

The Samurai and the Willows

Michael Bishop

1

Basenji and Queequeg

She called him Basenji because the word was Bantu but had a Japanese ring, at least to her. It was appropriate for other reasons, too: he was small, and doglike, and very seldom spoke. No bark to him at all; not too much bite, either. And he, for his part, called her Queequeg (when he called her anything) because at first he could tell that the strangeness of it disconcerted her, at least a little. Later her reaction to this name changed subtly, but the significance of the change escaped him and he kept calling her by it. After a time, Basenji and Queequeg were the only names they ever used with each other.

"Basenji," she would say, harping on her new subject, "when you gonna bring one of them little bushes down here for our cyoob'cle?"

"They're not bushes," he would answer (if he answered). "They're bonsai: B.O.N.S.A.I. Bonsai."

More than likely, she would be standing over him when she asked, her athletic legs spread like those of a Nilotic colossus and her carven black face hanging somewhere above him in the stratosphere. Small and fastidious, he would be sitting on a reed mat in his sleeper-cove, where she intruded with blithe innocence, or in the wingback chair in the central living area. He would be reading on the reed mat (a pun here that she would never appreciate) or pretending, in the wingback, to compose a poem, since ordinarily she respected the sanctity of these pastimes. In any case, he would not look up—even though Queequeg's shadow was ominous, even though the smell coming off her legs and stocking-clad body was annoyingly carnal. By the Forty-Seven Ronin, she was big. Did she have to stand in front of him like that, her shadow and her smell falling on him like the twin knives of death and sex? Did she?

"Well," she would say, not moving, "they cute, those bushes. Those bonsai." And then she would grin (though he wouldn't look up to see it), her big white teeth like a row of bleached pinecone wings.

They shared a cubicle on Level 9 in the domed City, the Urban Nucleus of Atlanta. Basenji was Simon Fowler. Queequeg was Georgia Cawthorn. They were not related, they were not married, they were not bound by religious ties or economic necessity. Most of the time they didn't particularly like each other.

How they had come to be cubiclemates was this: Simon Fowler was thirty-eight or -nine, a man on the way down, a nisei whose only skills were miniature landscaping and horticulture. Georgia Cawthorn was eighteen and, as she saw it, certainly only a temporary resident of the Big Bad Basement, the donjon keep of the Urban Nucleus. Fowler, it seemed, was trying to bury himself, to put eight levels of concrete (as well as the honeycombing of the Dome) between himself and the sky. She, on the other hand, was abandoning the beloved bosom of parents and brothers, who lived in one of those pre-Evacuation "urban renewal" slums still crumbling into brick dust surfaceside. And thus it was that both Simon Fowler and Georgia Cawthorn had applied for living quarters *under*, he perversely specifying Level 9 (having already worked down from the Towers and four understrata), she ingenuously asking for whatever she could get. A two-person cubicle fell vacant on Level 9. The computer-printed names of Georgia Cawthorn and Simon Fowler headed the UrNu Housing Authority's relocation list, and the need for a decision showered down on them like an unannounced rain (the sort so favored by the City's spontaneity-mad internal meteorologists). Georgia didn't hesitate; she said yes at once. Simon Fowler wanted an umbrella, a way out of the deluge; but since the only out available involved intolerable delay and a psychic house arrest on the concourses of 7, he too had said yes. They met each other on the day they moved in.

They had now lived together for four months. And most of the time they didn't like each other very much, although Queequeg had tried. She tried harder than he did. She had taken an interest in Basenji's work, hadn't she? She had asked about those little trees he nurtured, wired, shaped, and worried over in his broken-down greenhouse surfaceside. And they were pretty, those bonsai: Basenji really knew how to wire up a bush. Queequeg had first seen them about two months ago, when she had gone into the shop to discover her cubiclemate in his "natch'l environment." Which was more than Basenji had ever done. He didn't give gyzym, he didn't, that she was a glissador, one of those lithe human beings who

cruised the corridors of the hive on silent ball bearings inset in the soles of their glierboots. No, sir. He didn't give gyzym.

"How come, Basenji, you don' come see me, where I work?"

This time he answered, almost with some bite: "Dammit, Queequeg, you're in this corridor, then in that. How would I find you?"

"You could come to H.Q. To glizador-dizpatch."

A foreign language she spoke. And he said, "Not me. Your rollerskating friends close in on me."

"Which ones? Ty?"

"All of them. You're rink-refugees, Queequeg, fugitives from a recess that's never ended." And then he wouldn't answer anymore, that would be all she could pull from him.

It was probably lucky that the shift-changes kept them apart so much. They weren't really compatible, they weren't the same sort of people at all. Being cubiclemates was an insanity that they usually overcame by minor insolences like calling each other Basenji and Queequeg. That was their communication.

In fact, though the name had at first hurt and bewildered her (she had had to ask Ty Kosturko, a white boy apprenticing with her, what it meant), Georgia Cawthorn now knew that it was the only thing that kept her from falling on Simon Fowler's diminutive person and pounding his head against the floor a time or two. But for Queequeg, but for that insulting, mythopoeic nickname, she would have long ago harpooned her sullen little florist.

2

The Kudzu Shop

Georgia/Queequeg, two days after the argument (if you could call it an argument) during which she had protested his never looking in on *her*, tried again. After the glissadors' shift-changing, after a sprayshower in their otherwise empty cubicle, she rode a lift-tube surfaceside and angled her way through the pedestrian courts leading to Basenji's shop.

Why I makin' myse'f a fool? she wondered. She didn't have any

answers, she just let her long body stride past the ornamental fountains and the silver-blue reflecting windows of the New Peachtree. Distractedly swinging the end of her chain-loop belt, she examined herself in the windows: a woman, Zuluesque maybe, but no less a female for her size.

Simon Fowler's hothouse lay beyond New Peachtree in an uncleared tenement section much like the one she had grown up in (Bondville, across town). It was a shabby structure wedged between collapsing ruins, some of the useless glass panels in the roof broken out or crazed with liquescent scars. No wonder that her doggy little man kept moving down. Who'd walk into a place like Basenji's to buy a hydroponic rose for their most favorite bodyburner, much less something expensive like a ceiling basket or a gardenia bouquet? She didn't even know why *she* was punishing herself by seeking out the little snoot. Hadn't she already done this once? Wasn't that enough?

Maybe it was the willow he'd shown her. She wanted to see it again as much as she wanted to see him. Shoot, she didn't want to see him at all. *Tang*, the bell went: *ting tang*.

Moist flowers hung from the walls; ferns stuck out their green tongues from every corner; potted plants made a terra cotta fortress in the middle of the floor. And the last time she had come in, Basenji's vaguely oriental face had hung amidst all this greenery like an unfired clay plate, just that brittle and brown. He had been at the counter fiddling with the bonsai willow. But today Queequeg found no one in the outer shop, only growing things and their heavy fragrances.

"Basenji!" she called. "Hey, you, Basenji!"

He came, slowly, out of the long greenhouse behind the shop's business area. He was brushing dirt from his hands, dirt and little sprigs of moss.

"You again," he said. "What do you want?"

"You sweet, Basenji. You damn sweet."

"What do you want?" He didn't call her Queequeg. That wasn't a good sign; no, sir. Not a good sign at all.

She thought a minute, hand on hip, her green wrap-around clinging to the curve of her stance. She was a head taller than he. "I wanna see that little bush you had out here last time."

"You saw it last time, you know. I'm busy."

"You busy. You also ain' no easy man to do bidness with, Basenji. I thinkin' 'bout buyin' that bush. What you think of that?"

"That you probably won't be able to afford it."

"I a saver, Basenji. Since I come on bidness, you boun' to show me what I come to see. You has to."

"That willow's worth—"

"Uh-uh," she said. "No, sir. I gonna see it before you sen' me packin' with yo' prices."

What could he do? A black Amazon with grits in her mouth and something a little, just a little, more substantial than that beneath her scalp cap of neo-nostalgic cornrows: elegant, artificial braidwork recalling an Africa that probably no longer existed. (The same went for his mother's homeland, the very same.) Poor Basenji. These were the very words he thought as he stoically motioned Queequeg around the counter: Poor Basenji. He had even begun to call himself by the name she had given him.

3

Pages from a Notebook

This docility, this acquiescence, he despised in himself. Earlier that morning he had taken out the notebook in which he sometimes recorded his responses to the stimuli of his own emotions; he had opened it to a pair of familiar pages. On the top shelf of the counter around which he had just led Queequeg, the notebook lay open to these pages. This is what, long before moving to Level 9, Simon Fowler had written there:

• *Bushido is the Way of the Warrior. But our own instinctive bushido has been bred out of us. Most of us have forgotten what honor exists outside the Dome to keep us inside. Whatever it is, we have not fought it.*

• *Seppuku is ritual suicide, reserved for warriors and those who have earned the right to die with dignity. Hara-kiri (belly cutting) is a vulgarity; to commit it, and to think of it as belly cutting, one must be either a woman or a loser.*

• *My father died as a direct result of alcoholism. "Insult to the brain," said the final autopsy report. This is the same meaningless euphemism doctors listed as the cause of Dylan Thomas' death, over 90 years ago in the City that is now the Urban Nucleus of New York.*

• *The ancient Japanese caste of the samurai despised poetry as an effeminate activity. Sometimes I view it that way too, especially when I am writing it. A samurai would also despise the sort of introspection I practice in this notebook.*

• *Maybe not. The great shogun Iyeyasu (1542-1616) attempted a reformation of the habits of the samurai; he encouraged them to develop their appreciation of the arts. Iyeyasu died in the same year that William Shakespear died.*

• *Witness the example of that 20th century samurai and artist, Yukio Mishima. Can he not be said to be the latter-day embodiment of Iyeyasu's attempts at gentling his nation's warriors? Or was he instead the embodiment of the militarization of the poet?*

• *Bonsai is the art of shaping seedlings that would grow to full size to an exquisite, miniature environment. Bonsai is also the name of any tree grown by this method. I am an expert at such shaping.*

• *Each citizen of the Urban Nucleus is an artifact of a bonsai process more exacting than the one I am master of. Our environment is a microcosm. We are little. We are symmetrical. But wherein are we beautiful?*

• *Seymour Glass, who loved the haiku, who lived when a man could let a cat bite his left hand while gazing at the full moon, is the patron saint*

of suicides. He was not, however, a samurai.

- *Although no courtesan, my mother was mistress of the geisha graces: poetry, dance, song, and all the delicate works of hand. Kazuko Hadaka, a Japanese. Kazuko gave me a gentleness not in my father. And my docility.*

- *I gave my mother to a monolithic institution, where she failed and died. Cause of death: "Insult to the heart." Day 53 of the Month Winter, Year 2038, in the New Calendar designation.*

- *Yukio Mishima: "To samurai and homosexual the ugliest vice is femininity. Even though their reasons for it differ, the samurai and the homosexual do not see manliness as instinctive but rather as something gained only from moral effort."*

- *I have heard bonsai spoken of as "Slow sculpture." That it is. But so is the process by which the Dome shapes its inhabitants. Are we any more aware of the process than my bonsai are conscious of their protracted dwarfing? Or do my sculptures, as do I, think and feel?*

- *And what of those who are neither warriors nor gayboys? Does it not also require of them moral effort to establish the certainty of their manhood? If so, what regimen must these others undertake?*

- *Easier than discovering the answer, much easier, is to sink through the circles of our Gehenna. Can the willow ignore its wiring?*

- *Bushido, seppuku, samurai, bonsai, haiku, geisha. In this catalogue, somewhere amid the tension among its concepts: the answer. How to sort it out? how to sort it out?*

All of this was written in Simon Hadaka Fowler's tight, up-and-down cursive in black ink. A roll of florist's tape lay on the corner of the right-hand page of the open notebook. Thumbprints and smudges covered the two pages like official notations on a birth certificate. No one but Basenji, of course, would have supposed the notebook to be there.

4

Layering a Willow

So Basenji, that doggy little man, and Queequeg, the lady harpoonist, went on through the greenhouse, whose various counters and table trays were all overhung by fluorescent lights, and out to the open patio between the collapsing buildings: Queequeg unaware of what was going on in her cubiclemate's hangdog head, Basenji uncertain as to what this persistent Zulu wanted of him. He led her to the rough wooden table where he had been working when she came in. He sat down. She looked around, noticing the shelves against the patio's shoulder-high walls and the little potted trees sitting on these shelves. In spite of the rusted fire escapes and hovering brick dust outside, everything in the patio compound was spick-and-span.

Then she saw the bonsai on the table. "That the one," she said, letting her shadow drop on him like a weight. "That the one I saw out front last time I come. Hey, what you doin' to it?"

"Layering it."

"You took it out o' that pot, that blue shiny one," she accused, leaning over his shoulder. Then: "What this layerin', Basenji?"

He explained that he was trying to establish two more of the sinuously stunted trees before the year was out and that you couldn't leave the mother tree in an expensive ornamental Chinese pot such as she had last seen it in; not, anyhow, if you were tying off tourniquets of copper wire below the nodes where you wanted the new roots to develop. Since Queequeg, for once, kept silent, he finished the last tourniquet and began wrapping the willow's layered branches in plastic.

"That the one," Queequeg said, "I wanna buy."

"Can't now, Missy Queequeg, even if you could afford it. This is going to take a while. But next year we'll have three trees instead of one, all of them fine enough for pots like the blue Chinese one."

"We?"

"The shop," he corrected. "The Kudzu Shop."

"I see." Her shadow, however she had managed to drape it over him, suddenly withdrew. She stopped by the shelves against the back wall, and he looked up to see her in front of them. "You got more of them bushes right here," she said. "Five of 'em."

"Only one of them's a willow, though." Skipping the willow, he named the trees across the top shelf. "The others are a maple, a Sargent juniper, a cherry tree, and another juniper." He had potted each one in a vessel appropriate to the shape and variety of the tree it contained. Or, rather, had repotted them into these new vessels after taking the bonsai over from his mother's care.

"Well, you sell me this other one, then. This willow like the first one."

"What you want with that *bush*?" he said, mocking her. "What you want with a runty ole willow, Queequeg? You gonna rollerskate with a bush in yo' arms?"—He could bite if he wanted.

It wasn't a bite to her; she ignored it. "Man, I gonna bring that tree into our cyoob'cle where you won' let me bring it. When it mine, I do with it what I want."

"These are bonsai," he told her then, as if she were a customer instead of his annoying cubiclemate. "They're real trees, not toys. Don't be deceived by their size. Just like any real tree, they belong outside. You can't keep them in any of the understrata and expect them to survive, much less the ninth one. That's why they're usually outside on the patio here, instead of in the shop or greenhouse."

"Look up," she said contemptuously.

He stared at her without comprehension.

"I say look up, Basenji, look up."

He did what she asked and saw a faintly golden honeycombing of plexiglass and steel; no sky, just the underside of the Dome. All the tumble-down buildings seemed to funnel his gaze to this astonishing revelation.

"What you call *outside*? When you *ever* been outside?"

"Nobody's been outside," he said. "Nobody who was born here, anyway."

Not outside the tunnels between Cities. The requisite, Missy Queequeg, is *weather*, and that we've got. Underneath there's only air conditioning or dry heat. In three days you'd kill any bonsai you took down there, maybe that willow especially."

"Well, I don' have to keep it down there all the time, you know. So I ready now. How much you askin'?"

"Two hundred dollars."

"What kind o' dollars?"

"UrNu dollars. Two hundred UrNu dollars."

"You crazy. You think this bush a money tree, Basenji?" Incredulous, she canted her hip, leaned forward, and looked at the willow as if to determine if its bark were gold plate.

"I've had that tree thirteen years. My mother started it, and she had it as least twenty before that. The others—the junipers, the cherry, the maple—are that old, or older. One or two of them may have been started even before there was a Dome. Handed down to my mother from—"

"If hand-me-downs precious, I a millionaire, Basenji." She moved to the greenhouse entrance. "You mighty right," she said from the doorway. "Without I auction off all my brothers' ole socks and nightshirts, I can't afford that bonsai."

She left him on the patio sitting over the unpotted and clumsily trussed willow. When he heard the *ting-tang* of the bell in the outer shop, he began to whistle.

5

The Interpretation of Dreams

Simon/Basenji sometimes had a bad dream, not frequently but often enough. Before he had moved down to Level 9, the dream had been persistent about rubbing down his nervous limbs with night sweat: every three or four days the images would get a screening. But in the last four months, having reached bottom, he had apparently developed a degree of immunity to the dream. Once a week, no more.

Anyhow, here is the dream:

Always he finds himself on the floor of his greenhouse, under one of the table trays filled with fuchsia or rose geraniums. Like Tom Thumb, he has no more height than a grown man's opposed digit. When he looks up, the bottom of the wooden table seems as far away as the honeycombing of the Dome when he is awake. Always he realizes that he has been hiding under the table waiting for night. And as the City's artificial night slides into place, he creeps out of the hothouse and onto the patio where we have just seen him layering a willow and talking with Queequeg.

A small orange moon hangs under the Dome, and the "sky" behind and around it is like a piece of velvet funeral bunting. No glow at all from the ordinarily fluorescent buildings beyond both his own patio and the collapsed tenements surrounding it.

Basenji wears silken robes, a kind of kimono. He resembles a musician or a poet. The robes are cumbersome, and he would like to discard them but discovers that the material is seamless.

He stands on a piece of brick tile and stares at the wooden shelves ranged above him against the back wall of the patio. So small is he, the shelves look to him like stone ledges on a mountain face. On the highest shelf sit the willow trees in their glazed pots; not only the willows, the other bonsai besides. The orange moon (how did it come to be there?) provides just enough light to make this monumental undertaking possible. The seamless kimono, cinched at his waist with a golden strip of silk, several times almost sends him tripping over its skirts to the patio stones. This fate is what combcrawlers and hoisterjacks refer to as the "glory of splatterdom." Incongruous as it is, this phrase comes to Basenji's dreaming mind and offends by its slangy graphicness. Not solely because it mocks death, though that has its part.

Shaking and damp on the topmost shelf of his patio, the arduous climb at last done, Basenji turns and surveys his holdings. How meager they are, even for a man the stature of his dream self. Now his robes seem even more ridiculous, sweat soaked as they are, and he tries again to tear them off. They won't come, they bind him in.

He succeeds, however, in tearing away from his garment the golden sash about his waist. This he wraps several times about his hands. The sash has tassels at regular intervals along its bottom edge: an overpretty belt. Basenji, perhaps summoning energy from his sleeping body, tries to rend it to pieces.

Thwarted, he ceases and begins walking back and forth along the shelf,

looking at the miniature trees.

Finally he settles upon the older of the two willows, the one with the more artfully sculpted form, and expends his last reserves of strength and will getting into the Chinese pot and knotting the sash in a way he thinks appropriate to his purpose.

After which, using the sash, he hangs himself from the willow: a little man dangling unnoticed beneath foliage so delicate and veil-like that a picture of impact-upon-concrete rises before his backward-rolling eyeballs as if in reproach.

What warrior has ever killed himself in so womanish a way?

It is too painful, this thought. He is a Judas to himself. But then the limb of the bonsai snaps: Basenji falls on his kimono-clad backside into the pot he sweated so hard to clamber over, just to get to a place where he could hang himself. Now this. Lying there bruised, the broken willow branch attached to him by a golden umbilical, he finds himself shamelessly weeping, whether out of frustration or out of remorse at having disfigured the bonsai, he cannot tell. He hopes that a robin or a cardinal (species officially sheltered inside the Dome) will come along to sever his bond to the willow and to devour him, piece by grateful piece.

High overhead, through cascading leaves, the little orange moon blanks out: an extinguished jack-o'-lantern.

After this, Basenji invariably woke up, sweating his inevitable sweat. It happened less often now that he had hit bottom, but it still happened. What he needed was a Joseph, or a Sigmund Freud, to unravel the symbolism. Not really. He could do it himself, he was fairly sure, if he genuinely wanted to. But he didn't. He genuinely didn't want to. It frightened him too much, the image-ridden virus of his nightmare.

Nevertheless, two or three pages in his battered notebook were devoted to an account very much like the one given here.

6

Ty Kosturko

Outside the Kudzu Shop, she thought: Two hundred UrNus, that baa-ad news. And Basenji, he crazy.

Well, she wasn't going to go back down to their cubicle to wait until he came dragging in with the next shift-change (which he could observe or not observe as he liked, anyway). If she didn't have 200 earnies to squander on a potted fancy-pants bush, she at least had pay-credits to go shopping with, and she was sure enough going to prom a few of them for some kind of brightener; a compensatory purchase, something to make up for Basenji's nastiness. Then, afterwards, there was eurythmics for all the glissadors in the Level 9 Coenotorium. She just might go. It was pretty good sometimes, though about an hour of it was enough for her.

Georgia/Queequeg got back to New Peachtree as quickly as she could. Lizardly fellows, more evil-mean than the hoisterjacks in the hive, hung out in the City's crumble-down corners, and she didn't like the looks of some of the stoopsitters she was seeing sidelong. Basenji, in a rare moment, had told her once that he had been beaten up one evening leaving the Kudzu Shop; but since he never carried any money or kept any in his greenhouse building, the stoopjockeys and thugboys didn't bother him anymore. That anecdote, related offhandedly, had impressed Queequeg: no bite maybe, but ballsy enough to go in and out of a neighborhood worse than Bondville. In fact, she'd never been scared in Bondville, not the twitchy, uneasy way she was here.

Even so, she'd come to see Basenji twice, hadn't she? Right through the brick dust, and the potholes, and the unemployable street lizards (both black and white) "sunning" themselves on old porches. But no more. No, sir, not never again.

Back on New Peachtree, Queequeg slowed down. Her long stride turned into a kind of graceful baby-stepping as she turned this way and that in front of the store windows, looking at the merchandise on display behind the tinted glass, looking at her own tall body superimposed on the merchandise, a beautiful gaudy phantom about to strut sensually through the glass. Yoo-rythmics, she thought bitterly. Well, hell, she'd probably go anyhow. She was just getting used to it. Shopping first, though.

Queequeg went into the colossal, perfume-scented escalator lobby of the Consolidated Rich's building, the City's biggest department store and one of the few still in operation from pre-Evacuation times. The Urban Nucleus owned it now, though, and the building didn't look very much like the original one, a huge picture of which hung in a revolving metal frame over the shoppers crowded into the escalator lobby. Queequeg glanced at it perfunctorily, then picked her escalator and rode up to a mezzanine level

high enough over the lobby to give her a good view of two of the adjacent pedestrian courts outside.

People preening and strutting like pigeons, which, once, the City had almost got rid of.

Standing at the mezzanine rail, Queequeg noted the tingling in her feet: high, high up. And she lived down, down, down, almost forty meters under the concrete. Not forever, though; one day she was going to ride an escalator right out of there....

When she turned around, she saw a willowy white boy leaning back on a doodad counter and grinning at her like a jack-o'-lantern.

"Ty!"

"Hey, Queequeg," Ty Kosturko said. He had called her that, too, ever since explaining about Herman Melville and white whales. He was wearing a matching trousers and shirt, with cross-over-color arms and legs: pink and white: apple blossoms. Loose and gangly, he was as tall and as athletic as she, but less visibly muscular.

They had been glissadors for about the same period of time, seven or eight months, though he was one of the few whites in their ranks and had got his appointment by badgering his father, an influential ward representative, to exercise his influence. The boy had bragged of, or elaborated on, his threatening his old man with going hoisterjack if he, Ty, couldn't put on glierboots: it was all he wanted. And so the old man had capitulated; better his son a menial than a maniac.

"What you doin' here, Ty?"

"Same as you, I'd imagine."

"Yeah? What you think I up to, then?"

"Down-chuting your pay-credits, since you're so much like me. That's what I'm doing, getting out from under my money."

She showed her wide teeth. "Oh, I trying', I tryin'. But I ain' got so much I can prom for anythin' I want." She told him of attempting to buy Basenji, her cubiclemate's, miniature willow. "No way I gonna down-chute 200 earnies, Ty. I savin' for to say goodbye to 9."

Ty was one of the only three or four glissadors to live surfaceside, an amenity owing to the fact that he rented from his parents. Therefore, the boy commiserated. "I know what you need, then. Come with me."

He took her hand and led her through the many counters on the mezzanine, moving so gracefully that she had to look at his feet to

convince herself that he wasn't wearing glierboots even now. They climbed a stairway hidden behind the men's and women's lounges, and she tried to strangle her mirth as Ty Kosturko, leading her through the tie-dyed ceiling drapes and batik wall banners, affected the sleazy nonchalance of a dick on shoplifter lookout. Finally, Queequeg giggling, Ty nonchalantly rubbernecking, they got to a room with a rounded portal over which were these words: *Paintings & Prints*. Into this make-believe kingdom he led her, a gallery of white wallboards and simulated mahogany parquetry.

"If you can't get a tree for your cubicle," Ty said, "try a print. One of the Old Masters. Nothing better for flinging off a funk. Every two or three months I buy or trade one in."

And Georgia/Queequeg, who had never before been in the *Paintings & Prints* gallery of Consolidated Rich's, walked in awe among the wallboards. Here, since abstract expressionism had fallen into disrepute, were all the Old Masters of pre-Evacuation representational art: Whistler, Homer, Cassat, Albert Ryder, Remington, Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, Edward Hopper, the three Wyeths, and others whom even Ty had no knowledge of. Even so, he dropped all the names he could and impressed Queequeg by telling her who had painted what, even when she covered with her hand the title plates on the frames. Only two or three times did he miss, and each miss he accompanied with gargoylesque grimaces.

"Damn," Queequeg said. "You good, Tyger."

Ty Kosturko bowed. Then he took her hand again and led her to another of the partitionlike wallboards. "Now this," he said, a sweep of the hand indicating the prints on display here, "is what you're looking for, Queequeg, this is what you can take downstairs to homey up your humble abiding place."

Queequeg, she didn't say him nay.

7

Appreciating Norman Rockwell

About four hours after Queequeg visited him, Simon/ Basenji left the Kudzu Shop, locked its doors, and made his way to the central lift-terminal on New Peachtree. It was the weekend, Friday evening, and

he carried with him his battered notebook. A false twilight was descending, by design, on the towers of the Urban Nucleus, towers looming over Basenji like shafts of frozen air. People were crowding toward the transport-terminal, and he added himself to the flow of pedestrians, virtually riding the current they made into the vault of the terminal.

In the hall fifteen crystal lift-tubes went up and down the levels of Atlanta. The air was smoky here, wine-colored. Every upturned faces shone with nightmarish radiance. Pandemonium, Basenji thought. He half expected Beelzebub and a few of his cohorts to start pitchforking people into the lift-tubes, whose gliding capsules glowed with red emergency lights. Up and down the capsules went, packed with shadows instead of human beings.

Basenji found his way into a cordoned lane to a descent capsule and at last got aboard, with nearly a dozen others. "Sardine time," two teen-agers sang, "sardine time." Then Basenji felt the catacombs rise up around him like a hungry mouth. "Sardine time," the boy sang. They were all being swallowed. Like little fish ...

Once down, it took Basenji, threading his way among disembarked passengers from other lift-tubes, almost ten minutes to reach his own cubicle. Standing outside it, he heard Queequeg laughing and an adolescent male voice saying, "That's right, you know. Absolutely on-target. I'm the foremost expert on pre-Evacuation magazine art in the whole cruisin' glissador corps, Atlanta or anywhere else."

Ty Kosturko. Friday night, and he had to share it with Ty Kosturko, the 21st Century's Kenneth Clark of popular culture. A boy who, when he wasn't wearing glierboots and uniform, dressed like a department store mannequin; who ooh'd and ah'd over his, Basenji's, Japanese figurines like a gourmet over well-simulated lobster Newburg. And his voice was so self-assuredly pontifical you could hear him right through the walls. Goodbye, Friday night.

Basenji put his thumb to the electric eye beside his entrance panel, which promptly slid back, admitting him. He stopped in the middle of the spartanly furnished central room. He placed his notebook on the back of the upholstered chair beside the door.

"Hey, Basenji," Queequeg said, turning from the opposite wall. She grinned at him.

"Hello, Mr Fowler," Ty Kosturko said. He called Georgia Queequeg but he didn't call Mr Fowler Basenji. Self-proclaimed expert or no, son of a

ward rep or no, he at least had that much sense. But look at his clothes: pink and white: a lanky harlequin in drag.

"Look what I prommed for at Rich's today, Basenji. Ty, he help me pick 'em out. Not too spensive, either." *Holp*. Plantation English, which was enjoying an unaccountable renaissance among the City's blacks. "Come on now," Queequeg insisted. "Come look at 'em."

So Basenji crossed to the formerly naked wall and looked at the three prints they had affixed there, matted but unframed, with transparent wall tape. The prints were Norman Rockwells. They filled the cubicle with children, and loving parents, and the Apollo 11 Space team.

"Jes' ten earnies each," Queequeg said. "Which mean I don' have to auction off my brothers' ole socks. It all be paid for in two months, and you, you stingy Basenji, you gonna get to look at em too."

With Queequeg and Ty Kosturko on either side of him, Basenji felt like a matchbook between two tall, carven bookends. The lanky boy said, "The print on the left is called *New Kids in the Neighborhood*. It was commissioned by *Look* magazine in the late 1960s. The interesting thing about it is the way the composition's balanced, the moving van in the back kind of tying together the three white kids over here," pointing them out, "and the black boy and his little sister over here," sweeping his hand over to the black children. "Look at the way Rockwell's given the little girl a *white* cat, while the white kids have this *black* puppy sitting in front of them. That way, the confrontation's mirrored and at the same time turned around by the pets the children have."

"And what's the point of that?" Basenji asked.

"To show that the *color* on the two sides shouldn't make any difference. The painting has sociological significance for that period, you know. Rockwell was making a statement."

Basenji stared up at the print. "Cats and dogs," he said, "are completely different kinds of animals. Was the artist trying to suggest an innate . . . antipathy . . . between the children, as between cats and dogs?"

"Antipathy?" Queequeg said.

"No, Mr Fowler, you're trying to read too much into it now. The animals are just animals, a cat and a dog. An interpretation like yours would probably lead you to misconstrue Rockwell's intentions."

Basenji was silent. Then: "Well, go ahead. Tell me about the others."

"The one in the middle is from the Four Freedoms series: *Freedom from Fear*. The one on the right shows you the first men to land on the Moon,

with the NASA engineers and the American people behind them."

"But no cats or dogs," Basenji said. "Those men walked on it, and we can't even see it."

"Let's sit down so we can look at 'em easy," Queequeg said. "Forget 'bout the Moon." She and Ty Kosturko sat down on throwrugs while her cubiclemate lowered himself into the wingback. The notebook balanced on top slid down the chair's cushion. Basenji retrieved it and held it in his lap. Then the three of them stared, without speaking, at the prints.

Goodbye, Friday night. He hadn't been planning to do much with it, though. Go to his visicom console and read. Or try to make sense, in his notebook, of how he had come to a place where his privacy could be so effortlessly violated. Or maybe just sit and stare at a wall, a blank one.

Then Ty Kosturko said, "Come to the eurythmics with us, Mr Fowler. It's for glissadors, but you'll be our guest."

"Yeah," said Queequeg, touching his leg. "Otherwise, you jes' sit here all night thinkin' gloominess."

"No," Basenji said, earnestly shaking his head.

"Well, if you don't go," Ty Kosturko said, "we're not going to go either. We aren't going to let you sit here in solitary on Friday night. That's inhuman, Mr Fowler."

"No, it's all right."

"Inhyooman," Queequeg echoed her companion. "You ain' gonna sit here doin' nothin' on a Friday night. We won' let you."

So Simon/Basenji, not understanding why he had allowed himself to be so bullied, went with them to the Friday night eurythmics in the Level 9 Coenotorium.

8

Eurythmics

In the Level 9 Coenotorium, which lay (it seemed) an infinity of concourses away from their cubicle, a hundred or so people moved about under shoddy Japanese lanterns: little orange moons, like decorations for a high-school dance. Most of the people were black, since most of the

glissadors were black, and the lanterns filled the hall with a dismal orange smoke similar to the quality of light in the New Peachtree lift-terminal.

At the far end of the hall Simon/Basenji saw an elevated platform on which a man in white leotards demonstrated the proper eurythmic responses to the music of his accompanists, a flute player and a man sawing on a highly lacquered bull fiddle. The music had just enough melody to prevent its being censured as neo-avant-garde (a term even more ludicrous, Basenji thought, than the activities it was supposed to squelch). Ripples from the flute, reverberations from the bass ...

Ty Kosturko led Queequeg and Basenji into the middle of the floor, where variously attired dancers surrounded them. Arms, legs, hips, bellies, and buttocks moved past Basenji in a stylized and regimented choreography. In fact, everything about these languidly swaying body parts was too damn deliberate. Planned. Everyone kept an eye cocked on the white ghost on the far platform, aping his well-tutored spasms.

"Is this eurythmics?" he asked Queequeg.

"Yeah. It ain' much, but it better than sittin' home. Some of 'em here even *likes* it. Come on now, you do it too." She began snaking her arms around her body, bending and then lengthening out her smooth naked legs. Ty, without touching or looking at her, did the same, his harlequin's body assuming and relinquishing so many odd postures that he, Basenji, was intimidated by its mechanicalness. "Come on," Queequeg insisted.

"I don't know—"

Ty Kosturko revolved toward him, very nearly brushing one of the ubiquitous paper lanterns. "Anybody can do this, Mr Fowler, it's all just mental, you know, and almost anyone can think." He did a premeditated butterflying movement with his arms and swam back to the little florist. "My father remembers the days of fission opera, renaissance swing, even terror-rock, when you could let the beast out and explode all over yourself without worrying about where the pieces'd land."

"Shoot, my brothers and me were *livin'* that a few months back. We'd jes' go out in the street and close it off and 'splode to somebody's ole records till the slum trolls and spoil-it squad come along and tell us to silent down." Without ceasing to gyrate, Queequeg chuckled. That was a human memory; you could almost feel homesick for old Bondville. Almost. "Us and the neighbors. Too many for the ole spoil-it squad to junk up in their jails."

"Yeah," Ty said. "Raggy music, abstract art, and free verse. Gone with the wind, my queen McQueequeg."

"I don' like that, that McQueequeg bidness, Ty. Anyhow, yo' own daddy, who say he 'member what it used to be, he one of them what voted it all out the door. He one good reason we got yoo-rythmics instead of music."

"I know that. And that's one good reason I'm a glissador instead of an accountant or an aspiring ad executive,"

Basenji, forgotten in this exchange, walked over to a folding table in front of the hall's concessions booth and sat down. Bodies continued to hitch and snake and revolve past him, without any real expenditure of energy. No one threw back his head, no one pumped his knees, no one shimmied as if possessed. It was like watching a ballet performed by graceful wind-up toys, if that were possible. And Ty Kosturko looked like a sure choice to dance the part of Oberon, even though his competition was not inconsiderable.

Rock music, and atonal music as well. Abstract art. Free verse. And free-form video-feedback compositions. All gone with the wind.

Basenji didn't miss too many of these; his tastes ran in other directions. Nevertheless, he remembered when you couldn't walk down a surfaceside concourse without going by a row of imitation Mondrians and Pollocks. The Mondrians were there for their symmetry, the Pollocks for their vigor. Outside, in the parks and pedestrian courts, you could listen to people reciting Baraka, or Ishmael Reed, or maybe even their own unstructured verses; whereas today, if you dialed for the works of such people on your visicom console, the word PROSCRIBED rolled into place, and you could be sure that your key number had gone into the belly of a surfaceside computer. As for music, the Urban Nucleus itself had once sponsored, in the Omni, free retrospectives of artists like Schoenberg and the virtually deified Allman Brothers. Though never crushingly attended, these performances had always summoned genuine enthusiasts, and Basenji himself, on two different occasions, had gone to the atonal and dodecaphonic concerts. He remembered, too, a time when the Dome's citizens had access to the works of such early video experimenters as Campus and Emshwiller; programmed tapes to feed into your own visicom console. No more.

About eleven years ago—five years after the assassination of Carlo Bitler, a charismatic demagogue, and just one year after the disappearance of Bitler's wife—the Urban Council and the Conclave of Ward Representatives had together voted to remove the abstract paintings from public concourses, halt the outdoor poetry readings, and cease the funding of free concerts, except for those of designated classical works and contemporary popular music. There were simultaneous

crackdowns on hand-operated duplicating machines, distributors of underground comix, wielders of portable video equipment, and unchartered, "fringe-riding" religious groups. Only the Hare-Krishna sect and the Orthodox Muslims, with histories of influence in the city going back to pre-Evacuation times, secured legal exemptions from this last stricture of the Council/Conclave's sweeping decree.

The year of these "Retrenchment Edicts" had been 2035, the same year that Simon Hadaka Fowler committed his mother to an UrNu geriatrics program. Three years later she had died....

Since then, he had worked himself down from Tower housing, surfaceside, to his cubicle on Level 9, *under*: it averaged out to a little better than a level a year. And now he was sitting at a folding table in the hive-people's Coenotorium watching the glissadors move about eurythmically under Japanese lanterns. Amazing, this turn in his life.

Although the bull fiddle continued to throb in a subsonic hinterland that he was dimly aware of, the flute abruptly stopped. Queequeg found him, and Ty (all fluttering apple blossoms) came trailing along behind her.

"You lef' us, Basenji," Queequeg said.

"I didn't know how to do that."

"Do you want to learn, Mr Fowler?"

"No," he said, looking up into the stratosphere where their heads always seemed to reside. "There are too many important things that I haven't learned yet." Implacably young, they stared down at him. "I'm more than twice as old as you two are," he added: a kind of apology.

Queequeg leaned down and pecked him on the cheek. "You right, Basenji," she said. "Anyhow, you done seen it. And I tired of it. Let's go on home. I fix us a drink."

Ty Kosturko tried to persuade them to remain, but, much to Basenji's quiet pleasure, Queequeg refused to be persuaded. "OK," Ty said. "Call me *mañana*, Mz Cawthorn."

Out in the murky corridors they walked side by side, she striding smooth and silent, he newly self-conscious about his lack of stature, in a more acute way than he had been when all three of them had walked to the Coenotorium. Then the boy had balanced things a little.

But Queequeg, the lady harpoonist! Didn't the terrible fragrance of her, the smell of sweat-touched cologne and untrammelled woman, break over him like a *tsunami*? A tidal power set in motion not by the moon, but by the passions of vulcanism and earthquake! Anyhow, Queequeg's presence,

her aura, diminished him to a cipher; he could not speak, even though their mutual silence, as much as her size and smell, was disarming. In the bleak corridors of Level 9, he was a samurai without a sword.

9

Soulplaning

Georgia/Queequeg, she was damn glad to get away from that flute and fiddle, from the posturing zombie on the grandstand. It was OK for a while, but she didn't have Tyger-boy's knack of making what was "just mental" into a kinetic showplace for her instincts. She kept looking at what she was doing and wishing she could shake off her skin and emerge into an unclad rioting of the blood. To let the beast out, like even Ty said. Because he understood the other even if he could almost manage to bury his brain with the Friday night eurythmics. Shoot, they *all* understood the other, they were glissadors. And Ty, he could be sweet, he certainly could.

"You ain' sayin' much, Basenji," she said, after they had turned into a concourse perpendicular to the one to the Coenotorium.

"You aren't either, Queequeg."

"No, I was thinkin'. What you been up to, down there?" She grinned at him; he appeared to wince, just in the muscles of his face. So sensitive-crawly he couldn't take a bit of juicing, which was what he accused her of when she didn't whicker her nose off at one of his infrequent intellectual puns. Shoot, he only made them so she wouldn't get them, that was the point of his doing it. Whereas she wasn't trying to be nasty a bit. "I mean you been thinkin' too. What 'bout, Basenji?"

"About being a basenji, a little dog."

"No you ain'. I bet you wonderin' why I asked you to come to somepin I don' like myse'f."

"All right," he said agreeably.

"Well, I didn' ask you. Ty did. I jes' say Yeah to what he already asked. But I know why *he* done it."

"Why?" Now Basenji was just being polite, saying Why? because it was easier than jumping down on her with some rudeness. Well, she was going to tell him anyhow, he needed telling.

"Ty worried 'bout you, Basenji. He say you workin' nigger-hard to get as far down as you can, and you done got as far unner as this City gonna let you. Nex' step: the waste converters over on Concourse 13. But how and when you get there, that up to you, Ty say."

Basenji laughed; a Sort of snort.

"So he asked you along. When we home, you make me 'splain why we keep goin' to them sickly yoo-rythmics. You hear?"

They walked the rest of the way to their cubicle without saying a word to each other, although Queequeg softly scatsang a bit and, once, wished out loud for her glierboots. Since a few of the apartments along the way had their panels slid back, she waved at the people she knew. Solidarity against hoisterjacks and down-from-up spoil-it squads.

Home, she fixed toddies (the air conditioning made it cool enough) and made Basenji sit down in his chair. A throwrug for her, her legs straight out before her like pillars of polished oak. Basenji was letting her determine his evening as he had never ler her manipulate his time before. It was all guiltiness about the bonsai, she decided, that and maybe a little dose of the big head. After four months she had finally got him curious about something—even if, to be specific, it was only himself.

With the mug of hot liquor between his hands, he said, "You told me to make you explain why you and young Kosturko go to the eurythmics even though you're not enamored of it." He had a tic in one moist, narrow eye.

"You wanna hear that, Basenji?" If he did, maybe he wasn't so dragged out on himself after all.

And he said, "Please": a surprise.

"OK, then. Because we glizadors. They only twelve or fourteen of us on each level, you know that? Yeah. The City pick us 'cause we good—even Ty, whose daddy holp him get set up in the corps. They wouldn't've took him *only* because of who his daddy was. He can fly, Ty can. He belong on glierboots.

"Anyhow, we keep the unnerCity, the down-beneath part of it, together. We the Pony Express and the 707 airmail combined, we the fleet elite of New Toombsboro.

"In four months, jes' since I come down here, I been to the booondocks of this level and out again. I done run letters and packages 'tween ever' concourse. I been in on the dumpin' of twenny or so deaders down the waste converters, includin' one ole woman dressed like all in tinfoil and holdin' a baton so it wouldn' come loose. I skated through at least four

gangs of them sockheaded hoisterjacks, and I gone up to substitute on other levels, too. We all do that, Basenji, and we fine at doin' it." Look at that Basenji, she thought; he listenin' to me, eye tic and all.

"Then one day the councilmen and ward reps, even the house niggers sittin' upstairs with 'em, say *No more tomtoms down there, no more axes and ivories*, and give us a yoo-rythmics program to chew on. Shoot, that don' kill us, we glizadors. We keep our heads on.

"Now, by *we* I really mean them what were glizadors in 2035 when the 'Trenchment E-dicts was passed. But that don' make no difference: a glizador's a glizador, even 'leven years later. So we—all of us, then and now—we went to what they gave us to go to. And some of us wooleye those council fellows by learnin' to like the bullshit they sen' down here for music."

Basenji said, "Are you sure they didn't 'wooleye' you, inducing you people to like the eurythmics? Wasn't that what the councilmen and ward reps wanted?"

"Nah. It may seem like it, but it ain'. They never wanted us to like it at all, they jes' wanted us to *do* it. But we knew what they was up to, we all the time knew—so we done beat their plan by likin' that stuff when we was s'posed to jes' do it."

"But you *don't* like it, Queequeg." Damn, he was listening almost closer than she wanted him to. A starved little slant-eye drinking his toddy and eating up her words: *smack, smack*.

"No. But it's tollable. I can stan' it 'cause I know I a glizador. That make up for the music they done stole from us in '35."

"You were seven then," Basenji said. They were quiet. A moment later he leaned forward, and she could see the gray in his otherwise jet-black sideburns. "Don't you ever get tired?" he said. "Don't you ever get sick of going up and down the same ugly hallways? As if you were a rink-refugee forever?" He was asking about himself, really. About himself and her, too.

"No," she said. "No, I don'. You know what *volplane* mean?"

He shook his head.

"Use to, it mean what a airplane do when its motor quit. Down here, we *volplanin'* after a good run down a concourse, when the balls in our boots get rollin' like rounded-off dice. Yeah. That's real *volplanin'*. Jes' yo' whole body slippin' through air like a rocket or a arrow, goin' head up and flat out, gamblin' on the brains in yo' muscles to keep you from headin' over inna heap. *Soulplanin'*, we call it when ever'thin's smooth and

feathery, and it make livin' sweet, Basenji. It beat liquor and new peaches and a lovin' tongue, it beat mos' anything I can think of. Doin' it, you forget 'bout concrete and levels and how no one see the Moon no more. That's the truth. That's real soulplanin'. And Ty, he'd tell you the same thin', Basenji. That's why we glizadors."

Queequeg stopped talking and examined her cubicle-mate's face. He was blushing a little, red seeping into his pale brown cheeks. Shoot, she'd embarrass him again, then. The air conditioning had leached away at her toddy's warmth, had put a chill on her legs. She drew them up under her, without a great deal of attention to the arrangement of her skirt. Another surprise: he didn't hurry to look away.

Good for him, he was usually prim as a prufrock, whatever that meant. Ty always used that expression, and somehow it was just right for Basenji. In a three-room cubicle, with the bath-booth between two sleepers, you couldn't practice or pretend any bodyshame, ritualistic or real, unless you were an expert. Which Basenji was. He was never anything but dressed, and if she dropped a towel in front of him or strolled nighty-clad out of her sleeper, *zup!* he was right out the door: prim as a prufrock.

But tonight, his cheeks looking like somebody brutish had pinched them over, he didn't let the drawing up of her Zulu's legs at all befuddle him. His eyes swept across her whole body, they flashed with a toddy-fed humor. He said, "And what will you do when you're too old to volplane?"

"I gonna las' till I forty at leas'. We got glizadors been lacin' on glierboots since ten years 'fo' I was bo'n."

"Then what? After forty? You could live sixty more years."

"I gonna do it, too. Die in the wunnerful year 2128, when they won' be no more Dome and the earth will have done took us back."

"But before that happens? And after you're through with the glissadors?"

"Babies. I have my babies to raise up. Then when I feeble, I got 'em to talk at and to baby me. If I need it. Which I won'."

"How do you know you won't, Queequeg?"

"I jes' like my mamma, and she don' need nobody but my daddy and not him all that much. She love us all, I mean, but she ain' gonna fall over if somepin happen to us. A quittin' streak don' run in her. Or me neither."

"Maybe." He said that cockylike and lifted his eyes from her. Whispering, he breathed out the word, "Babies," as if he didn't believe it.

Queequeg fixed Basenji another drink, which he accepted and slowly sipped off. But he wouldn't talk anymore, even though she plopped herself immodestly down in front of him. He went to sleep in the wingback. Thank you, thank you for a stimulating evening. Well, it had been: stimulating, that is. Moreso than any evening she had ever shared with him in the cubicle. He was sweet too, Basenji was....

Queequeg took the heavy mug out of his lap and removed his shoes. Then, mug in hand, she stood in front of her Rockwell prints. It hit her that she was almost like the parents in the *Freedom from Fear* painting, tucking in the children while thugboys beat up the citizens surfaceside and hoisterjacks terrorized pedestrians in the understrata. In their cubicle, though, it was cozy: air-conditioned cozy. A sad-making peacefulness suffused Queequeg and, shuddering with the ache of it, she put the mug on the kitchen board, dialed down the lights, shed her clothes, and lay in her sleeper cove gazing into the impenetrable darkness. Her hands rested on the planes of her lower abdomen, the tips of her fingers pressing into the wiry margin of her pubic hair. How still and big the world was. She felt connected to everyone in it, a deliverer of universal amity. And she was a long time going to sleep....

10

In the Descent Capsule

Simon Hadaka Fowler, alias Basenji, woke up and lifted himself out of the chair where Queequeg had left him. He had slept dreamlessly: no visions of a tiny incarnation of himself climbing the shelves on his patio. Ordinarily, he did not go into the Kudzu Shop on Saturdays, at least not to open it; if he did go, it was to secure the plants for the Sabbath. Then he would retire back into the hive and his own private cell. This morning, though, he quietly changed his clothes and prepared to leave for surfaceside, two hours before the City's meteorological technicians would dial up daylight.

Outside her sleeper he paused. "Queequeg," he said.

No movement, and the glowing clock on the kitchen board didn't give him enough light to see into her room. Very well.

Off Basenji went. Out of the cubicle, through the Level 9 concourses, up

the lift-tube shaft (in a capsule by himself), across the pedestrian courts, and into that faintly inimical district where the Kudzu Shop tried to bind a collapsing empire together with flower chains.

On his door he put a sign reading OPEN. Then, by the fluorescents in the greenhouse, he worked until the artificial dawn gave him enough light to move out to the patio.

The morning went by. He even had a few customers. Queequeg stayed on his mind. Occasionally he shook his head and said, "Babies." Was that what she thought you relied on when your own strength ran out: your grown-up babies? Not altogether, apparently. She trusted her own resources too; she was just like her mamma. So she said.

At the noon shift-change Basenji looked at the newly layered willow in its covered stand; in two warm, sealed-over wombs of sphagnum moss it was beginning to generate new life. He hoped. A year it would take....

He watered the other plants on the patio shelves, then picked up the bonsai willow he had not altered and carried it straight out the shop door. The locking-up was made clumsy by his holding the miniature tree in its shallow oriental pot while he struggled with his key.

Then he walked all the way to the New Peachtree lift terminal with the willow swooning in his arms, half concealing his face. Aboard a descent capsule, seven or eight black men and women surrounding him, Basenji tried to pretend that he wasn't clutching a pot to his stomach, a willow to his chest. Not really. Grins on every side. The Big Bad Basement was swallowing them all, rising like irresistible water around them.

"What you got there, man?"

Basenji started to answer.

"A bush. He carryin' that bush home."

"That ain't no bush. That a tree, Julie-boy."

"Well, it don' got a proper growth, anybody tell you that."

A woman asked him, "What do you wanna take a pretty tree like that into the basement for? It doesn't belong down here, not that one."

Basenji started to answer.

"He takin' that bush to his dog," Julie-boy said. "He mos' likely got a dog hid out in his cyoob'cle."

"A dog?"

"Yah. A little one that don' make much noise. So he don' get junked by

the concourse trolls."

"It's for decoration," the woman said, answering her own previous question.

"He takin' it to his dog."

Speculation went on around him, entertaining speculation. He couldn't get a word in. Then they were down: all the way down, without having stopped at any of the other floors: the Level 9 Express. Everyone disembarked.

"Take it on home to yo' dog," Julie-boy insisted. "See to it he don' has to hike his leg on the wall."

"Fuckin' fine tree," someone else said. "You got a fuckin' fine tree."

Laughter as they dispersed, although the inquisitive woman had already taken herself out of earshot of Basenji's jovial assailants. Huffy, huffy. As the others tapped off toward various corridor mouths, a wiry man with big luminous eyes turned back to him.

"You take care of it," he said. "It could die in a place like this. You tend it now." Then those eyes, too, revolved away from him.

Basenji, balancing the plant, at last turned from the lift-tube passageway, walked down a poorly lit auxiliary hall, entered a wide concourse, and reached his own cubicle. After he shifted the willow so that he could hold his right thumb to the electric eye, the panel slid back.

11

Declaiming a Poem

Queequeg, when she woke up, was surprised and disappointed to find that Basenji had gone off somewhere. Standing in her *penwah* at the kitchen board, she ate a bowl of cereal (fingernail-colored flakes that dissolved into a paste when she moved her spoon around) and drank some instant orange juice. She scatsang to herself and mashed a few imaginary muscadines with her bare feet: muscadines and scuppernongs. Her daddy always called the latter *scup'nins*. Sometimes you could find both varieties of grapes in the City's supermarkets, especially in the Dixie-Apple Comestibulary on the Level 4 mall. The checkout boys and stockers didn't seem to know where they came from: they were probably growing all over

the Dome, right over everybody's heads, out there where nobody poked his old noggin anymore.

I bet Basenji could raise 'em up in the Kudzu Shop, Queequeg thought, if he had enough room. Which he probably didn't.

She got dressed, a body stocking. What was she going to do? Not shopping. She'd already prommed away enough pay-credits for a while. The Rockwells. She sat down in Basenji's chair to look at them. A sharp nub cut into the small of her back. "Umpf." It was the corner of a beat-up old notebook, a notebook wedged between the back of the chair and the seat cushion. Queequeg pulled it out and began thumbing through it.

Lord, look at all the soot-smudged pages. Basenji wrote as teeny-tiny as anyone she'd ever seen, as if this was all the paper there was in the world and he wasn't going to waste none of it. As she flipped along, the notebook opened out flat, of its own accord, to two pages where his little handwriting was even tighter than elsewhere. She read:

- Bushido is the way of the warrior. But our own instinctive bushido has been bred out of us. Most of us have forgotten what horror exists outside the Dome to keep us inside. Whatever....

That was enough for her. Bushido. Boo-SHEE-doe. Whatever that was. Some of the other words on the page looked mighty funny, too. Back she flipped, leisurely thumbing. It was a journal, though not a very well-kept one. The entries went all the way back to 2039, seven years ago. A year, or two in between didn't seem to be represented at all. She stopped thumbing when she saw this:

*you gave me the willow
with the loving remonstrance
that the tree become
something other than a decoration,
the diffident point of an effeminate motif;*

Whew! Queequeg was reading this out loud. It wasn't any better than the other, but it looked pretty on the page. It had that to speak for it. And

her. She spoke some more:

*and though I still go
through gardens looking askance
at the total sum
of your commands and my hesitation,
the willow itself has become animate:
a thief.*

*what it has taken
from the days I wear like leaves*

A line into the second stanza, Queequeg had levered herself out of the chair and begun pacing. She was declaiming nicely by the time she got to *leaves*. Then it stopped. She had to stop too, which was too bad because she'd almost reached the volplaning stage. Actually, there was more, but Basenji had very effectively crossed out the final two stanzas: violent red slashes. He had done it so well that she couldn't read any of the words in the obliterated lines, not a one.

So she started again from the beginning, gesturing with one arm and walking back and forth in front of the Rockwells. L-O-Q-shun. Maybe it wasn't so bad, after all. Bad enough, though. Anyhow, reading it again, she knew that it was about the bonsai she had tried to buy the day before. Or the other bonsai just like it.

At the bottom of the page Basenji had written the date, Winter 2041, and two more words: "Oedipal claptrap."

Queequeg put the notebook back in the chair, exactly as she had found it. For a few minutes she scatsang variations on the phrase *you gave me the willow*, still pacing. What had he gone off for? Maybe just to close up for Sunday. Anyhow, if he hadn't gone off, he'd probably be scrunched over his visicom console tapping into the *Journal/Constitution* news-tapes. Last night was a fluke, one big fluke.

The clock on the kitchen board said 11:10. Queequeg went into her own sleeper cove and dialed Ty Kosturko surfaceside, up in the towers.

His mother answered: very, very politely. Finally Ty was on.

Queequeg said, "Meet you for lunch, Level 4 mall."

"Sleepy." He sounded it, too.

"How long you stay?"

"Till it was over. It got good then. Everybody talked."

"Well, I hungry, Tyger."

"Where on the mall?"

"The Dixie-Apple."

"OK. Thirty minutes."

" 'Bye."

Quick, quick: a spray shower, which she should have taken last night. Then, a summer dress, orange and yellow.

Maybe they'd have scup'nins in the produce department, shipped in from the Orient or Madagascar (ha,ha) or the kudzu forests where no one supposedly ventured anymore. If they did, she'd buy her daddy some. Besides, it had been a couple of weeks since she'd been over to Bondville. She'd take Ty with her, turn him loose on her mamma. . . .

Out of the cubicle she went, fifteen minutes ahead of the Saturday shift change. And up to Level 4 before the crowds came waterfalling down.

12

Simon Hadaka Fowler

The cubicle was empty. But he found a cereal bowl and a juice glass on the kitchen board, both wearing the lacy residue of their contents. Staring through the branches of the willow, he saw that the clock behind the breakfast dishes said 12:40. Which had to be right: it was linked to a strata-encompassing system tying it into The Clock, a computerized timekeeper housed in a tower on New Peachtree. So what? He was disappointed that Queequeg wasn't in (an unusual response, he knew), but mildly gratified that the time didn't make any difference to him. The disappointment and the gratification canceled each other out: quasi-serenity.

Put the bonsai down, Simon.

Holding it, he turned around. Where? In a place where it would be

displayed to advantage. Fine. But the central room of their cubicle didn't offer that many possibilities. Beside his chair? Under the Rockwells? Either side of the kitchen board? Not good, any of them.

Well, it was evident to him why he had brought the willow down to Level 9, it would be evident to Queequeg as well. Why not let its placement say unequivocally what, just by exchanging a glance, they would both know?

Very good. Therefore, Simon Hadaka Fowler carried the pot into Queequeg's sleeper cove (the first time he had been through that door) and set it at the foot of her bed. She had thrown her nightgown, he noticed, over her pillow. Meanwhile, her presence, her aura, hung in the room like a piquant incense, not yet completely burned off. That was all right, too.

But an unmade bed didn't do much for the miniature tree, and he wasn't going to touch her nightgown so that he could remedy the bed's rumpledness. He moved the tree to the back wall of the cove. Then he went into his own room and came back with a rolled bamboo mat and a small scroll of rice paper, also rolled. He put the bamboo mat under the glazed vessel containing the tree and affixed the scroll to the wall with the same sort of tape Ty and Queequeg had used for the Rockwells. He went out and came back again. This time he stood a bronze ornament on the mat next to the bonsai: an Oriental warrior, sword upraised.

Scroll, tree, figurine: the display formed a triangle. Good. That's what it was supposed to do. The scroll bore a poem that he had written as a boy:

*The moon and the mountain
Mailed themselves letters:
These were the flying clouds.*

His father had criticized him for messing up the syllable count and for writing about inaccessible phenomena: Moon, mountain, clouds. His mother had said it was OK, very nice. He had never tried to straighten it out.

Simon Fowler went again to his own sleeper cove, shed his trousers and tunic, and performed his daily regimen of exercises, which he had forgotten to do that morning. Afterwards, he took a spray shower, conscious of the cool droplets clinging to the cabinet from its previous use.

A smell of scrubbed flesh trembled in these droplets.

Fowler fixed himself lunch at the kitchen board. He decided, knowing Queequeg, that he would have the entire afternoon ahead of him. Maybe the evening, too. All right. His soul was at rest. Heaven would accept Simon Hadaka Fowler: moon, mountain, and clouds. For the first time in eleven years it seemed certain to him inevitable. Only the demands of conscience and honor remained. After lunch, he sat down at the visicom console and tapped into the *Jour/Con* newstapes.

13

Wedding Bells

Ty Kosturko and Queequeg came in a little after eight, laughing and punchy-hysterical. They had been at each other in Georgia's old bedroom in the surfacside Bondville tenement and hadn't really pulled either themselves or their clothes' together even yet. The boy's long, neo-Edwardian shirt, embroidered flowers going up and down the sleeves, might have been on backwards: its design made it difficult to tell. And Queequeg's flaming scarf of a dress looked like an old facial tissue, everywhere crumpled.

Fowler, when he came out of his room to greet them, took all of this in at once, even the sexual compact between them. Especially the sexual compact. It had shone in their gestures and lineaments before, but then he had been either pre-emptively indifferent or unbelieving. Now he was neither: he smiled.

"Basenji," Queequeg said, putting an arm over his shoulder, "we gonna get married, Ty and me."

"That's right," the boy said, and dropped, grinning, into Fowler's wingback. He shifted uncomfortably, pulled a smudged notebook from behind him, and lowered it to the floor as if it were an incunabulum.

Fowler said, "Very good. Congratulations. Congratulations, both of you."

"After Quee—" Ty broke off and nodded deferentially to the girl. "After *Mz Georgia Cawthorn* called me this morning, my mother gave me the mail. The UrNu Housing Authority says I can have a cubicle of my own. They said—"

"His daddy done help him again, that what it was. How long *we* have to wait, Basenji,, how long did it take *us* to fine a place?"

"Well, my daddy, Mz Cawthorn, wanted me out of the house. As far as that goes, I think my mother did too. But I digress. The Housing Authority said the cubicle was two-person only, Mr Fowler, up on Level 3, but that the double-occupancy requirement could be waived since the requisitioner's father was T. L. Kosturko. I didn't want that, but I didn't want to roost forever with mommy and daddy either.

"So when I met Queequeg at the Dixie-Apple—Mz Cawthorn, I mean—, I said, 'Move up with me.' She said, 'I got a cubiclemate.' I said, 'You haven't got a bonafide, signed-and-delivered bodyburner.' 'No,' she said, jes' a bodyburner.' So I said, 'Well, let's sign and bind, with options, durations, and special clauses to get worked out between now and the wedding.' "

"Which gonna be nex' Sattidy."

"She said OK. Which'll leave you without a cubiclemate, Mr Fowler, but the Housing Authority won't toss you out because of a wedding. You'll have a grace period and a chance to screen the first five people on the relocation list for the one you most want to move in with you. Which neither you or Queequeg got to do when you were thrown together from the top of the lists. So I hope you aren't upset with me for stealing your cubiclemate."

The boy had never seemed so earnest, not even while explaining the Rockwell prints or instructing him in the theory and practice of eurythmics. Maybe his shirt was on frontwards.

"No, that's fine," he told them. "But I want a clause permitting me visiting privileges."

"Yeah," Queequeg said. "You 'member that one, Ty."

The boy nodded and wrote a make-believe message to himself on the palm of his hand. "Anyway, Mr Fowler, we've already told Georgia's parents and you. But I've got to break the news to Ward Rep Kosturko and his lady, who'll be," rippling his wrist in demonstration, "determinedly delighted." He laughed, that incongruous falsetto. Then, looking at Queequeg, "Tomorrow's Sunday. I've met yours, you gotta meet mine. Come up in the afternoon, three or so. All right?"

"OK. You tell 'em who I am: a glizador, jes' like you." She reached down and pulled Ty out of Fowler's chair. "Only better." They kissed, decorously, though he didn't believe the decorousness was for his benefit; they were simply expressing the calm their affection had come to.

"Good night, Mr Fowler," Ty Kosturko said. And he went out into the concourse, where he was at once absorbed by the red fog hanging there.

14

Georgia Cawthorn

She was high, high, high. Like yesterday at the mezzanine rail in the Consolidated Rich's before meeting Ty. Like looking down on the pedestrian courts, out through the tinted glass. The world spread out like a map, the flat kind like they used in geography: Africa on one side, America on the other. So that you could fall off either end, right into the chalk tray. Well, she was volplaning back and forth across that whole landscape.

"Hey, Basenji," she said, walking toward her sleeper cove, "what you think? You 'prove?"

"I approve," he said, right behind her. In fact, he was following at her heels, which never happened: he didn't do that. But when she turned toward him from the darkened cove, he was right there. Like a little dog that's been left shut up all day, eyes begging, tail ticktocking. Except Basenji had his arms folded self-composedly and was standing straight and still at the edge of the shadow just inside her door.

Facing him, she dialed up her light. "Hey," she said again, smiling. Prim as a prufrock, he looked, but devilish too, a little bit of witchman in his Japanese eyes. Last night had not been a fluke; he was somehow turned around, wrinkles fallen out of his soul as if he'd hung it up overnight to drip dry. Neat on the outside, neat in: that was Basenji now.

He unfolded his arms and pointed at the wall behind her.

Georgia turned to look. She saw the willow, its blue ceramic pot glinting with highlights. Saying, "Oh, Basenji," she crossed the room and knelt beside the tree. "You givin' it to me?"

"No," he said.

Her head jerked up, her mouth turned down, before she could stop either of these involuntary responses. Damn.

"I can't. If it isn't outdoors most of the time, it will die. As I said yesterday, it needs weather. But we can keep it down here for the

weekend. *You can keep it.*"

"It won' die?"

"It shouldn't. Not because of two days downstairs." Straight and still he stood; a trifle stiff, too.

"Take you a seat, Basenji." She pointed him to the bed. He was going to protest, she could see it coming. "Go on now. Ty, he plonk down in yo' chair, you plonk down right there. An res'."

"Oh, I've had plenty of rest." But he did what she'd told him to. And he watched her as she picked up the bronze samurai. "The bonsai display is very formal," he said, "if you bother to do it right. There are always three points of focus, and the tree isn't necessarily the main one, although it always represents the corner of the triangle standing for Earth."

"Well, that seem natch'l enough. What this one?" She waved the sword-wielding warrior at him, then set it down in its place.

"A figurine representing Man." He pointed at the wall over her head. "The scroll stands for Heaven. Those are the three principal aspects of the universe: Heaven, Earth, Man. In the Shinto formulation, I think. I can't really remember anymore."

Georgia stood up to examine the rice-paper scroll. She read: "*The moon and the mountain/Mailed themselves letters:/These were the flying clouds.*" That was OK. Nice. It beat the poem in his notebook all up and down. She looked at him sitting on the bed. His shirt was open at the collar, dark hair curled below his throat. (Ty's chest was as bald as a baby's.) Too, he smelled like soap.

"Each point of the triangle," Basenji said, "also represents a vital human attribute. Heaven is soul, Earth is conscience, Man is honor. You have to fulfill the requisites of all three." His eyes were merry, like the eyes of a preacher who didn't mind taking a nip now and again. A nip for a Nip. She grinned at him as he finished talking. "And that's not Shinto, or Muslim, or Ortho-Urbanism. That's my own formulation."

She sat down beside him. They looked at the display together. No nervousness in him at all, not even the teeniest blush under the almost translucent planes of his high cheeks. Serenity was riding him like a monkey. It was about damn time. For four months he'd been shooting up a jillion cc's of crotchiness a day and staying together by making sure his clothes were straight. Then, last night. Now, today. Sitting in *her* sleeper cove, on *her* bed, with his collar open. OK.

Georgia Cawthorn took Basenji's left hand, which was calloused from

his work in the Kudzu Shop, and bit it gently in the webbing between thumb and forefinger. Then she lowered the unresisting hand to her thigh and helped it push the hem of her crumpled yellow dress upward to her hip. His hand seemed to know what to do. Leaving it there, she began to unbutton his shirt.

"You ain' tired, are you?"

"No," he said. "Are you?" It was a sweet question, not sarcastic. She could tell by the way his eyebrows went up to a little *v* when he asked her.

"Well, I ain' gonna think 'bout it right now." She moved a kiss across his mouth and let her hands come down to his waist. He, in turn, pressed her backward, slowly, like a gentleman, so that her cast-aside nightgown lay under her head.

Everything else happened just like it was supposed to, although she had to wait until the first round was over to get her dress all the way off. Then she got up, dialed down the light, and quickly came back to the hard muscular, curly-chested Basenji. They lay together in her bed, her head on that chest. She could certainly feel her tiredness now, weights in her arms and legs.

After a while she said, "You invited to the wedding, Basenji."

"Next Saturday?"

"If Ty and me get the papers set up."

"Well, I hope you do." He did, too. He was thinking of something else, though, just like she was thinking of going up to the Tower tomorrow and sitting down with Ty to figure out options and whatnots. Maybe they could finagle authorization to go glissadoring on the same level, so long as it didn't take Ty's daddy to finagle it.

After a while she said, "The way you dress, you been hidin' all them muscles you got." She touched one.

"I do push-ups," he said. Then, like a naughty boy: "And yoga."

She laughed. "Bet you could glizador. Bet you could even fine out how to soulplane, jes' you get started."

Putting his arm over the girl's bare shoulder, Simon Fowler said, "I want to tell you a story, Queequeg, something that happened eleven years ago." All his life since then, he had been looking for someone to tell it to; the notebook had been the only listener he'd found. "It's a confession, I suppose."

"Well, if it happen 'leven years ago, it ain' gonna have to do with me."

He was silent. Did she want to hear it?

She recognized his hesitation. "No, that *good*. I don' *wan'* it to. You go ahead, Basenji."

And so he confessed, doing for his conscience what Queequeg and Ty Kosturko and the bonsai had somehow managed to do for his soul. "Eleven years ago I gave my mother to the UrNu Geriatrics Hostel. Do you know what that is?"

"I think so."

"Well, it's a place for old people, a hospital and nursing home. Some of the old people there aren't sick at all and live in a separate wing, almost a hotel. Most who go there, though, are waiting to die. Geriatrics Hostel. The name itself is a contradiction, meant to inspire hope when you know you shouldn't have any."

"I don' know what's hope-inspirin' 'bout a buildin' full of hostile ole people," the girl said. She waited for him to laugh. Which he didn't.

"That's a joke, Basenji. One of yo' snooty *puns*. You ain' the only one smart enough to make 'em, whatever you think." She chuckled. "Good one, too."

"Touché." It had stopped him, he had to admit. To save face, he pinched her nipple. "May I finish?"

"Ouch. Yeah. Don' do that."

Georgia Cawthorn listened while he told her about taking his mother, Kazuko, who had been born in reconstructed Hiroshima in 1970, to the UrNu Geriatrics Hostel. His mother was only sixty-five, but he had been taking care of her as if she were a child for six or seven years, since Zachary Fowler's death in 2028 (the year she, Georgia, was born) of "insult to the brain."

Kazuko had taught him everything he knew about horticulture, bonsai, and miniature landscaping; and he, after he was old enough to run it himself, had taken her with him every day to the Kudzu Shop, even though this had entailed pushing a wheelchair through the corridors of the Tower

Complex, into and out of lift-tubes, and across spotless pedestrian courts and pitted, unrepaired asphalt. The medicaid physicians told him that they could find no measurable deterioration in her legs; perhaps her condition derived from an irresistible and ongoing loss of neurons, nerve cells, in the brain, a failure owing to oxygen deprivation. "Premature senescence," they said. Perhaps. In any case, they didn't know what to do about it since they had no long-range methodology for reversing vein constriction in the brain or for increasing her blood's oxygen payloads.

"One of them said *payloads*," Simon Fowler said. "Aerospace jargon. The men in the descent craft *Eagle* were part of its payload."

"They talk like they has to, Basenji," She could see him nosediving into bitterness. But he pulled out.

"Finally, I went and talked to the people at the Geriatrics Hostel. They were soliciting tenants, patients for the hospital section, residents for their quasi-hotel. Part of a study, all of it. The director told me that my mother's apparent 'premature senescence' might in reality be a response to alterations in her life over which she had no control.

" 'Look,' he said. 'Your mother was born in Hiroshima. She came to this country with your father before the turn of the century. She watched the Dome go up over Atlanta, actually saw the steel gridwork—over a ten-year period—blot out the sky. The United States turned into the world's only Urban Federation before she was even granted American citizenship. So instead she had to apply for enfranchisement under the new Urban Charter. You were born only after she and your father had obtained that enfranchisement. That made her what?—thirty-seven years old?—when you were born, Mr Fowler, no small adjustment in its own right. Twenty years devoted to raising you, then, while the Urban Nuclei cut themselves off from all contact with their own countrysides, not to speak of foreign nations, and your father degenerated into alcoholism. Then your father, the one person she knew who had seen her homeland, who could talk about it with her, was cruel enough to desert her. By dying. Mr Fowler, your mother's time sense has been upended, her cultural and her emotional attachments pulled out from under her. Her psychological metabolism has sped up to keep pace with the alterations she sees occurring in the external world. She is aging because she feels intuitively that she must, that it would be a chronometric impossibility for her *not* to be aging. Physiologically she is neither older nor younger than any reasonably healthy woman of sixty-five. We have other victims of the same malaise here, some barely into their fifties. The roots of this syndrome, in fact, are a century old. Older. Leave your mother with us, Mr Fowler, and

we'll try to help her. That's all I can promise.'

"I said, 'All of her emotional attachments haven't been pulled out from under her. She has a son, you know.'

" 'Yes,' the director said (his name was Leland Tanner, I believe), 'and from what you've told me, you've been castigating yourself for not being your father. Or an improved version of your father: all the strengths, none of the weaknesses. Your own sense of guilt runs very deep in this matter, Mr Fowler, as if you blame yourself for being both a late *and* an only child, neither of which conditions you had any control over. And you've done well to seek help here.' "

"You don't still feel that guilt, do you?" Georgia asked.

"I don't think so. If I ever felt it. But I'm not through confessing. The greater guilt is ahead.

"I gave—*sold*—my mother to the Geriatrics Hostel. They had been soliciting tenants, as I said, as subjects for a gerontological study, and they offered me a considerable sum to submit my mother to them. I did. They promised that she, along with the others, would be a recipient of intensive care and treatment, not simply a guinea pig for their researches. And in that, I think, the director told me the truth.

"During the first year I visited the Geriatrics Hostel every week, usually twice a week. Wednesday evenings and Sundays. They were working to alter my mother's time sense, to bring it in line with that of a normal woman in her sixties, maybe even to slow it down below the so-called normal threshold. The director did not believe in the biochemical approach, though, and that seemed good to me. No untested repressants or hallucinogens. Instead, they placed my mother in a controlled environment, a room in which everything took place at leisurely, but prescribed, intervals. They encouraged the reintroduction of Japanese motifs into her life, in the decorations of her room and in the material available for her to read. I brought a different bonsai with me each time I came; when it had been indoors for two or three days, an attendant carried it to the balcony outside my mother's window—which, on the director's orders, they kept curtained. But she still had scenery. A false window in the room opposite the curtained balcony ran holographic movies of the Japanese gardens in San Francisco; my mother could watch the people come and go, come and go. Or she could wheel herself over to the wall and let a curtain drop into place here, too. More, they permitted her company from among the Hostel's other 'guests,' and they didn't shut her off from news of the City and the other Urban Nuclei; they just

monitored and restricted its content.

"The first month, no progress. Not much the second one, either—though by the third month she had begun trying to walk, supporting herself on a movable aluminum frame they had kept in her room since the beginning. This didn't last. The director went by tunnel to a conference on aging research in the Washington Nucleus. While he was gone, someone proposed a room adjustment; patients were shuffled around. That did it. We *think* that's what did it; the results of this bungling didn't begin to show for a while. In fact, the new room my mother was given was exactly like the other, down to the false window and the hologramic movies of the San Francisco botanical gardens, except that the floor plan was a mirror-image of the other. Even the adjustment's having been made in its entirety during my mother's sleep couldn't compensate for this; the director later said it may have even complicated matters, since if my mother had witnessed the shuffling, her sense of disorientation would not have been so great."

"Thoughtlessness, Basenji. The program don' soun' bad, the director don' soun' bad."

"No, they weren't. But that's not the point. This is a confession, not an indictment. May I finish?"

"Go on. But let's pull up that sheet." The air conditioning, the interminable, almost imperceptible droning of the air conditioner. They adjusted themselves against each other under the rumpled drifts of linen.

"From that point on, my mother failed. When I came to visit her, we sat opposite each other and, more often than not, stared. She had sores on her legs and arms from lying so long in bed. She scratched the sores and the skin came away. The attendants left the sores undressed so that they'd be open to the air and the prospect of healing. I found myself fixing obsessively on these raw wounds; it was as if I expected on one visit to see her shin bone or elbow joint peeping through the worn flesh. And her eyes, the skin around them was sagging and red, falling into pouches. Queequeg, I expected—I was afraid—that one Sunday afternoon her eyes would roll out of her sockets into the little bags on her cheeks."

"Hey now!" She drew away from him, a reprimand.

"Come back," he said, and she did. "I wouldn't admit to myself the horror I felt, I still don't completely admit it. Later when I went to visit her I had to introduce myself; I had to tell Kuzuko Hadaka Fowler, my mother, who I was. It was just her eyesight, the director told me, not her memory. But then she would ask questions about my father, who she seemed to

think was still living in the Tower Complex with me. Or she would speak in Japanese, which I had never learned. In English she would reminisce about what it had been like to survive the A-bomb blast of August 6, 1945, although not even her own parents had been alive when that first bomb was dropped. Even so, after the reversal in her progress, it was the key to almost everything she talked about. She once described for me the photographic images of human shadows burned into the sides of Hiroshima's buildings by the blast. Maybe she saw a few of them when she was a little girl, three or four years old, I don't know. One or two such images may still have existed then.

"At the end of the first year in the Hostel she wasn't even talking about that, just sitting in her wheelchair and nodding, or asking me every ten minutes or so what time it was. Which I wasn't supposed to tell her. I had been seeing a woman quite frequently during this time, but I finally stopped. The visits to my mother had started to tell on me: a depression I couldn't exorcise.

"I went three weeks without going to see her, my very first break in a year-long routine. Then, on a Wednesday evening, I rode a lift-tube from street level to the floor of her ward in the Geriatrics Hostel. When I came out into the hall, I heard an old woman's voice saying over and over, 'Please, please help me.' I saw her, my mother, in her wheelchair at the end of the corridor: nothing terrible seemed amiss. She looked all right. But she kept begging for someone to come to her aid.

"They were mopping out the rooms along the corridor, and several other 'guests' shared the hallway with her, all of them deaf, maybe even literally, to her pleas. I threaded my way through the wheelchairs, and when she heard me coming, knowing that I was neither a patient nor one of those who ordinarily tended to her, she stopped begging. She held her head up and started nodding and smiling.

" 'How do you do,' she said. 'How do you do.'

"I said, 'Mother, it's Simon, it's your son.'

" 'How do you do,' she said. 'How do you do.' In the past my introducing myself had gained me at least a slow-coming acceptance. This time, only her grin and those terrible nods of the head. I waited. That was all I got. 'How do you do, how do you do.'

"Then I saw that the skirts of her robe—a hideous robe I had never seen before, kimonolike, with Mount Fujiyama embroidered over her left breast and the name of the mountain stitched across the right—well, the drape of this hideous robe was drenched. A pool of urine lay under my mother's

wheelchair, droplets hung from the frame on which her feet rested. 'How do you do,' she said. She wasn't going to let a stranger, even if he had just introduced himself as her son, help her with something as personal as a bladder she could no longer control.

"Courtesy, dignity, self-reliance."

" 'I'm your son,' I said. 'Mother, let me—'

" 'How do you do.'

" 'Someone help this woman!' I shouted. 'Someone help her!'" Four or five time-savaged faces revolved toward me. An attendant came out of one of the rooms.

"I backed away from my mother, I turned and walked up the hall. Waiting for the lift-tube, I heard my mother saying again, 'Please, please help me.' The attendant took care of her, I think: I didn't look back to see. Then I left the Geriatrics Hostel and never went back again until almost two years later when they notified me that my mother had died."

Beneath drifts of linen Simon Fowler and Georgia Cawthorn lay against each other. He was thinking, Heaven is soul, Earth is conscience. These I have salvaged....

16

The Samurai and the Willows

It was the Saturday of the wedding. The clock on the kitchen board said 1:20. She kissed him. "You come on up now, the Ortho-Urban chapel. You hear? We both gonna be late, Ty gonna kill me."

"Go on, then."

"You comin', Basenji? You better come." He was smiling, the way a quiet little dog smiles. And you never find out what it's thinking.

"In time," he said.

"*On* time," she said, "you be *on* time." Enough. She went out the door into the concourse, her shoulder capes, intense burgundy, twirling with the power of her stride. No need for glierboots, he thought.

Simon Hadaka Fowler went to his sleeper.. He took his notebook out of the drawer in the cabinet compartment of the visicom console. He tore out

two blank pages toward the back. Then, pulling a metal waste can toward his chair, he dropped the notebook in and set it afire with a pipe lighter from the console. He pushed the waste can away from him with his foot.

This done, he began to write on the first of the two pages he had saved back from the miniature holocaust in the waste can:

"Ty, Queequeg: I am leaving the Kudzu Shop to you. Here is the name of a man who may offer you a good price for it, should you not wish to keep it." He wrote the name and level station of the man. "The bonsai on the patio I hope you will keep, especially the willows. Under the counter in the main shop I have left instructions for completing the layering and transplanting processes of the willow now putting forth new roots. It should not be too difficult if you follow them to the letter. They are good instructions." '

He leaned back in his chair and thought. Then he wrote:

"My mother once told me a story of two young Japanese men who recklessly stormed the home of a great lord who they believed had impugned the good name of their father. Perhaps the lord had been responsible for their father's death. (My memory fails me here.) In any case, the two young men—neither of them yet twenty—were captured.

"The lord whom they had tried to kill, however, was impressed by the young men's courage and refused to condemn them to death. Instead, he commuted their sentence to the mercy of committing seppuku, ritual suicide.

"To a Japanese, my mother tried to explain, the distinction between execution and seppuku is by no means a fine one. On the one hand, disgrace. On the other, the satisfaction of one's honor. An Occidental mind struggles with this distinction, attempts to refute it with reasoning altogether outside the context of its origin. It is only in the last two or three weeks that I have recognized this myself.

"To return to my story, which I am almost done with: The gracious lord whose home the young men had attacked even went so far as to include in this commuted sentence the six-year-old brother of the attackers, even though the boy had been left at home during their mission. Nevertheless, on the appointed day he sat between the two brothers and watched carefully as each one of them performed the exacting ceremony. Then, with no hesitation at all, he took up his knife and did likewise."

Fowler set this page aside.

On the second sheet he wrote: "Queequeg, I go in joy. This is no

execution. You have commuted my sentence."

The equation in his mind he did not write down. Heaven, Earth, Man: soul, conscience, honor. Shortly, he thought, I will have solved all three.

Much later, when Georgia Kosturko-Cawthorn could weigh with some degree of objectivity what had happened, she told Ty: "He changed a lot. The blessed part is, he started askin' himse'f questions 'bout who he was. He got a long way. But he jes' never asked the last question, Ty, he jes' never asked it." In the spring of the year that followed, working from Basenji's directions, Georgia and Ty began two new trees from the layered bonsai willow. Both trees took.