonie can't believe it either but I swear by holy heaven it's true.

Just look at him, look at him making slow figure eights with his chin. God, but I've boggled him! He thought me just another Asadi, a low Asadi dog—and when he had finished carving up that pitifully helpless woman, that sweet long-legged lady, he set the huri down atop her carcass—I had to do something then, I pulled myself up. But the huri was sitting there on her butchered body, staring at me blindly. Old boonie-boy had put it there to guard her corpse, just the way Eisen Zwei had done in the clearing the day he carried in three slaughtered kinsmen as a feast offering. The huri meant I wasn't supposed to move, I was supposed to be a good cannibal and wait until dinner had been properly served. I'm not an Asadi—I'll be damned if I'm an Asadi and I didn't—no, by God, I didn't—pay any heed to The Batchie-boy's stupid sentinel. I killed it. I ran up and kicked the huri with my boot. It fluttered backward and I was upon it with the heel of my boot, grinding its filthy little no-face into the grass. It's body split open. Pus spilled out like putty from a plastic tube, stinking to the skies—that's what made me sick, the sight and the stink of the huri's insides. I stumbled away, fell to my knees....

The Bachelor couldn't move. Killing the huri had given me a hold over him, a power. He just sat, like he's sitting now, and watched me. The smell of the grass revived me, convinced me of my own heroism, my own crimson-blooded heroism—and that's when I knew I had to tell you about it, when I started talking through my sickness and the too-sweet smell of the grass.

(Mockingly.) Are you awed, boonie? Is that your trouble? Could I walk right over there and kick your face in if I tried? Yes, oh, yes, I could. Damn it, Ben, I'm in control, I'm on top!

(Laughter, prolonged laughter; then virtual silence.)

Power's an evanescent thing, Ben. *(Musingly.)* He just stood up, The Bachelor did, uncoiled and faced me like an enemy. I thought I was dead, I really did. I know that's a turnabout—you don't have to require consistency of me when I'm ill. But he only stared at me for a minute, then turned and walked across the open clearing toward the temple. He's climbing the steps right now, very slowly, a gray shape like the gray shape he killed. Every moon is up. The three of them ripple his shadow down the tier of steps behind him. I'm not going into that place again, gang, he needn't wait for me—and he isn't waiting. Fine. Excellent. I'll stay here in the grass, under the vines and fire blossoms, until it's morning. Let him go, let him go. . . . But, damn him, he can't leave me in this gut-strewn glade! It reeks; the grass is black with gore. And here —just look at this. What the hell is it? You've got to get down *(groaning)* to see it: a little pocket of globular tripe here on the edge of the grass, just where the moonlight falls. Three of them nestled in the grass, three palpitant little globes—I think they're ova, Ben, all of them about the size of my thumbnails. Much bigger than a human being's minute reproductive cells. But ova nevertheless. Ovaries. That's my guess. They glisten and seem alive, glowing as they do. . . . The Bachelor placed them here while he was butchering the poor lady. He was careful not to crush them—he laid them out so that they'd form an equilateral triangle here in this nest of grass. It's like— well, it's like the arrangement of the globes in the chandelier ring inside the pagoda....

But I'm not going back in there, boonie—I'M NOT GOING BACK IN THERE! DO YOU UNDERSTAND THAT? I'M NOT GOING...

7 CHANEY *(bewildered)*: Where is it? Eisen, you said we could see it from this hemisphere—you said it was visible. But I'm standing here, standing out here in front of the Asadi's hulking temple where there aren't any branches to block my view and, damn you, Eisen, I don't see it. I don't see it! Just those blinding moons dancing up and down and a sky full of sparkling cobwebs. Where's Sol? Where's our own sun? Eisen, you said we could see it with the unaided eye, I'm sure you said that— but I don't see it! It's lost out there in a cobwebbing of stars—lost!

(Suddenly resolute.) I'm going back into the temple. Yes, by God, I am. The Bachelor doesn't care if I stay out here and rot with the poor butchered lady he's abandoned.

He's abandoned me, too. Twenty minutes I've been out here alone,

twenty minutes staring at the dark grass, the dark Sweet grass. He wants me to die from its cloying reek; that's what he's after. I killed his huri. A man who kills a huri isn't one to put up with a passive death, though. He forgot that. If I have to die, Ben, it'll be heroically, not the way he wants. I've taken too much to sit cross-legged under the trees and wait for either my own death or the corrupt hunger that would keep me alive. I won't eat his offering, that poor butchered lady, and I won't stay out here either!

There's a beautiful golden cord in the pagoda, a beautiful golden cord. That should do it. If the boonie's still too shaken up from his loss, his stinking bereavement, to lead me back to the clearing—the Asadi clearing—that plumbline ought to serve. I've worked with my hands; I can fashion a noose as well as any dumpling-hearted boonie. And then carry it through where he couldn't. Just come along, gang, and see if I can't.

(The shush-shushing of feet in the dirt, Chaney's shortwindedness as he climbs the temple's steps, the inward-groaning utterance of a heavy door.)

*(From this point on, Chaney's each word has the brief after-echo, the telltale hollowness imparted by the empty volume of a large building's interior.)******

******Just one of the many apparently unsimulable conditions that convinces me of the authenticity of the tapes. How much of what Chaney reports is hallucination rather than reality, however, I'm not prepared to conjecture.*

It's cold. You wouldn't believe how cold it is in here, Ben. Cold and dark. No light is filtering down through the dome and the chandelier—the chandelier's out! My eyes aren't accustomed. . . . *(A bump.)* Here's a cabinet. I've scraped my elbow. The shelves are down and I scraped my elbow on one of the shelves. I'm going to stand here a minute. The cabinets give off their own faint light; a very warm faint light, and I'll be able to see a good deal better if I just stand here and let my pupils adjust. It's the same cabinet I described for you last night! Or one just like it, I guess. The statue, the knife, the implements and weapons —nothing is different. *(A scraping sound, somewhat glassy.)* Well, Wait a minute. Here's a difference. The bottom petals of this cabinet have been broken off, torn away. I'm standing in the shards. And I'm not the vandal, Ben—the shards were already here. I just stepped on them, that's all. The little bump I gave the cabinet couldn't have done this—someone had to work energetically at these shelves to break them away. The Bachelor, maybe? The Bachelor's the only one in here besides me. Did he want an ax to stalk me with? Did he need one of his ancestors' ornamental knives

before he felt competent to take on the pink-fleshed Asadi outcast who killed his poor rubber rooster? Poor, poor rubber rooster—IS THAT IT, BOONIE? YOU AFRAID OF ME NOW? (*Crashing echoes. Chaney's voice becomes huskily confidential.*) I think that's it, Ben, I think that's why the globe lamps are out, why this place is so dark, why this cabinet is broken. The boonie wants to kill me—he's stalking me in the dark. Well, that's fine, too. That's more heroic than the cord, an excellent death—I'll even grapple with him a little. Beowulf and Grendel. It shouldn't take very long. The lady he killed felt almost nothing—I'm sure of that. OVER HERE, BOONIE! YOU KNOW WHERE I AM! COME ON, THEN! COME ON! I WON'T MOVE!

(A confusion of echoes, dissonant and reverberating. Complete silence but for Chaney's chronic short-windedness. This continues for four or five tense minutes. Then a forceful crack followed by a tremendously amplified shattering sound—like a box full of china breaking. Chaney gives a startled cry.)

(Whispering.) My dear God—the pagoda's flooded with light now—flooded with light from the three globes in the great iron fixture that yesterday hung just beneath the dome. It's different now—the iron ring is floating above five feet from the floor. The Bachelor is inside the ring, stabbing at one of the globes with a long-handled pick. He's already chipped away a big mottled piece of its covering. The piece shattered on the floor. You heard it shatter. *(Aloud.)* And all three globes are pulsing with energy, angry energy. They're filling the temple with electricity—a deadly chill—their own anger. I'm sure they've generated the field that keeps the iron ring afloat, the ring hovering like a circular prison around The Bachelor's shoulders. The plumbline whips back and forth as he jabs—it has damn near entangled him. And he's caught inside the ring—caught there and he keeps jabbing at the foremost globe with his pick.

(The jabbing sounds punctuate Chaney's headlong narrative—apparently, another piece of the globe's covering falls to the floor and shatters.)

Why the hell doesn't he duck out of there? Is he trapped in that field? I can see he's too damn busy to be worried about me, to want to kill me. All right. That's fine. I'll cheer him on, I'll give him moral support—HIT IT A LICK, BOONIE!

All the cabinets are open. All the shelves are down. I can see them now. The pagoda's alive again. All it took was the dark and a little violence.

The foremost globe has split wide open—he's knocked the crown off it. And listen, Ben, listen. Something is moving inside it, inside the intact bottom half. The ring is canting to one side and it's dimmer in here. Suddenly dimmer. If he keeps banging away at those globes this whole place will be drained of light—the shelves will fold back up and lock into position forever. Can you hear the scrabbling in the broken globe? Can you hear it, Ben? Do you already know what it is? I can see it and hear it both. In this dimness there's a flickering in that shell, a flickering like the hissing tatters of a black flame Sweet Jesus, Ben, it's a huri scrabbling about in there, a black-black, blind-blind huri! It's clawing at the shell and pulling itself upright even as the ring dips toward the floor.

(A fluttering which is distinctly audible over both Chaney's voice and the tapping of The Bachelor's pick.)

It's in the air—a clumsy beast a little larger than the one I killed. And there's a smell in here just like the smell when I ground out the guts of the other huri. Damn it! The Asadi are idiots! The Bachelor is stabbing at another globe—he wants to let another one out. He wants to let all three of them out so that we'll be plunged in darkness and flapping wings and maybe even the dome will fall in on us.

To himself he can do that—to me, no sir! I'm getting out of here, Ben, I'm going to go tumbling down the steps while there's still light to tumble by. What a madhouse, what a sacred madhouse. Old Oliver Bow Aurm should kiss the nearest maggot for saving him from this—figurative maggot, that is. BoskVeld crawls with figurative maggots—and I'm coming home. I'm coming home to you. To you, my kinsmen

(Footfalls, a heavy wooden groaning, and then the unechoing silence of the night as Chaney emerges into the Wild.)

8 CHANEY (*exhilarated*): God, look at them go off! I'm unloading my backpack. I'm lobbing them toward old Sol, wherever the debbil he at. Another Independence Day! My second one. (*Four or five successive whooshing sounds.*) I'm coming home, I'm coming home. To you, Ben. To Eisen, Morrell, and Jonathan. You won't be able to say I don't do things with a flare. Or flares. (*Laughter.*) God, look at them stain the sky! Look at them smoke! Look at them burn away the reek of Asadi self-delusion! No, by God, we don't destroy every race we run across. Maybe the pygmies, maybe we did it to the pygmies—but the Asadi, bless 'em, they're doing it to themselves—they've been doing it to themselves for aeons. And, God, look at that clean phosphorescent sky! I only wish I knew which direction

Sol was in—I'd like to see it. I'd like to see it like a shard of ice glittering in the center of those flaming cobwebs.

Thomas Benedict speaking: last things

We saw the flares and picked up Chaney. Moses Eisen was with me in the copter. We had come out extremely early on the morning of Day 140 in order to complete Chaney's customary supply drop and then to circle the Asadi clearing with the thought of making a naked-eye sighting of the cultural xenologist. Captain Eisen ordered this course of action when it became apparent that Chaney was not going to communicate with us of his own accord. The captain wished to appraise himself of Chaney's condition, perhaps by landing and talking with the man. He wanted him to return to base camp. If it had not been for these unusual circumstances, Chaney's flares might have gone off for no audience but the empty sky.

As it was, we saw only the last two or three flares that he set off and had to reverse the direction of our copter to make the rendezvous. By the time we reached him Chaney was no longer the exhilarated adventurer that the last section of his monologue paints him—he was a tired and sick man who did not seem to recognize us when we set down and who came aboard the copter bleary-eyed and unshaven, his arms draped across our shoulders. By removing his backpack we came into possession of the recorder he had used for the last two days and the "eyebooks" he had supposedly picked up in the Asadi temple. And that night I went back to the Asadi clearing alone in order to retrieve the remainder of his personal effects.

Back at base camp, however, we committed Chaney at once to the care of Doctors Williams and Tsyuki and saw to it that he had a private room in the infirmary. During this time, as I mentioned earlier, he wrote The Ritual of Death and Designation. He claimed, in more than one of our conversations, that we had picked him up not more than four or five hundred yards from the pagoda he describes. He made this claim even though we were unable on several trips over this area to discover a clearing large enough to accommodate such a structure. Not once in all of our talks, however, did he ever claim that he had been inside the pagoda. Only in the confiscated tape does one encounter this bizarre notion; you have just read the edited transcript of the tape and can decide for yourself how much credence to give its various reports. One thing is certain—the "eyebooks" that Chaney brought out of the

Synesthesia Wild with him do exist. And they had to come from somewhere.

The eyebooks are a complete puzzle. They look exactly as Chaney describes them in the tape, but none of them work. The cassettes are seamless plastic, and the only really efficient way we've been able to get inside one is to break the bulb, the glass eyelet, and probe through the opening with old-fashioned watch tools. If the "books" were indeed programmed as Chaney reports in his tape, we've found nothing inside the cassettes on which these programs could have been inscribed and no energy source to power such a rapid presentation of spectra patterns. Morrell has suggested that the programs exist in the molecular structure of the plastic casings themselves, but there is no ready way to confirm this. The eyebooks remain an enigma.

As for Chaney, he apparently recovered. He would not discuss the tape that I once—only once—confronted him with, but he did talk about putting together a book-length account of his findings. "The Asadi have to be described," Chaney once told me. "They have to be described in detail. It's essential that we get every culture we find out here down on paper, down on tape, down on holographic storage cubes. The pen is mightier than the sword and paper is more durable than flesh." But Chaney didn't do his book. Three months he stayed with us, copying his notes, working in the base-camp library, joining us only every sixth or seventh meal in the general mess. He kept to himself, as isolated among us as he had been in the Asadi clearing. And he did a lot of thinking, a lot of somber, melancholy, fatalistic thinking.

He did something else that few of us paid much attention to. He grew a beard and refused to have his hair cut. Later we understood why.

One morning we could not find Egan Chaney anywhere in base camp. By evening he still had not returned. Eisen sent me to Chaney's hut and told me to spend the night there. He told me to go through Chaney's belongings and to see if I could determine his whereabouts either from an explicit note or a random scrawl. "I don't think he'll be back," the captain said—and the captain was right. He was wrong about the note, though. I found nothing but battered notebooks in his book-littered cubicle. And though I read through all of these that night, I found no farewell note.

It was not until I checked my mailbox the next day that I found what Eisen had told me to look for. I checked the box merely out of habit—I knew there had been no probeship deliveries. Perhaps I was looking for a memo from one of the base-campers. And I found the note from Chaney.

The only comfort it gave me was the comfort of knowing that my friend had not decided to commit suicide and that he had successfully fought off a subtle but steadily encroaching madness.

(Eisen read this last sentence in rough draft and took exception to it: "Now you're dead wrong, Ben. Chaney not only succumbed to his madness but he committed suicide as well—a slow suicide, but suicide nevertheless.") The note expressed a peculiar sort of optimism, I think, and if you don't see this slender affirmative thread when you first read through the note, go back and read the damn thing again. Because even if Chaney did commit suicide he died for something he believed in.

I'm going back to the Asadi clearing, Ben. But don't come after me—I won't let you bring me back. I've reached a perfect accommodation with myself. Probably I'll die. Without the supply drops I'm sure I will. But I belong among the Asadi, not as an outcast and not as a chieftain—but as one of the milling throng. I belong there even though that throng is stupid, even though it persists in its self-developed immunity to instruction. I'm one of them.

Like The Bachelor, I am a great slow moth. A tiger-moth. And the flame I choose to pursue and die in is the same flame that slowly consumes every one of the Asadi.

Good health to you,
Egan

A note from Moses Eisen:

Because of Egan Chaney's defection to the Synesthesia Wild and Thomas Benedict's lucid compilation of Chaney's notes, the Academy of Cultural Xenologists bestowed upon Benedict rather than Chaney the Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier Memorial Fillet Though we do not forget the dead, we bury them. It is for the living that honors were made.