

A GIFT FROM THE GRAYLANDERS

Michael Bishop

True science fiction horror stories are rare, and despite the surfeit of monster movies they are seldom about attacks on Earth by alien beasties. Here is a quietly written sf story whose undercurrent of fear builds gradually, as in the best horror stories. But its ending isn't at all what you might expect.

Michael Bishop won a Nebula Award for his novelette "The Quickening." His many novels include No Enemy but Time and Ancient of Days.

In the house where Mommy took him several months after she and Daddy stopped living together, Cory had a cot downstairs. The house belonged to Mommy's sister and her sister's husband Martin, a pair of unhappy people who already had four kids of their own. Aunt Clara's kids had real bedrooms upstairs, but Mommy told Cory that he was lucky to have a place to sleep at all and that anyway a basement was certainly a lot better than a hot-air grate on a Denver street or a dirty stable like the one that the Baby Jesus had been born in.

Cory hated the way the basement looked and smelled. It had walls like the concrete slabs on the graves in cemeteries. Looking at them, you could almost see those kinds of slabs turned on their ends and pushed up against one another to make this small square prison underground. The slabs oozed wetness. You could make a handprint on the walls just by holding your palm to the concrete. When you took your hand away, it smelled gray. Cory knew that dead people smelled gray too, especially when they had been dead a long time—like the people who were only bones and whom he had seen grinning out of magazine photographs without any lips or eyeballs or hair. Cory sometimes lay down on his cot wondering if

maybe an army of those gray-smelling skeletons clustered on the other side of the basement walls, working with oddly silent picks and shovels to break through the concrete and carry him away to the GrayLands where their deadness made them live.

Maybe, though, the gray-smelling creatures beyond the basement walls were not really skeletons. Maybe they were Clay People. On his cousins' black-and-white TV set, Cory had seen an old movie serial about a strange planet. Some of the planet's people lived underground, and they could step into or out of the walls of rock that tied together a maze of tunnels beneath the planet's surface. They moved through dirt and rock the way that a little boy like Cory could move through water in summer or loose snow in winter. The brave, blond hero of the serial called these creatures the Clay People, a name that fit them almost perfectly, because they looked like monsters slapped together out of wet mud and then put out into the sun to dry. Every time they came limping into view with that tinny movie-serial music rum-tum-tumpling away in the background, they gave Cory a bad case of the shivers.

Later, lying on his cot, he would think about them trying to come through the oozy walls to take him away from Clara's house the way that Daddy had tried to kidnap him from that motel in Raton, New Mexico. For a long time that day, Daddy had hidden in the room with the vending machines. Going in there for a Coke, Cory had at first thought that Daddy was a monster. His screams had brought Mommy running and also the motel manager and a security guard; and the "kidnap plot"—as Mommy had called it later—had ended in an embarrassing way for Daddy, Daddy hightailing it out of Raton in his beat-up Impala like a drug dealer making a getaway in a TV cop show. But what if the Clay People were better kidnapppers than Daddy? What if they came through the walls and grabbed him before he could awake and scream for help? They would surely take him back through the clammy grayness to a place where dirt would fill his mouth and stop his ears and press against his eyeballs, and he would be as good as dead with them forever and ever.

So Cory hated the basement. Because his cousins disliked the windowless damp of the place as much as he did, they seldom came downstairs to bother him. Although that was okay when he wanted to be by himself, he never really wanted to be by himself *in the basement*. Smelling its mustiness, touching its greasy walls, feeling like a bad guy in solitary, Cory could not help but imagine unnameable danger and

deadness surrounding him. Skeletons. Clay People. Monsters from the earthen dark. It was okay to be alone on a mountain trail or even in a classroom at school, but to be alone in this basement was to be punished for not having a daddy who came home every evening the way that daddies were supposed to. Daddy himself, who had once tried to kidnap Cory, would have never made him spend his nights in this kind of prison. Or, if for some reason Daddy could not have prevented the arrangement, he would have stayed downstairs with Cory to protect him from the creatures burrowing toward him from the GrayLands.

"Cory, there's *nothing* down here to be afraid of," Mommy said. "And you don't want your mother to share your bedroom with you, do you? A big seven-year-old like you?"

"No," he admitted. "I want my daddy."

"Your daddy can't protect you. He can't or won't provide for you. That's why we had to leave him. He only tried to grab you back, Cory, to hurt me. Don't you understand?"

Daddy hurt Mommy? Cory shook his head.

"I'm sorry it's a basement," Mommy said. "I'm sorry it's not a chalet with a big picture window overlooking a mountain pass, but things just haven't been going that way for us lately."

Cory rolled over on his cot so that the tip of his nose brushed the slablike wall.

"Tell me what you're afraid of," Mommy said. "If you tell me, maybe we can handle it together—whatever it is." After some more coaxing, but without turning back to face her, Cory began to talk about the skeletons and the Clay People from the GrayLands beyond the sweating concrete.

"The GrayLands?" Mommy said. "There aren't any GrayLands, Cory. There may be skeletons, but they don't get up and walk. They certainly don't use picks and shovels to dig their way into basements. And the Clay People, well, they're just television monsters, make-believe, nothing at all for a big boy like you to worry about in real life."

"I want to sleep on the couch upstairs."

"You can't, Cory. You've got your own bathroom down here, and when you wake up and have to use it, well, you don't disturb Uncle Martin or Aunt Clara or any of the kids. We've been through all this before, haven't we? You know how important it is that Marty get his sleep. He has to get up at four in order to make his shift at the fire station."

"I won't use the bathroom upstairs. I won't even drink nothin' before I go to bed."

"Cory, hush."

The boy rolled over and pulled himself up onto his elbows so that he could look right into Mommy's eyes. "I'm scared of the GrayLands. I'm scared of the gray-smellin' monsters that're gonna come pushin' through the walls from over there."

Playfully, Mommy mussed his hair. "You're impossible, you know that? Really impossible."

It was as if she could not wholeheartedly believe in his fear. In fact, she seemed to think that he had mentioned the GrayLands and the monsters who would come forth from them only as a boy's cute way of prompting adult sympathy. He did not like the basement (Mommy was willing to concede that point), but this business of a nearby subterranean country of death and its weird gray-smelling inhabitants was only so much childish malarky. The boy missed his father, and Mommy could not assume Daddy's role as protector—as bad as Clinton himself had been at it—because in a young boy's eyes a woman was not a man. And so she mussed his hair again and abandoned him to his delusive demons.

Cory never again spoke to anyone of the GrayLands. But each night, hating the wet clayey smell of the basement and its gummy linoleum floor and the foil-wrapped heating ducts bracketed to the ceiling and the naked light bulb hanging like a tiny dried gourd from a bracket near the unfinished stairs, he would huddle under the blankets on his cot and talk to the queer creatures tunneling stealthily toward him from the GrayLands—the Clay People, or Earth Zombies, or Bone Puppets, that only he of all the members of this mixed-up household actually believed in.

"Stay where you are," Cory would whisper at the wall. "Don't come over here. Stay where you are."

The monsters—whatever they were—obeyed. They did not break through the concrete to grab him. Of course, maybe the concrete was too thick and hard to let them reach him without a lot more work. They could still be going at it, picking away. The Clay People on that movie planet had been able to walk through earth without even using tools to clear a path for themselves, but maybe Earth's earth was packed tighter. Maybe good old-fashioned Colorado concrete could hold off such single-minded creatures for months. Cory hoped that it could. For safety's sake, he would keep talking to them, begging them to stay put, pleading with them not to undermine the foundations of his uncle's house with their secret digging.

Summer came, and they still had not reached him. The walls still stood against them, smooth to the touch here, rough there. Some of the scratches in the ever-glistening grayness were like unreadable foreign writing. These scratches troubled Cory. He wondered if they had always been there. Maybe the tunneling creatures had scribbled them on the concrete from the other side, not quite getting the tips of their strange writing instruments to push through the walls but by great effort and persistence just managing to press marks into the outer surface where a real human being like him could see them. The boy traced these marks with his finger. He tried to spell them out. But he had gone through only his first year in school, and the task of decipherment was not one he could accomplish without help. Unfortunately, he could not apply for help without breaking the promise that he had made to himself never to speak of the GrayLanders to anyone in Aunt Clara's family. If Mommy could muster no belief in them, how could he hope to convince his hard-headed cousins, who liked him best when he was either running errands for them or hiding from them in the doubtful sanctuary of the basement? Then Cory realized that maybe he was having so much trouble reading the GrayLanders' damp scratches not because he was slow or the scratches stood for characters in a foreign tongue, but because his tormentors' painstaking method of pressing them outward onto the visible portions of the walls made the characters arrive there *backwards*. Cory was proud of himself for figuring this out. He filched a pocket mirror from the handbag of the oldest girl and brought it down the creaking stairs to test his theory.

This girl, fifteen-year-old Gina Lynn, caught him holding the mirror against one of the rougher sections of wall, squinting back and forth between the concrete and the oval glass. Meanwhile, with the nub of a broken pencil, he was struggling to copy the reversed scratches onto a tatter of paper bag. Cory did not hear Gina Lynn come down the stairs

because he was concentrating so hard on this work. He was also beginning to understand that his wonderful theory was not really proving out. The mysterious calligraphy of the GrayLanders continued to make no sense.

"You're just about the weirdest little twerp I've ever seen," Gina Lynn said matter-of-factly. "Give me back my mirror."

Startled and then shame-faced, Cory turned around. He yielded the mirror. Gina Lynn asked him no questions, knowing from past experience that he would respond with monosyllables if at all, but began to bruit it around the house that he could read the marks in concrete the way that some people could read cloud formations or chicken entrails. Uncle Martin, who was home for a long weekend, thought this discovery about his sister-in-law's son hilarious. He called Cory into the living room to rag him about taking the mirror but especially about holding it up to the shallow striations in the otherwise blank gray face of a basement wall.

"Out with it," he said. "What'd that stupid wall tell you? No secrets, now. I want me a tip straight from the cee-ment itself. What's a rock-solid investment for a fella like Uncle Marty with only so much cash to spare?"

Cory could feel his face burning.

"Come on, cuz. This is a relative talkin', kid. Let me in—let us *all* in—on what's goin' down, basement-wise."

"Who's gonna take the World Series this year?" twelve-year-old David promptly asked.

"Is Hank Danforth gonna ask Gina Lynn to his pool party?" Faye, disturbingly precocious for nine, wondered aloud.

("Shut up," Gina Lynn cautioned her.)

And thirteen-year-old Deborah said, "Is war gonna break out? Ask your stupid wall if the Russians're gonna bomb us."

"Maybe the wall was askin' him for some cold cream," Uncle Martin said. "You know, to put on its wrinkles." All four of Uncle Martin's bratty kids laughed. "You were just writin' down the brand, weren't you, Cory? Don't wanna bring home the wrong brand of cold cream to smear on your favorite wall. After all, you're the fella who's gotta face the damn thing

every morning, aren't you?"

"Silica Lotion," Gina Lynn said. "Oil of Grah-velle."

Mommy had a job as a cash-register clerk somewhere. She was not at home. Cory fixed his eyes on Uncle Martin's belt buckle, a miniature brass racing car, and waited for their silly game to end. When it did, without his once having opened his mouth to reply to their jackass taunts, he strode with wounded dignity back down to the corner of the basement sheltering his cot. Alone again, he peered for a time at the marks that Gina Lynn's mirror had not enabled him to read. The scratches began to terrify him. They coded a language that he had not yet learned. They probably contained taunts—threats, in fact—crueler and much more dangerous than any that his uncle and cousins had just shied off him for sport.

Two days later, in Uncle Martin's detached garage, Cory found a gallon of yellow paint that Aunt Clara had bought nearly three summers ago to take care of the house's peeling shutters. He also found a brush and an aerosol can of black enamel that David had recently used to touch up the frame of his ten-speed. These items the boy carried downstairs to his private sanctuary.

Stripped to his jockey briefs, he began to slap runny gouts of latex brilliance all over the disturbing hieroglyphs. At first, he hid a few of them behind the dripping image of a huge lopsided egg yolk. Then, swinging his arm in ever-widening arcs, he expanded this clownish shape into the brim of a festive straw sombrero. The sombrero rim grew to be gong-sized, and the gong ballooned to the dimensions of one of those giant yellow teacups whirling around and around in a local amusement park. Finally, though, Cory had his circle as big as a small sun, a ball of good cheer radiating into the basement as if the very paint itself had caught fire.

He outlined the sun with the black spray paint and added flares and fiery peninsulas that cried out for yet more yellow. Then he painted smaller lamps on other portions of this wall and on the other walls too, and squat tropical birds with combs and wattles, and pineapples as big as the lamps, and a long yellow beach under the glowering sun. His arms ran yellow, as did his pipe-cleaner thighs, as did his caved-in belly and chest, while his face seemed to reflect back the brightness of the obliterated gray that he strove to cover over permanently. If he had to live and sleep in this dank hole in the ground, let it be a happy hole in the ground. Let the light

of artificial suns, two-dimensional lamps, and crudely drafted fruits and cockatoos spill into his basement through the pores of the very cement. Let there be light.

Let there be light to hold the GrayLanders at bay. For Cory believed that the work he had done, the symbols he had splashed up around his cot like a fence of sunlight, would keep the creatures beyond the subterranean walls from bursting through them to steal him away from Mommy and the real world of automobiles and mountains and football stadiums—the real world in which she was trying to make a place for both of them. Maybe he was safer now.

But while Cory was admiring what he had done, David came down the steps to ask him to go to the store. His older cousin saw him three-quarters naked and striped like an aborigine in the midst of a yellow-gray jungle unlike any terrain that David had expected to find only a floor below the family's TV room.

"Holy shit," he said and backed away up the steps as if Cory might be planning to slit his throat on the spot.

A moment or two later, Uncle Martin came storming down the steps in a pair of rope-soled boots that made the whole unfinished structure tremble like a medieval assault tower in an old Tyrone Power movie. He could not believe what Cory had done. He bruised the boy's arm and upper chest shaking him this way and that to demonstrate his disbelief and his unhappiness. He threw Cory onto his cot with such force that it collapsed under the blow and dumped the boy sidelong so that his head struck a section of painted concrete. Yellow paint smudged the whorl pattern of hair on Cory's crown, and a trickle of red worked through the smudge to enrage Uncle Martin even further.

"This is *my* house!" he shouted, slapping Cory again. "No one gave you permission to do this!"

Aunt Clara's pant-suited legs appeared halfway up the trembling stairs. More of her came into view as she descended. When Uncle Martin drew back his forearm to administer another cracking wallop, she cried, "Marty, don't! Something's happenin' on the news. You like the news. Come see what's goin' on. Try to relax. I'll take care of this. Come watch the news."

Uncle Martin's forearm halted inches from Cory's eyes. "Ain't nobody gonna take care of this, Clara!" he shouted. "We'll jes' leave our little Piggaso down here to moon over his shitty goddamn yellow masterpieces! Forever, maybe!" He thrust Cory into the wall to punctuate this last threat, kicked the crumpled cot, and pounded back up the steps, pulling Aunt Clara along with him. Then the door slammed. Soon after, the naked light bulb near the staircase went out; and the boy knew that one of his cousins, at Uncle Martin's bidding, had flipped the circuit breaker controlling the power supply to the basement.

But for a narrow line of light beneath the door at the top of the steps, Cory crouched beside his cot in utter darkness. Then someone—maybe Uncle Martin himself—put something—probably a rolled-up towel—along the base of the door; and the not quite utter darkness of his prison took on a thoroughness that made the boy think that someone—possibly a GrayLander—had stuck an altogether painless needle into his eyeballs and injected them with ink. He still had eyeballs, of course, but they had gone solid black on him, like licorice jawbreakers or moist ripe olives. With such eyes, he could "see" only darkness.

What about the fat yellow sun that he had painted? What about the beach, the pineapples, the sunlamps, and the cockatoos? He put his hands on the damp slabs of the basement walls and felt each invisible figure for reassurance. Was the dampness only the sweat of soil-backed concrete, or was it instead an indication of undried paint? Cory could not tell. When he sniffed his hands, they gave off the familiar odor of grayness—but even bright yellow pigment could acquire that smell when, like a glaze of fragile perfume, it was applied to an upright slab of earthen gray. The boy wiped his hands on his chest. Was he wiping off a smear of latex sunshine or the clammy perspiration of underground cement? Because he would never be able to tell, he gave up trying.

Then he heard a pounding overhead and knew that Mommy had come home from work. She and Uncle Martin were just beyond the door at the top of the stairs, arguing.

"For Chrissake, Marty, you can't keep him locked up in the basement—no matter what he's done!"

"Watch me, Claudia! Jes' you watch me!"

"I'm going down there to see him! I'm his mother, and I've got a right

to see him! Or else he's gonna come up here to see us!"

"What he's gonna do, woman, is stew in the dumb-fuckin' Piggaso mess he's made!"

"He hasn't even had his dinner!"

"Who says he deserves any?"

"He's my son, and I'm going to let him out!" Then Cory's darkness was riven by the kind of noise that a big dog makes when it slams its body into a fence slat, and Mommy was screaming, and Aunt Clara was cursing both Mommy and Uncle Martin, and the staircase scaffolding was doing the shimmy-shimmy in its jerrybuilt moorings. Crash followed crash, and curses curses, and soon all the upper portions of the house seemed to be waltzing to the time-keeping of slaps and the breakage of dinnerware or random pieces of bric-a-brac. Cory waited for the rumpus to end, fully expecting Mommy to triumph and the door to open and the darkness to give way to a liberating spill of wattage that would light up the big yellow sun and all the other happy symbols that he had painted. Instead, when the noise ceased and the house stopped quaking, the darkness kept going, and so did the silence, and the only reasons that Cory could think of were that Mommy and her brother-in-law had killed each other or that Mommy had finally agreed with Uncle Marty that Cory really did deserve to sit alone in the dark for trying to beautify the dumb-ass basement walls.

Whatever had happened upstairs, the door did not open, and the ink in his eyeballs got thicker and thicker, and he came to realize that he would have to endure both the dark and the steady approach of the GrayLanders—Clay People, Earth Zombies, Bone Puppets—as either a premeditated punishment or a spooky sort of accident. (Maybe a burglar had broken in during the argument and stabbed everybody to death before Mommy could tell him that her son was locked in the basement. Maybe Mommy had purposely said nothing to the bad guy about him, for fear that the bad guy would get worried and come downstairs to knife Cory too.) Anyway, he was trapped, with no lights and nothing to eat and streaks of yellow paint all over his invisible body and only a tiny bathroom and trickles of rusty tap water for any kind of comfort at all.

Cory crept up the rickety stairs, putting a splinter into one palm when he gripped the guard rail too hard. At the top, he beat on the door in rapid

tatoos that echoed on his side like the clatter of a fight with bamboo staves at the bottom of an empty swimming pool. "Let me out!" he shouted. "Let me out of here!" Which was not dignified, he knew, but which was necessary, here at the beginning of his confinement, as a test of Uncle Martin's will to hold him. If noise would make his uncle nervous, if pleading would make the man relent, the boy knew that he had to try such tactics, for Mommy's sake as well as his. But it was no use, and finally he sat down and bit at the splinter in his palm until he had its tip between his baby teeth and managed to pull it free of the punctured flesh sheathing it.

Darkness swallows time. Cory decided that darkness swallows time when he had been alone in the black basement so long that he could not remember being anywhere else even a quarter of the time that he had spent hunched on his cot waiting for the darkness to end. He could not tell whether time was stretching out like a pull of saltwater taffy or drawing up like a spider when you hold a match over its body. Time was not something that happened in the dark at all. The dark had swallowed it. It was trying to digest time somewhere deep in its bowels, but when time emerged again, Cory felt sure that it would be a foul thing, physically altered and hence bad-smelling—gray-smelling, probably—and unwelcome. He almost hoped that the dark would swallow him, too, so that he would not have to confront the stench of time when, altered in this bad but inevitable way, it came oozing into the world again.

Once, he thought he heard sirens. Maybe Uncle Martin had gone to a fire somewhere.

Later, though, he was more concerned that the GrayLanders were getting closer to breaking through the basement's outer wall than that some poor stranger's house had caught fire. He put his hands on the upright slab next to him. He did this to hold the slab in place, to prop it up against the gritty GrayLanders straining their molecules through the earth—straining them the way that Aunt Clara strained orange juice on Saturday mornings—to scratch backward messages into the cement in a language so alien that not even a mirror could translate it for Cory. No longer able to *see* these messages, then, he began to *feel* the striations embodying them. Maybe the Bone Puppets, the Earth Zombies, the Clay People, or whatever they were, preferred to contact living human beings

with *feelable* rather than *seeable* symbols.

Like Braille, sort of.

Didn't that make sense? It was smart to think that monsters living underground, in everlasting subterranean dark, would be blind, wasn't it? Cory's first-grade teacher had taught them about moles, which could only see a little, and had even shown them a film about cave animals that had no eyes at all because, in their always-dark environments, they had *revolved* that way. Well, the GrayLanders were probably like those cave animals, eyeless, blind, totally and permanently blind, because by choice and biological development they made their home in darkness. Which was why they would write backwards on the walls in symbols that you had to feel and then turn around in your head to get the meaning of.

Cory worked hard to let the alien Braille of the GrayLanders talk to him through his fingertips. Probably, their messages would let him know what sort of horrible things they planned to do to him when they at last got through the concrete. Probably, the symbols were warnings. Warnings meant to terrify. A really smart kid would leave them be, but because he had been locked into a place that he could not escape without the aid of the adults upstairs—grownups a kid would ordinarily expect to make some responsible decisions for him and maybe for themselves too—Cory had to struggle to parse the queer dents and knobbls on his own. Alone, in the dark, it was better to know than not to know, even if what you learned made your gut turn over and the hair in the small of your back prickle. So far, though, he was learning nothing. All their stupid tactile messages made no sense, either forwards at the tips of his fingers or backwards or sideways or upside-down in the ever-turning but ever-slipping vise of his mind.

"You're blind and you can't even write blind-writing!" Cory shouted. He pounded on the sweaty slab beside his cot as centuries ago he had pounded on the door at the top of the staircase. Thwap! thwap! thwap! and not even the satisfaction of an echo. Bruised fists and a bit lip, only.

Cory forced the bent legs on his cot back under the canvas contraption, but pinched the web between his thumb and forefinger. He lay down on his cot nursing the pinch and staring through ink-filled eyes at the heavy nothing pressing down on him like the bleak air pressure of a tomb. With a bleak black here and a bleak black there (he crooned to himself), here a black, there a black, everywhere a bleak black, Uncle Marty had a tomb,

ee-ai, ee-ai-oh. The melody of this nursery song kept running in his head in almost exactly the way that the darkness kept restating itself all around him. They were both inescapable, and pretty soon they got mixed up in Cory's mind as if they were mirror-image phenomena that he could not quite see straight and hence could not distinguish between or make any useful sense of.

Upstairs, as faint as the buzzing of a single summer mosquito, sirens again.

And then, somehow, the sun that Cory had painted on the wall—the humongous yellow orb with hair-curler geysers and flares around its circumference—lit up like a flash bulb as big as a Mobile Oil sign. But unlike any kind of flash bulb, Cory's sun did not go out again. Instead, in the bargain-basement catacombs of his aunt and uncle's house, it continued incandescently to glow. Everything in the basement was radiated by its light. Cory had to lift one paint-smear forearm to shield his eyes from the fierce intensity of its unbearable glowing. The images of sun-lamps on this and other walls, and of birds of paradise, and of bananas, pineapples, and papayas—all these clumsy two-dimensional images began to burn. They did so with a ferociousness only a little less daunting than that of Cory's big latex sun. It seemed to the boy that God Himself had switched the power back on. For some private reason, though. He had chosen not to use the orthodox avenue of the wiring already in place.

No, instead He had moved to endow with blinding brightness the symbols of life and sunshine that *Cory* had splashed on the walls. If Mommy would not help him, God would. If his aunt, uncle, and four bratty cousins would not release him to daylight, well, God would bring a gift of greatly multiplied daylight right down into the basement to him. Although grateful for this divine favor, the boy helplessly turned aside from the gift. It was too grand, too searing, and that for a brief instant he had actually been able to see the bone inside the forearm shielding his eyes fretted Cory in a way that his gratitude was unable to wipe from his memory.

And then, almost as if he had dreamed the divine gift, darkness reasserted itself, like a television screen shrinking down to one flickering central spot and going black right in the middle of a program that he had waited all day to see.

Ei-ai, ei-ai-oh.

Cory sat still on his cot. *Something* had happened. For an instant or two, the ink had been squeezed out of his eyeballs, and a liquid like lighter fluid had been poured into them. Then the liquid had ignited, and burned, and used itself up, whereupon the ink had come flooding back. Or something like that. Cory was still seeing fuzzy haloes of light on the congealed blackness of the ink. Fireflies. Glowing amoebas. Migrating match flames. Crimson minnows. They swam and they swam, and no one gave a damn but the boy in the basement.

And then it seemed to him that overhead a whirlwind had struck the neighborhood. The darkness roared, and the staircase began doing the shimmy-shimmy again. But this time the shaking got so violent that the steps and guard rails—a tiny din within the great bombast of the Rocky Mountain hurricane raging above him—broke loose of the scaffolding and like the bars of a big wooden xylophone tumbled into and percussed down upon one another with the discordant music of catastrophe, plink! plunk! crash! ka-BOOM-bah! clatter-clatter!

It would have been funny, sort of, except that the roaring and the quaking and the amplified sighing of whatever was going on upstairs—*what* stairs?—in the real world, the terrifying playground of wild beasts and grownups, would not stop. Cory feared that his head might soon explode with the noise. In fact, he began to think that the noise was *inside* his skull, a balloon of sound inflating toward a ka-BOOM! that would decorate the gray-smelling walls with glistening oysterlike bits of his brain. Gray on gray.

The endless roaring swallowed time. Cory began to forget that the world had not always entertained such noise. It seemed a kind of constant, like air. He wondered if maybe the GrayLanders were the culprits, howling from all the topless basements in his aunt and uncle's neighborhood that they had succeeded in breaking into from their earthen grottos. If so, they would soon be here too, and time would both begin again and stop forever when they opened the sky for him with their grating godforsaken howls.

Maybe air was not a constant. Cory was suddenly having trouble breathing. Also, the clammy walls had begun to hiss, as if the ooze invisibly streaking them had heated to a temperature enabling them to steam. Gasping, he got down off the cot and crawled along the floor to the niche where an old-timey water heater, unemployed since the final days of

the Eisenhower administration, squatted like the sawed-off fuselage of a rocket. Cory could not see it now, of course, but he remembered what it looked like. The metal wrapping the cylinder scalded his naked shoulder as he crawled past the antique.

Still gasping, bewildered by the difficulty of refilling his lungs, the boy slumped behind the old heater and turned his face toward an aperture in the concrete wall—an accident of pouring—through which a faint breath of warm rather than desert-hot air blew. He twisted his itching, enflamed body around so that he could thrust his entire head into this anomalous vent. The lip of concrete at its bottom sliced into his neck, but he ignored the minor discomfort to gulp the air leaking through. A gift from the GrayLanders? Maybe. Cory refused to question it, he just gulped and gulped, meanwhile praying that the noise would die down and the heat ease off and his oxygen supply return to normal.

In this unlikely posture, the boy fell asleep. Or, at least, consciousness left him.

When Cory awoke, his ears were buzzing, but the whirlwind had ceased. He pulled his head out of the rough spout in the concrete and found that he could comfortably breathe. He crawled out from behind the old gas water heater. An eerie kind of darkness held the day, but he could see again, as if through blowing smoke or murky water. Parts of the basement ceiling had fallen in, but all the walls were standing, and on them, as dim as the markings on the bottom of a scummy swimming pool, wavered the childish symbols that he had brushed and spray-painted onto the cement. Soot and grime dusted his handiwork, giving a disheartening dinginess to the latex yellow that a while ago—an hour, a day, a millennium— had shouted God's glory at him. Soot and dust drifted around the dry sump of the basement like airborne chaff in the grainery of a farm in western Kansas.

He looked up. The staircase had collapsed, and the door that he had pounded on, well, that door no longer occupied the doorjamb framing an empty portal at the top of the fallen stairs. In fact, the doorjamb was gone. Where it should have stood, a refrigerator slouched, its hind rollers hanging off the edge of the oddly canted floor. How it had wound up in that place, in that position, Cory could not clearly say, but because the walls of the upper portions of the house had evaporated, along with the ceiling, the furniture, and its human occupants, he did not spend much

time worrying about the recent adventures of the parboiled refrigerator. High above the ruins of the house, the sky looked like a crazy-quilt marbling of curdled mayonnaise and cold cocoa and dissolving cotton candy and burnt tomato paste. Yucky-weird, all of it.

Just as gut-flopping as the sky, everything stank and distant moans overlay the ticks of scaled metal or occasionally pierced the soft static of down-sifting black snow. Although summer, this snow was slanting out of the nightmare sky. Appropriately, it was nightmare snow, flakes like tarnished-silver cinders, as acrid as gunpowder, each cinder the size of a weightless nickel, quarter, or fifty-cent piece. Right now, the boy was sheltered from their fall by a swag-bellied warp of ceiling, but he had made up his mind to climb out of the basement and to go walking bareheaded through the evil ebony storm.

Bareheaded, barechested, and barefoot.

Before the GrayLanders came.

Which they surely would, now that the grownups, by flattening everything, had made their tunneling task so much the easier. One of the outer basement walls had already begun to crumble. It would be a relaxing breaststroke for the Clay People, Earth Zombies, or Bone Puppets to come weaving their cold molecules through that airy stuff. And they had to be on their way.

Cory got out of the basement. It took a while, but by mounting the staircase rubble and leaping for the edge of the floor near the teetering refrigerator and pulling himself up to chin height and painstakingly boosting one leg over, he was finally able to stand on the tilting floor. Then, propelling his arms to maintain his balance, he watched with astonished sidelong glances as his Aunt Clara's big Amana toppled from its perch and dropped like a bomb into the staircase ruins below it. A geyser of dust rose to meet the down-whirling cinders.

But he kept from falling, and looked around, and saw that no longer did the tall buildings of Denver, whose tops it had once been easy to see from his aunt and uncle's neighborhood, command the landscape, which had been horribly transfigured. Debris and charred dead people and blasted trees and melted automobiles lay about the boy in every direction, and the mountains to the west, although still there, were veiled by the photographic-negative snowfall, polarized phosphor dots of liling

deadliness.

Cory pulled his vision back from the mountains. "Mommy!" he cried. "Mommy!" Because he had no reasonable hope of an answer in this unrecognizable place, he started walking. Some of the burnt lumps in the rubble were probably all that remained of certain people he had known, but he had no wish to kneel beside them to check out this nauseating hunch. Instead, he walked. And it was like walking through a dump the dimensions of... well, of Denver itself. Maybe it was even bigger than that. The ubiquitous black snow and the yucky-weird sky suggested as much.

And then he saw his first GrayLander. The sight made him halt, clench his fists, and let go of a harsh yelping scream that scalded his throat the way that the down-whirling cinders had begun to burn his skin. The GrayLander paid him no mind, and although he wanted to scream again, he could not force his blistered voicebox to do as he bid it. For which reason, frozen to the plane of crazed asphalt over which he had been picking his way, Cory simply gaped.

Well over six feet tall, the GrayLander was almost as naked as he. The boy could not tell if it were Clay Person, Earth Zombie, or Bone Puppet—it seemed to be a little of all three, if not actually a hybrid of other ugly gray-smelling ogres of which he had never even dreamed. The GrayLander's ungainly head looked like a great boiled cauliflower, or maybe a deflated basketball smeared with some kind of milky paste. If the creature had eyes, Cory could not see them, for its brow, an almost iridescent purple ridge in the surrounding milkiness, overlapped the sockets where most earth-born animals would have eyes.

The creature's heavy lips, each of which reminded Cory of albino versions of the leeches that sometimes attacked people in television horror movies, were moving, ever moving, like greasy toy-tank treads that have slipped off their grooves. Maybe it had heard the boy approach—the huge, stunned creature—for it turned toward him and pushed an alien noise from between its alien lips.

"Haowah men," it said. "Haowah meh."

When it turned, the purple-gray skin on its breasts, belly, and thighs slumped like hotel draperies accidentally tilted off their rods. Cory took a careful step back. One of the monster's arms showed more bone below the elbow than flesh, as did its leg below the knee on the same side. Pale lips

still moving, the GrayLander extended its other arm toward the boy, the arm that might almost have been mistaken for a man's, and opened its blackened paw to reveal a tiny glistening spheroid. The monster shoved this object at Cory, as if urging him either to contemplate it at length or to take it as a memento of their meeting.

Squinting at the object in the unceasing rain of cinders, Cory understood that it was an eyeball. The GrayLander, blind, wanted him to have its eyeball. Just as he had suspected, the Gray Landers whom he had been waiting to come after him were sightless. They had eyes, apparently, but years of living in the dark, ignoring the realms of light just above their heads, had robbed their optical equipment of the ability to see. What, then, could be more useless than the gift of a GrayLander's eyeball? Cory was outraged. The whirlwind had finally freed this stupid creature— and all its equally ugly relatives wandering like benumbed zombies across the blasted landscape—from its subterranean darkness, and it was trying to give him something that had never been of the least value to itself or to any of its kind.

"Haoweh meh," it said again.

The boy's anger overcame his fear. He jumped forward, snatched the eye from the monster's paw, and flung it off the hideous body of the GrayLander so that it bounced back at him like the tiny red ball connected to a bolo paddle by a rubber tether.

Then, knowing nothing at all about where he was going or what he would do when he got there, Cory began to run. The dump that Denver and its suburbs had become seemed too big to escape easily, but he had to try, and he had to try in spite of the fact that as he ran many of the yucky GrayLanders loitering bewilderedly in the rubble called to him to stop—to stop and help them, to stop and share both their pain and their bewilderment. Cory would not stop. He was angry with the blind monsters. They were people in disguise, people just like his dead mommy, his dead aunt and uncle, and his dead cousins. He was angry with them because they had fooled him. All along, he had been living among the GrayLanders and they had never once—until now—stepped forward to let him know that, under their skins, they and their human counterparts were absolutely identical.