

The Horse Of Iron & How We Can Know It & Be Changed By It Forever

by M. John Harrison

M. John Harrison's most recent novel, Climbers, (Gollancz, 1989) is a mainstream novel dealing with the author's strange hobby of climbing rocks. Of it, Texas émigré fantasy writer Lisa Tuttle says: "it is about a group of people with a particular obsession (even weirder than SF fans) and their ways of enriching/escaping from/making sense of their ordinary daily lives in sordid contemporary Britain. It is written in a 'realistic' mode so heightened as to be hallucinatory. It's brilliant."

M. John Harrison is the most accomplished stylist among British science fiction/fantasy/horror writers working today. Born on July 26, 1945 near Catesby Hall, Harrison now lives in Peck-ham in southeast London. His books include The Committed Men and The Centauri Device (science fiction), In Viriconium and Viriconium Nights (fantasy), The Ice Monkey (horror), and Hot Rocks (with Ron Fawcett) and Climbers (climbing). Frankly, it's really impossible to categorize any of these, as readers of Harrison's work will readily agree. Harrison reports that he hasn't written much fantasy of late, and that after completing his current novel-in-progress, The Course of the Heart, he will probably drift exclusively into the mainstream. I would call that extremely depressing news, but then how does one distinguish between Harrison's mainstream writing and his horror/fantasy?

Recently I switched on in the middle of a television arts program. Two men were molding in brass something which looked at first sight like the stripped carcass of a turkey, that exact, sharp-edged cage of bone which reveals itself so thoroughly through all the strips and flaps of flesh after Christmas dinner. It turned out, though, to be something less interesting, a classical figurine, a Poseidon or Prometheus which systematically lost its magic as the layers of casting plaster were knocked off carefully with the back of an axe. This was so essentially disappointing -- a striptease in which, by removing veils of strangeness and alien signification, the sculptor revealed a value ordinary and easily-understood -- that to replace it I turned off the TV and imagined this:

Another foundry, somewhere in the night, somewhere in history, in which something like a horse's skull (not a horse's head: a skull, which looks nothing like a horse at all, but like an enormous curved shears, or a bone beak whose two halves meet only at the tip, a wicked, intelligent-looking purposeless thing which cannot speak) came out of the mold, and all the founders were immediately executed to

keep the secret. They had known all along this would happen to them. These men were the great craftsmen and engineers of their day. They could have looked for more from life. Yet they crammed down their fear, and got on with the work, and afterward made no attempt to escape.

This was how I learned the secret of the horse, which I now give here, after first holding it across itself like a slip of paper, in a further intrincating gesture:

1: THE FOOL

A young man, in whose dark hair a single strand of gray has recently appeared, decides to set out on a series of excursions suggested by the fall of the cards.

Complex rules will determine the direction of each journey. For instance, the suit being WANDS, he will only go north if the journey is to take place in the second half of the year; or if the next card turned up is a Knight.

Equally intricate rules, whose algebraic clauses and counter-clauses he intuits with each new cast of the cards, cover the choice of South, West and East; of destination; even of the clothes he will wear: but he will always travel by train. This decision is based on the relationship he has identified between the flutter of cards falling in a quiet cold room and the flutter of changing destinations on the mechanical indicator boards at railway stations. This similarity rests, he is willing to admit, on a metaphor: for while the fall of the cards is -- or seems -- random, the sequence of destinations is -- or seems -- controlled.

To represent himself in this affair, the young man -- or "Ephebe" -- has chosen THE FOOL. This card, therefore, will never turn up. He has subtracted it from the deck and keeps it beside him; each afternoon, as the light goes out of the room, it seems to fluoresce up at him from the table or the arm of his chair, more an event than a picture. We move forward through time by the deeply undercutting action of Desire. As THE FOOL steps continually off his cliff and into space, so the Ephebe is always a presence attempting to fill the absence that has brought him forth. He is a wave tumbling constantly forward into each new moment, and his journeys are thus in every sense a trip. By following the journeys as they fall out, he believes, he will open for himself a fifth direction; and to help identify it he will bring back from each journey an object. These objects or donnees will eventually comprise both a "compass" and set of instructions for its use.

All the Ephebe's journeys begin from London.

2: THE MAGUS, representing Heterodox Skills

Some are no more than commuter trips, on trains with automatic sliding doors and the interior design of buses. They arrive at the platform loaded with well-groomed, purposive people who seem prosperous but new to it: clerks and estate agents already a bit pouchy in the face, doing all they can with a shirt and a tie and a padded shoulder to pass themselves off as dangerous, successful accountants from the City -- men and women in their early twenties who pride themselves on looking like self-satisfied bullies.

Trains like this run hourly between Harrow and Euston, through a station called Kilburn High Road, the high walls of which are covered with the most beautiful graffiti. They are not scrawls whose content -- "LUFC wankers die tomorrow" "No brains rule" -- and context are their only significance, but explosions of red and purple and green done with great deliberation and exuberance, shapes like fireworks going off, shapes that bulge like damp tropical fruit, with an effect of glistening surfaces. They are names -- "Eddie" "Daggo" "Mince" -- but names which have been transformed from sign or label into illustration: pictures of names. After them everything else looks dull, the high brick walls of the next station -- Hampstead South -- resembling the walls of some great windowless linear prison. The children who do this call it "bombing"; they bomb their personalities on to the walls.

When the train stops at Kilburn High Road the doors slide open as if it is waiting for someone and after a long time an old man gets on and goes to an empty seat. His overcoat is belted but he has no shirt on, so you can see clearly the mass of springy yellowish-white hairs between his withered old pectoral muscles. A rank smell comes up from him. As soon as the doors close, he rolls a cigarette and smokes it with relish, smiling and nodding around at the other passengers. The men stare at their polished shoes. The women draw away and look angrily at one another as he pulls back his cuff to consult his watch. This grand gesture reveals the word FUGA tattooed inside his grimy wrist. "No one dare remind him," the Ephebe muses, "that this is a No Smoking carriage." And then: "We should live our lives the way those children sign themselves, bombing our names on to the prison walls inside our heads."

From this, his first excursion, he brings back a flattened cigarette stub, porous and stained brown at the end where the old man has held it gently between his lips.

3: THE HANGED MAN, representing "the descent of light into darkness in order to redeem it"; in its female aspect, "the Sophia of Valentinus."

New trains run on the line between Wakefield and Huddersfield. Inside them, next to every door, is a sign, which reads: PRESS WHEN ILLUMINATED TO OPEN. Illuminati everywhere should know about this sign. Between Wakefield and

Huddersfield illumination is likely to come as a corollary of the abandoned factories visible from the train; the rubbish that clogs the shallow river; the dour failed lives in the houses beyond. What is the Ephebe to do on receiving it? Press the button and jump out of the train?

In the overheated carriages of the 22.01 his journey pulls out like chewing gum; then snaps.

At Dewsbury a tired-looking woman gets up to leave the train. Round her neck she is wearing five or six gold chains, each bearing either her initial or her Christian name. They cling and spill between the tendons of her neck like a delicate gold net. She stands in front of the doors, which will not open for her. The sign is illuminated but she has not noticed it. Soon the train will pull away again and she will still be on it. She looks around with growing agitation. "I just can't work these doors out. Can you?" The Ephebe would like to be able to reply: "What you call yourself, who you claim yourself to be by putting on all your necklaces, is not as important as the act itself." That gesture he believes, of netting or fixing, is what actually identifies her. He would like to be able to explain, "People love you for the identity in the act, an identity so frail they must constantly help affirm it." But all he actually says is, "I think you have to press the button." At this the train gives a lurch, as if it has lost its patience.

From this journey the Ephebe brings back an item of personalized jewelry in the form of the name SOPHIA. The Aeon called Sophia, Valentinus reminds us, astonished to find herself separate from the Good, mistook for its light the tawdry, bluish flicker of the created world, and flung herself towards it. By desiring God so strongly she fell away from Him and into the city of Alexandria, where she still redeems herself daily as a prostitute. (In some versions of her agony, Sophia becomes the city, and as library, language, labyrinth, is thus the instrument of Mankind's redemption. In others, rather than falling away from the Father, she denies herself to Him in reprisal for some never-defined unkindness to His children.)

4: THE LOVERS, representing "Alchemical Marriage" and the Concordance of Opposites

Now the Ephebe lives along the line.

His journeys divide themselves between those on routes he has never traveled in his life -- such as the one that worms its way, stopping at every station from Shotton on round the coast, from Crewe to Bangor; and those he already knows by heart, so that he can recognize every power pylon, substation or battery hen house between, say, London St. Pancras and Sheffield Central.

He delights in the surprises of an unknown line.

Suddenly the sea is racing along by his shoulder, light spattering off it like frying fat. Later the train crawls past container depots, and a tank farm lit up mysteriously in the night. The guard announces, "Once again lays n gem I do apologize your late arrival and inconvenient cause," and the Ephebe wakes next morning in the Rose & Crown: where like some traveling salesman he feels obliged to guzzle bacon, eggs, sausage and hot tea while he looks speculatively out at the wet provincial street.

As a result of one of these journeys he drifts into a tranced, sensual affair with a young woman a little older than himself who runs her mother's boarding house. In the mornings she serves breakfast to the guests, while he lies in bed imagining the men as they watch her moving about the room with her tray. Though she has already brought him his own breakfast in bed, kissed him, watched him eat it with a kind of unfashionable pride in his appetite, the Ephebe sometimes finds himself envying them what he thinks of as an intensely formal experience of her. They see her only once or twice a year, at the beginning and end of a day. Some of them try to look down her blouse as she puts the crockery on the table; others are content to talk to her about the weather; yet others are hypnotized by the quick deftness of her hands as she lays out knife, fork and serviette, or calmed by the smell of her body beneath the smell of her perfume.

When he tries to explain this to her she laughs and tells him, "You're so greedy!"

This goes some way towards understanding though perhaps not far enough. Increasingly, after she has taken away his breakfast tray, the Ephebe catches himself staring up through the attic skylight at the heavy white clouds, wondering if he can disguise himself and, like some boy out of a Medieval poem, appear one morning among the commercial travelers at the breakfast table to observe her unobserved: and from this journey he brings back only the sound of her voice as she urges him, "Fuck me. Fuck me," in the night.

5: THE CHARIOT, representing Self Expression

All journeys are enchanted.

It isn't so much that the landscape distracts you, as that something about the motion of the train -- something about the very idea of constant, rushing, forward movement -- makes you restless and slow to settle to anything. You read a few pages of a book and look out at some swans on a canal. A newspaper opened suddenly just down the carriage sounds like rain spattering on the window. Another chapter and you make your way down to the buffet or the lavatory. Between each event a reverie pours itself, as seamless as Golden Syrup, as smooth as the motion of the train. You wonder what the weather will be like in Leeds or Newcastle, turn to

the Independent to find out, read: "The world economy is likely to remain subdued."

Looking up from these words to a landscape of hedges and ponds, copses and little embankments, the Ephebe sees with amazement a strange vehicle bounding along beside the railway line.

In a long, complex frame of metal tubing, suspended on four tractor wheels, are cradled: an engine wrapped round with copper pipes and sheaves of old electrical wiring; clusters of what seem to be household butane gas bottles; and, well to the rear, the padded seat of some old-fashioned military jet, into which is strapped a man. Gouts of earth and water spray up from its enormous wheels. From time to time this whole machine seems to be consumed by a kind of radiant discharge, through which its driver or pilot can be seen helplessly or furiously waving his arms.

Is he a prisoner of his vehicle? Or does he prefer to drive on the edge of disaster like this? He is a wasted old man. When it can be seen, his face runs the gamut of expression, wild with fear one moment, laughing with excitement the next. His long gray hair blows back in the slipstream. His lips contort. He has fastened himself into a tight brown leather suit along the arms and legs of which run clusters of neoprene tubing. Out of these at intervals erupt thick colored fluids, which splatter over his chest or into his eyes. Though he blinks furiously, he suffers the indignity without harm: but wherever the machine is touched it blackens and smokes briefly, and lightning writhes along its chassis members.

One huge wheel flies off suddenly into the air. The old man claps his hands to his face. At that moment the train enters a tunnel, and the Ephebe can see only himself, reflected in the window.

If the appearance of the machine has filled him with astonishment, its disappearance leaves him with a curious mixture of elation and anger he can neither understand nor resolve. By the time he is able to unclench his hands and wipe his forehead, the train has left the tunnel for open ploughland across which spills a tranquil evening light. Wrestling desperately with one another, the old man and his machine have passed back into the dimension from which they came, where they leap and bucket and belly their way forever through rural England, scattering clods of earth, steam, small bushes and dead animals. But in the palm of the Ephebe's hand remains a small intricately machined metal item, melted at one end to slag.

This he brings home with him. For months it remains warm to the touch, as if it had only lately been thrown out of the hearth of the heart.

6: THE TWO OF DISCS, representing Change

Some journeys encourage a different kind of fantasy.

In his journal the Ephebe records:

"For some time I was enchanted by a tiny station called Long Eaton on the main line between Derby and Loughborough. Here, two slatted wooden platforms surrounded by larch, pine and variegated holly gave the air of a rural halt at once bijou and mysterious: the last place you would expect an Inter City turbine to stop. Sitting in the train, you had no idea what sort of landscape lay behind the woods. The wind rushed through them, so that you thought of yourself as being on some sandy eminence away from which spread an intimately folded arrangement of orchards and lanes, of broad heathland stretching off to other hills. Afternoon light enameled the leaves of the holly. Owls and wood pigeons moved amid the branches. Everything was possible in the country -- or garden -- beyond.

"Then the light passed, the wind dropped and the train began to move again: you saw that the trees were dusty and birdlimed, and that they had hidden only housing estates, allotments, and a light engineering plant. A fat woman with a hyperactive child came into the carriage, sneezed in your face. "Just sit down," she warned the child. Instead it stared defiantly into her eyes for a moment then wandered off to make noises with the automatic door.

"Despite this I always looked forward to Long Eaton, as if I hoped each time that the enchantment would be maintained. Then one day I glimpsed, fleetingly, through the windows of a train speeding in the opposite direction, a station called Haywards Heath (it was on the line between London and Brighton), and realized immediately that both it and Long Eaton were references to a lost type, that intimate little station of middle class children's fiction forty years ago. Conifers and sandy soil; foxes and owls and stolen ponies; gorse and gypsy caravans in a rough field: then some mystery about a pile of railway sleepers near the tracks, shiny with rain in the green light at the edge of the woods."

The Ephebe has recognized his mistake. But is he cured of it? Or does he still hope that one day he will abandon his life as it now is, some freak fall of the cards throwing him into another one in which he gets down from a train at just such a fictional station without even a suitcase and walks towards some granite tor steeped in evening light? Whatever the answer to this question, he brings back from a subsequent journey a children's novel called "Island of Adventure" -- though to give him credit he does not actually read it.

7: THE QUEEN OF SWORDS. "We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself."

Long journeys encourage the Ephebe to read and write: but they also outline the great gap between the lived and the written. Under a railway bridge at night, in Glasgow perhaps, he finds himself staring into the window of "Apollo Video

Supplies." There on a large screen, the following video clip repeats itself endlessly and silently to the drunks who stagger past:

In front of an Asian boy who watches captivated, a sword is beaten into existence out of the sparks of the anvil. The boy's father lies dead. The boy will grow up to be a Ninja fighter, and avenge him. His eyes are huge now as he discerns his uncertain yet triumphant future in the steel. The sparks stream past.

Exactly what you would expect, thinks the Ephebe, and indeed this boy is only a cliché: but look up from the screen and you can see the orange sparks fly out of it and down the road, where amid the dancing hailstones they light up in other dreary shop-fronts something more than "Winter Woolens -- Reduced".

Language is a scandal because it can make connections like these. Stories pass the experienced world back and forth between them as a metaphor, until it is worn out. Only then do we realize that meaning is an act. We must repossess it, instant to instant in our lives.

8: DEATH. Everything opens to contain its opposite.

Whenever the Ephebe looks up there is something new in the landscape -- gorse spilling down the side of a steep little hill with a farm on top; factory chimneys dissolving in a blaze of sun he can't bear to look at; a clear night somewhere up north, with contrails drawn across Orion and the Dog -- but eventually journeys like this must become tiring. The clean yellow front of an Inter City train, rushing toward the platform in the sunlight, no longer fills him with excitement. He's slept in too many overheated rooms, under thick continental quilts; eaten in too many station cafes; awaited too many connections. He is losing faith in the insights he had, the relationships he formed.

All he remembers about the city he's in is a display of popular wedding stationery -- 20% off -- which, as he walked past it, seemed for a moment to merge indistinguishably with the cigarette ends, burger cartons and supermarket receipts on the pavement: so that for a moment everything became illegible to him, because the floor of the display window and the street, the inside and the outside, were only extensions of each other. He yawns and stares in the mirror. Behind him his bag is packed.

Later, repair works along the line delays the 5.18 Sheffield/St. Pancras, then again by a fault in one of its power cars. It's Sunday. The Ephebe dozes and then wakes up abruptly. The train isn't moving and he has no idea where he is. He looks for lights or signs in the night: only dark fields. He has no watch -- it was broken in Edinburgh -- and the only one he can see belongs to a woman sitting across the aisle. Made of plastic, this has a dial transparent to its own works, greenish flickering cogs

in the complexity of which your eye loses the position of the hands. The Ephebe falls asleep again for a moment, dreams briefly of the old man and his strange energetic machine, racing alongside the train but this time looking in, then wakes suddenly in the horrified knowledge that he has cried out in his sleep and the whole carriage has heard him. He has become someone who makes noises in his sleep on the London express: a worn-out middle aged man with bad teeth and a cloth briefcase, his head resting uncomfortably in the corner between the seat-back and the window.

From this journey, though, he brings back a memory of his childhood in Warwickshire.

One July morning, sitting hypnotized by the sound and weight of the river in Stoneleigh Park, he watched the hot sunlight spilling and foaming off the weir until he could no longer separate the look of the water from its strange, powerful, almost yeasty smell. Most of the objects of his childhood, he remembers, were transfigured in this way for him; and he notes in his journal that night:

"Little earthy lanes and banks become secret entry-ways into the warm fields and bemused emotional states of childhood, when in a kind of excited fatigue you watch your own hand come closer and closer to the dry gray wood of an old gate, and find yourself unable for a second to context the one by the other or find a single context -- unless it is something as huge and general as 'the world' -- which will accept both. In the end you are able to understand only the intense existence, the photographic actuality of such objects. In that kind of childhood everything is fused into the light like flowers fused into a glass paperweight. At first I thought this light was in itself a fusing-together of other states or qualities which I could only vaguely label -- "self awareness" "growing sexual curiosity" "the unconditional trances of narcissism." Now I see that the child is contrived wholly of the things he has already experienced: a spider web in the grass, a jet flying overhead; a cocoon of cuckoo-spit, the flare of light off the windscreen of a designer car. These elements are reassembled as a way of looking at other things. It was this continual fusing and re-fusing -- this infolding -- of experience which I perceived as a light bathing the landscape.

"What we call 'meaning' is not what the light discovers, because what it discovers is itself. Now cast by the adult on new objects, it is valuable only for its very act of illumination. Perception is meaning. Meaning is an act."

9: THE MOON, representing "the state of impure horror"; human faculties reach their limit and collapse before the Inward Light.

As soon as the journeys are over, the cards can be laid to rest.

The Ephebe waits in the taxi rank outside Charing Cross Station after his last trip. A short, badly-dressed woman of about twenty five or thirty is walking up and down the station forecourt shouting "You bloody piece of paper, you bloody piece of paper," at a letter she holds in her right hand. Her face is red with effort; her hair straggles down around it. A maroon wool coat like a carpet compresses her fat breasts. "You bloody piece of paper!" Eventually she varies the emphasis on this accusation until it has illuminated briefly every word; as if trying for the feel of some final, indisputable delivery. Her sense of drama, the transparency of her emotion (whether it is unaffected misery or something more complex and theatrical declaring itself) leaves him unnerved.

No one else seems bothered. Out on the Strand the taxis continue to drive homicidally at one another. The people waiting for them laugh and talk about the price of things. But as his cab arrives, and he sees the light dancing in the raindrops on its bonnet, the Ephebe cannot repress a shudder. Later, when he tries to recall the incident, he will be able to fasten only on the minor details -- the minicab touts, for instance, mooching up and down the queue pleading in soft voices, "Any long jobs?" while the woman stares down at her bit of paper like Ellen Terry as Joan of Arc and rubs her free hand in the food stains down the front of her coat.

"You bloody piece of paper!"

That afternoon he sits by the downstairs front window of his small house, looking out into the street. Rain drops steadily on the windowsill. "This drip, which is sometimes doubled, sometimes trebled, syncopated," he once wrote to a friend, "is all that is most monotonous about London residential streets."

In fact it is a street he rather likes: in summer all rain and sunshine and every minute the most surprising and confusing changes of light.

Over the road from the Ephebe's window two beautifully trimmed bushes stand out against a brick wall. He has no idea what they are. The true word "buddliea" comes to mind when he looks at them; but they are evidently conifers. Under certain lights, especially in the morning -- "When the world looks promising again despite what we know about it" -- the brick takes on an old warm red color. The wall itself seems to recede a little, as if the street had widened, and at the same time it becomes taller and longer. At that, the bushes no longer seem like bushes at all. Rather than being in front of the wall, they define two arch-like spaces in it. It is an illusion: but suddenly the Ephebe seems to be looking through two arches at a hedge some way behind the wall. The effect of this is of a glimpse into the well-matured garden of some great house near Warwick or Leamington, and it always delights him.

Tired out now by his journeys, unable to convince himself of the need to unpack his case, unsure of the success of his experiment, he makes himself a cup of coffee, then another. The room behind him is dim and quiet, full of secondhand furniture.

On a little veneered table he has arranged the incomplete Tarot, THE FOOL which represents himself, and the objects of his search -- a flattened cigarette end stained with nicotine and spittle; an item of personalized jewelry in the form of the name SOPHIA; the vulnerable but determined whisper of a woman approaching her climax in the middle of the night; a small, intricately machined metal object, melted at one end; the children's novel "Island of Adventure"; particles of sleet billowing down an empty pavement; a page from his journal -- though he cannot yet bring himself to do anything with them. Instead, he finds himself watching the school children running up and down the street. At half past four there is an increase in traffic. The rush hour has begun.

About fifteen minutes later the woman he watched this morning outside Charing Cross Station waddles into view from the junction with Harrow Road, crosses on to the opposite pavement, and, going through one of the "arches" in the wall, disappears from view. Sunlight splashes the pavement. Rain falls through it like a shower of parks. Without thinking, the Ephebe leaves his house and rushes after her. The "arch" is closing again even as he passes it. He has the sense of penetrating some material halfway between wood and stone, then something which is neither, something membranous which clings for a moment round his face.

Now he is in the garden. Paths race out everywhere in front of him, across great lawns, between high topiary hedges, over patios paved black and white like chessboards surrounded by gray stone urns and leaden statuary. In this confused, ideal moment, the Ephebe believes he may go anywhere. With a shout of elation he attempts to fall forward instantly and endlessly in all possible directions; only to find to his dismay that in the very exercise of this privilege he has selected one of them.

The house, in all respects the same as his own, is empty.

Though the carpets have been removed, odd items of furniture remain -- a small inlaid table, an old-fashioned brass fender with grotesque moldings, an ironing board folded up in a corner -- as if some tenant is still in transit.

He sees the woman he has been pursuing, standing quite still in her maroon coat staring out of a bay window in an upstairs room; he sees her through the open door, lumpen and heavy, from the landing at the top of the stairs. Light pours round her thickened, monolithic silhouette, transfiguring the bare floor of the room, illuminating where it spills out on to the landing rolls of dust beneath cream painted skirting boards. He knows that if he were able to enter the room and look over her shoulder now, he would not see North London or his own house. The light fixes him, photographic, frozen; it is the same hot, silvery light which falls on the dense trees on the other side of the valley, giving them the look of giant mosses, thick clumps and curtains of moss of the sort that drips down the ornamental waterfalls in old gardens.

"All the things it might be," a voice says clearly. "The one thing it is."

At this a white bird flies past the three panes of the bay window, its shadow flickering between elongated bars of light over the walls of the room: entering the first pane from the left and leaving from the right, it crosses the third in the same direction, only then flying across the central pane from right to left, after which it vanishes.

"The one thing it is."

The Ephebe knows that he must cross the doorway of this room. He must pass through the moment he finds himself in. Before he can do this, though, the woman must turn toward him, so that he sees balanced on her shoulders the skull of a horse. It is not a horse's head, but a skull, which looks nothing like a horse at all; and out of this enormous curved shears, this wicked bone beak whose two halves meet only at the tip, will come words. "You bloody piece of paper," she must admonish him. Only then will he be able to pass.

"You bloody written thing."

10: THE HIEROPHANT, representing "occult force, voluntarily evoked"

The journeys are over.

The Ephebe, having returned to the front room of his own house and made himself another cup of coffee, has arranged on the veneered table -- alongside the incomplete Tarot, THE FOOL which represents himself, and the objects of his search already noted -- a further nine cards. For each card of the original-spread, we discover, he drew an alternative, which has remained unconsulted until now.

These blind or uncommunicating cards provoke completely different interpretations of his journeys, and of their "meaning" for him and for us. For instance, as an alternative card to THE CHARIOT he drew THE AEON ("God has deconstructed the Old Universe and has learned too much to be able to build another"). Had he looked out of the opposite window of the railway carriage that day, he would have seen only a toddler with a string of snot at its nose, pedaling its plastic tricycle through the weeds, the heaps of dried mud and discarded plasterboard in the back garden of a newly-completed council house in the Midlands. To simulate speed, the child kicks out violently with its little legs, while from its open mouth comes a constant high-pitched imitation of the roar of a jet fighter overhead -- "Nnnnneeaaaa!"

Here are the alternative cards he drew, in order:

The Nine of Discs; the Six of Wands; the Four of Swords; THE AEON; the Ten of Discs; the Ace of Swords; THE DEVIL; the Princess of Wands; FORTUNE. He is left only with the card he chose to represent himself. This was the

Knight of Swords. As he turns it up, THE FOOL, which it replaces, charred and curled as if by some great heat or light, vanishes in incense smoke! He hears the horse repeat gently,

"All the things it might have been."

Initiated now, the Ephebe smiles thoughtfully. Next to THE LOVERS he places the Four of Swords. He remembers the young woman whispering, "Fuck me, fuck me," in the night. What would he have seen if he had turned his head away from her then and looked into the quiet darkness of their upstairs room? The journeys are over. They have just begun.