

THE ROBOT'S TWILIGHT COMPANION

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The Robot's Twilight Companion

By Tony Daniel

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*For Lucius Shepard,
Who taught me the life of the writer*

and

*In memory of Jim Turner,
An extraordinary editor and friend*

Introduction

Tony and I share the same opinion of introductions, that is, that the work should speak for itself, and we agreed that this would be a fitting place, instead, to focus on the role of Jim Turner in bringing this book to print. Most of you have never heard of Jim Turner . . . and I suppose there's no reason you should have. He was an editor, which is an under-publicized and unappreciated profession. Jim was one of the most unappreciated—and most astute—editors in the history of publishing. He lived and worked in Collinsville, Illinois, far from the literary spotlight of New York. There, unencumbered by corporate concerns, by the need to provide vast amounts of silage for the undiscerning appetites of mass-market readership, he was able to transform Arkham House from a minor-league publisher specializing in H.P. Lovecraft tributes to a respected showcase for new writing talent. He had a passion for making quality books with strong content, beautiful books that would survive as objects for generations. His Arkham books—as well as those he produced under his own imprint, Golden Gryphon (which continues today under the stewardship of his brother, Gary)—were lovingly designed and were nominated for and won innumerable awards. Jim himself was not accorded the slightest honor by the field he served so ably and devotedly until after his death when he won the World Fantasy Award in the category “Special Award, Professional.” He was never less than forthright in his opinions, and I'm certain that the notion of being recognized posthumously would have struck him as the height of hypocrisy.

I believe that Jim's greatest virtue as an editor was his ability to spot talent. Evidence of this is a phone call I received from him in late 1989, during which he raved about the first published story of a young writer named Tony Daniel. I had taught at a workshop that Tony attended the previous summer, and when I mentioned this, Jim got excited and started pumping me for information, as he was wont to do.

He declared his intention of one day publishing a collection of stories by Tony—he was that sure of Tony’s potential. As usual, Jim’s judgment was borne out: Tony has since become one of the most important new-generation science fiction writers, and it’s likely that his ultimate horizon lies far beyond the shores of that genre. *The Robot’s Twilight Companion* is the last book that Jim Turner nurtured from conception to the printer’s shop before his untimely death. It stands as a fitting memorial to his life, constituting the record of a maturing young writer’s development, something that Jim delighted in and something that has been a signature of many of his books. From the title piece, with its Asimovian focus on a redefinition of humanity, to the Sergio Leone-flavored tour-de-force of “A Dry, Quiet War,” to the meditation upon the often contrary forces of love and social commitment in the Hugo-nominated “Life on the Moon,” these stories constitute the most idiosyncratic body of short science fiction since the early days of John Varley. In sum they clearly enunciate the fact that Tony Daniel is a supremely gifted writer whose career has just begun.

—Lucius Shepard
14 May 2000

ElectricStory.com gratefully acknowledges Jim Turner’s extensive work on The Robot’s Twilight Companion and his brother Gary’s generous cooperation with our eBook publication. Gary mentioned to us that Golden Gryphon wanted to approach Lucius about an introduction like this for the print edition but lost track of the idea while bringing the book to press, an effort that was greatly complicated by Jim’s death. We hope you’ll support Golden Gryphon in their ongoing mission to publish fine hardback volumes of the best speculative fiction (<http://www.goldengryphon.com>).

Life on the Moon

The Big Empty
by Henry Colterman

*If I ventured into the Big Empty,
a smaller movement between hard
and fast stars,
if I ventured to the moon, and the
dust of the moon,
and to those smooth ceramic halls,
those lustrous and benign
spaces, or to the evaporated surface,
the empty mineral stretch and score,
would I find you?
Are you still in the valence between
spaces? I would kiss the
fall of your hair; I would lie
beside you in the silence,
and trace with my fingertip your lips’
surge and fall.
I would pull you gently from the
undermass,
the crystal and stone, like a spiderweb
from foliage, like
breath from a sleeper.*

*If I ventured to the Big Empty,
I would never stop looking for you, Nell*

Nell was skinny and wan. Her hair was brown, darkening to black, and her eyes were brown and sad. Henry did not understand why he loved her, for he had always considered himself a shallow man when it came down to it, with a head turned by shallow beauty and flashy teeth and eyes. Nell was a calm, dark pool. She was also probably the greatest artist of her generation, though, and when one had the extraordinary luck to claim such a woman's regard, one made exceptions.

They met at a faculty mixer in St. Louis. Henry was a visiting poet at Washington University's graduate writing program. Nell, already quite famous in her professional circles, had given a lecture that day at the architecture school—a lecture that Henry had studiously avoided. Nell had not read any of Henry's poetry, for that matter, but then few people had. If anything, twenty-first-century poets were more obscure and unknown than their predecessors had been.

But both knew the other by reputation, and being the only people at the mixer who were not involved in the intricacies of academic policy skirmishes, the two of them ended up in a corner, talking about corners.

"Why do they have to be ninety degrees?" Henry asked. He leaned against one wall, trying to appear nonchalant, and felt his drink slosh over his wrist. For the first time, Henry regretted that he was not a man brought up to be comfortable on the insides of buildings.

"They don't," Nell replied. "But there are good reasons they mostly are." At first glance, Nell's face seemed lacking in some way, as if the muscles and tendons were strung out and defined, but weren't really supporting anything of importance. Odd.

"Structural reasons?"

"Why are there laps, when we sit down?"

Henry knew then that he was going to like her, despite her peculiar face.

"So we have something to do with our legs, I suppose," he said.

"And to hold cats and children on, too. Function and beauty." Nell smiled, and suddenly Henry understood why her face seemed curious and incomplete. It was a superstructure waiting for that smile.

They did not, of course, return to Henry's place and fuck like minks, although by the end of the mixer that was all Henry had on his mind. Instead, Henry asked her to coffee the following afternoon. Nell actually had a scramjet to Berlin scheduled for the early morning, Henry later discovered, but she canceled the flight for the date. Nell understood which situations called for spontaneity, and being a careful, thoughtful woman, she always made the right moves.

Those first moments were so abstract, urban and—formed, as Henry later recalled them. Like a dance, personifying the blind calls and pediments of nature. That was what it felt like to be alive in the houses of people you didn't really know, of living hazy days in parks and coffee shops and the chambers of the university. Nell and he met the next day for espresso like two ballet dancers executing a maneuver. Touch lightly, exchange, touch, pass, pass, pass.

But something sparked then and there because, of course, he had asked her to drive out to the Ozarks to see the flaming maples, and Nell had accepted. And in the Ozarks, Henry could become himself, his best self.

Nell had found one of his books, and when they stopped to look at a particularly fine farmhouse amid

crimson and vermilion foliage, she quoted, from memory, his poem about growing up in the country.

They kissed with a careful passion.

From: Living on the Moon
An Essay Concerning Lunar Architectural Possibilities
by Nell Branigan

Lunar architecture will offer many new frontiers for artists, but the old truths must still apply if the edifices of the moon are to be places where people will want to live and work. Lunar architecture must take account of space and form above all. Art is the outward, objective expression of inner, subjective experience. It is the symbol of what it is like to be human.

Consider architecture. What is the great element of architecture? It is not form alone, for that is the great element of sculpture. We live and work inside the architectural sculpture, as well as pondering it from outside. We inhabit its spaces. This is why I say that its greatest elements are both form and space, and the ways the two relate to one another.

Two years later, Henry published his fifth book to sound reviews and a little more money than he'd expected. On the strength of this, he had agreed to move to Seattle for a while to be with Nell, despite the fact that he had no academic appointment there, or prospects for one. They were married in a civil ceremony in the apex of the Smith Tower, a building Nell particularly admired.

And I am *aman* Nell particularly admired, Henry later thought. Perhaps love is not an emotion that is possible for the developed feelings. Perhaps the artist contemplates and symbolizes feeling to such an extent that he or she can't just have one after a certain point. Maybe that's why I'm only a good poet, and Nell was a genius. I feel too much stuff. Too much goddamn unformed *stuff* .

Yet Nell had remembered his poem and by now, she had read all of his work and would quote parts of it when she was happy or animated by some idea.

In Seattle, Nell's earthly masterpiece was being built—the Lakebridge Edifice. “Built” was, maybe, not the word for construction these days. “Substantiated” or “Formed” seemed more correct, as the macro- and micromachines interacted with the algorithmic plans to produce a structure utterly true to the architect's vision—down to the molecular level.

To achieve such perfection of craft took a little over two years, during which Nell and Henry shared comfortable apartments on the Alki-Harbor Island Span, a glassy affair of a neighborhood that stretched across Elliott Bay in a flattened arch. Nell thought it crass and atrocious. Henry decided to make the best of things, and planted a garden on the thirty-foot-long catwalk that opened up from their bedroom. His new book began to take shape as a series of captured moments having to do with plants and growth and getting soil on your pants and hands.

Production and Reproduction
by Henry Colterman

*In the nucleus of our home,
my wife draws buildings
in concentrated silence, measured pace
as daylight dapples through the walls
and ceilings
of our semipermeable high-arch*

living space.
While I, raised young among the cows
and maize,
garden the terrace by my hand
and hoe
and fax her concept out to their
next phase,
she makes our living—and
your living, too.
Near twilight, I osmose from
room to room
feeling vague, enzymatic lust for her
but wait, and clean, and prepensely
consume
my supper in the leavings of our birr.
And then she stumbles, blinking,
into night
and we opaque the walls to
greenhouse light.

I was happy, Henry recalled. I thought I was just getting by, using my garden as a substitute for living in nature, living by nature. But I was truly happy on the span. Somehow, nature came to me there.

Sex was never Nell's strong point. She was awkward and seemed perpetually inexperienced, but she was passionate and thoughtful. Her sexuality was as well-formed, balanced, and beautiful as her buildings. But it lacked something. That something was, of course, what Nell put into her work, Henry knew. Artless ardor. Novelty and insight. The secret ingredient of genius.

Yet Henry did not mind. For she loved him, he knew, and respected his work, his long silences, his gazing off into nowhere, his sometimes childish glee at what must have appeared to her to be nothing at all.

And so they lived and grew together during the making of the Lakebridge Edifice. Or perhaps I grew *around* Nell, Henry later considered, like wisteria around wrought iron. Nell didn't change, but she was good support and did not mind being covered over in spots.

From: Living on the Moon
An Essay Concerning Lunar Architectural Possibilities
by Nell Branigan

So what does this tell us about a lunar architecture? Only that space and form still apply to our constructions because humans still apply. The moon is perhaps one of the oldest constants in the making of this feeling of being alive that all art expresses. Women know this quite literally, but men know it just as well in a hundred biological rhythms that go back to our animal experience of the rise and fall of the Earth's tide.

Yet we will no longer be down on Earth, looking up at the moon. We will be on the moon, looking up at the Earth. The old movements and spaces will not apply. Or rather, they will not apply in the same ways. I imagine that this disruption of feeling will be far more upsetting to people than the change in gravity or the physical necessities of existence on the lunar surface.

I conceive of a lunar architecture that would mitigate this disruption and yet, if it were possible, provide us with new forms and spaces to reflect our new relationship with the mother planet. Like a

child who has left the nest, lunar architecture must look back with fondness, but forward with imagination and resolve.

What are the actualities of such an architecture? What sorts of cities ought we to build on the moon?

When the Lakebridge Edifice was complete, it was clear that Nell was a major artist of her generation. Even Henry, who had been an intimate part of the design and construction of the structure, was stunned when he first saw it complete and revealed, one morning near sunrise.

He'd been out on his terrace, weeding the tomatoes. Even with a plethora of soil emulsifiers, regulatory agents, and hunter-killer insect robots, weeds still grew. The problem was one of recognition, for life was life, no matter how irritating the form it took. Henry had not been able to sleep the night before, while Nell had slept like a log, her labors in Seattle nearly completed. Their settled life was about to end, Henry knew, and with it the feeling of content and regularity that he hadn't known since his days growing up on his parents' little farm near Dalton, Georgia.

He'd gone out onto the terrace because that was the place that smelled and felt most strongly of the old farm, particularly his father's prized tomato garden. It should. He'd worked to get just that flavor out of the thirty feet, even sacrificing yield to do it. This was the way it had been. And, once again, he was going to leave it and lose it.

Henry began to weed despondently, while dawn turned the black sky gray, as it did nearly every morning in Seattle. Except. Except that now there was something new that made the gray sky—not brighter—but *lighter*. The sun came up, and shone on the northeast corner of the Lakebridge Edifice.

The problem wasn't new, Nell had told him. It was the age-old renovation problem of what to do with low ceilings. In Seattle, the clouds were often low, and the sky was frequently mean. It sometimes made you feel compressed, made your life seem squat and set. Yet there was the water of lake and ocean nearby, and when the clouds would permit, mountains on all sides.

Lakebridge was a solution to those days when the mountains didn't come out, and the Sound and lakes were dishwater dull. It did not attempt to reverse those conditions, but to provide a new experience. It was a complex of different spaces, Nell called them. They couldn't properly be viewed as distinct buildings. Too many connections, suggested and literal. The complex partially encompassed Lake Union, on the northeast side of downtown, and seemed to be the very evaporation and condensation of lake water into the sky—the cycle of liquid, vapor, and the solid apparitions of clouds in an ascending order that spired out at three-quarter miles. And yet this was far from all that the complex suggested. There was a colorful marina, a hoverport, residential and business sections intertwining like striated muscles. The structure was organic, alive, useful, because it was art first, because the craft was part of the makeup of its living form.

Henry found himself drawing in his breath at the beauty of what his wife had conceived. Then a small hand wiped the sweat from his brow, and Nell wound her arm around him and crooked herself under his shoulder.

"Do you think it's pretty?" she asked shyly. Henry knew that this was no put-on. Nell was, herself, constantly surprised by what her gift allowed her to do.

"You done yourself proud," Henry whispered, and Nell hugged him tighter.

"I'm glad you like it," she said. "That means more to me than anything." Henry looked down into her hazel eyes and felt pure love. Like the love he felt for the Earth, for the way things grew and changed.

Her eyes were the color of good fertile soil. They were the color of fine wood and thick prairie sage. He kissed her lightly on the forehead, and she drew him down to her lips. Good. Right. Beautiful.

They made love in the terrace garden, as Henry had always wanted to. If there was any artistry in sex, they caught it that day, twisting amid the tomato plants. Sex was supposedly the pattern and rhythm that the sonnet followed, but Henry was convinced theirs was itself the symbol of a sonnet, the gift that art was giving back to the world for giving it someone like Nell Branigan.

Henry made love to her with abandon. Her responding movements dug her deeper into the dirt of the terrace until she was partially buried, and Henry was lowering himself deeper than soil level with each thrust. Her hands smeared his back and sides with loam, and their kisses began to get muddy.

Before he came, Nell turned him over into the depression they had carved and, sitting on him, wiped herself clean with tomato vines. He pushed up into her. She caressed his face with hands smelling of vegetable tang, and rubbed her clit with the pith and juice of his crushed plants. Henry felt himself on the verge but held back, held back. He tried to reach up into Nell with feeling, with an understanding and admiration for her—the woman in her, the artist, the subtle combination of the two that was her soul.

And he must have touched it, set it to pulsing, for she came all over him, more than ever before, dampening his stomach and thighs with a thin sheen of herself. His climax was just as hard and complete, and they collapsed in the garden. Henry spoke on some nearby heating elements, and fell fast asleep, his love in his arms.

Two weeks later, Henry was offered a visiting professorship at Stanford that would not involve teaching, but only a bit of consulting work with graduate students in writing. It was a dream slot, lucrative and freeing. Henry suspected the offer was partly due to the reflected glamour of his association with Nell, for Nell and the Lakebridge Edifice had made the opening screen of the general newsource *Virtual* with the heading Architectural Renaissance Woman. Nell was, of course, receiving project proposals from right and left.

“It appears I can live practically anywhere and do my work,” she said. When Henry told her about the Stanford opportunity, she encouraged him to accept. They prepared to move to San Francisco in the autumn.

From: Living on the Moon
An Essay Concerning Lunar Architectural Possibilities
by Nell Branigan

I conceive of structures that create a human space within themselves, and yet are not closed off from the grandeur of the setting—the wonder of where the people are and what they are doing. This is the moon, and we have come to this new world to live! We must take into account Earth-rise and moon mountain vistas. I imagine an architecture that moves and accommodates itself to take advantage of the best synergies and juxtapositions of the landscape.

And yet the forms that we conceive to give us the spaces that will move us must, themselves, be beautiful.

What follows is merely my idea of such an architecture. It is intended as an acorn, and not as the oak-tree entire. Space is broad and empty, and where there are humans, there will be places humans live. And where there are places to live, there will be architects.

Henry was writing a poem about briar patches when Nell came in to tell him about the moon. He knew it

must be important, otherwise she would never have interrupted him at his work. In those days, his hair was closely cropped, and Nell had enjoyed running her fingers through its crispness. She did so this time, but halfheartedly—more of a swat—and then sat down across the table from him.

“Dobrovnik interfaxed in yesterday, full virtual,” she said.

Dobrovnik was a partner in Nell’s firm. He had given up his own design work to serve as principal agent and negotiator for the other partners—most importantly, Nell.

“That must have been incredibly expensive,” Henry replied, still a little blank from having been yanked out of the poem. “It must have been important?”

“Yes. I’ve been offered a wonderful project.”

“Really?”

“*Really*wonderful.”

“That’s great.”

Nell slumped, and looked around the room. Henry was not used to such odd body language from her. He forced thoughts of thorns and briars from his mind, and concentrated.

“So,” he said. “You aren’t going to be able to go to San Francisco? Is that it?”

“That’s part of it.”

Something else, but Nell was being very quiet. “Nell, you know I support you completely.”

“I know, Henry.” She sobbed. *Nell* sobbed. “My Henry.”

“Nell, what is it?”

“The Subcommittee on Exploration has approved my proposal for a lunar colony.”

“The United Nations General Assembly?” Nell nodded. “Nell, that’s amazing news!”

And she was crying. Henry was entirely nonplussed.

“I have to go,” Nell said. “I have to go to the moon for five years. Maybe longer.”

Henry stood up, sat down. San Francisco. He pictured San Francisco’s gardens and fogs, its graceful spans and temperate climate. But fog. And more fog, like dead vines. *Un* dead vines. Covering, obscuring, eating the city away, fog, until there was nothing, nothing but depthless gray.

“You can come, Henry. That would all be part of the arrangement. They’ll pay your way, and more.”

“To the moon?”

“Yes.”

All he could picture was a blank. A blank expanse.

“But there’s nothing there.”

“There will be. We are going to build it.”

“No, there’s no . . . air. No manure. No briar patches.”

“I know. I understood that from the moment Dobrovnik told me about the offer, and I truly began to consider what it would involve to actually do it.”

Henry felt a trickle of sweat down his forehead. Where had that come from? Nell was too far away to wipe it. He pawed it off, continued down his face with his hand, and kneaded his own shoulder.

“Are you going to accept?”

“I don’t know. To build a city, practically from scratch—it’s the chance of the century for an architect.” Nell wiped her tears, sat up straight. “I want you with me, Henry.”

Did she? Or was she just doing the right thing? What was he, after all, when compared with her art? Had Nell ever really cared for him at all, except in the abstract? Jesus, he felt like Rick at the end of *Casablanca*, letting Ilsa go off with Victor Laszlo. What in God’s name had gotten into him? Why was he thinking like this? Was he that jealous of her gift? Of her fucking acclaim? He loved Nell. He loved Nell, and he wanted to be with her, too.

But didn’t she know what it would do to him? To his work? The moon. The bone-dead moon.

“I have to think. I don’t know if I can go with you. I have to think.”

And, as always, Nell knew that it was time to leave him alone and let him do so. She had perfect instincts about such things. Or perhaps it was art. Henry could never tell the difference as far as Nell was concerned.

She Hangs Mute and Bright
by Henry Colterman

*Blank hole, like a fresh cigarette scar.
I like the stars better; they don’t
care or not care, but the moon
doesn’t care and makes you think
she does. It is the light, I think,
the queered shadows, as subtle as lips,
the tease of incomplete revelation.*

*I have climbed up to small branches
on full moon nights and pressed
my face to the dark
while the wind chapped my eyes open.
I was without tears,
as empty as an orbit,
but she did not fill me.
She moved on.*

*She never lived.
She cannot die.
She hangs mute and bright.
I do not understand the moon.*

Henry did not decide that day, or the next. He rented a car the following morning and went for a drive into the Cascade Mountains. There was a chilly rain above four thousand feet, and the drying elements in

the roads steamed in long, thin lines up, up toward the passes.

Henry stopped at a waterfall, and stood a long time in the mist. There was no thought in his head for several minutes, and then he became aware that he had been tessellating the fall between being a single stationary entity and a torrential intermingling of chaotic patterns.

I ought to make a poem about this, he thought. But no words came. Just the blank stare of nature, incomprehensible. One or many, it didn't matter. Henry had almost turned to go when the sun broke out from behind the clouds, and shattered the falls, and the surrounding mist, into prismatic hues.

This is as loud as the water, Henry thought. This is what the water is saying. It is talking about the sun. The possibility of sunlight.

The light stayed only for a moment, and then was gone, but Henry had his poem. In an instant, I can have a poem, Henry thought, but I look at the moon, and I think about living there—and nothing comes. *Nothing*. I need movement and life. I cannot work with only dust. I am a poet of nature, of life. My work will die on the moon. There isn't any life there.

He must stay.

But Nell.

What would the Earth be like without Nell? Their love had not been born in flames, but it had grown warmer and warmer, like coals finding new wood and slowly bringing it to the flash point. Were they burning yet? Yes.

"I have to have life for my work," he told her when he returned. "I can't work up there."

"Henry, I'll stay—"

"No."

"There must be a way," she whispered. Her words sounded like the falling of distant rain.

"No."

He must stay, and Nell must go. To the moon.

The preparations were enormous, and Nell did not leave for five more months. They lived in Seattle, but Henry saw very little of her during that time. He was lucky to spend one night a week with her.

Nell tried to make their time together meaningful; Henry could tell she was working hard at it. But now there was The Project—The Project, always hulking over her mind like an eclipse. During their last week together, Henry called up the plans, the drawings and algorithms that had won the commission, for the first time, to see what was taking his love away.

As usual, the blueprints communicated little to him, despite the time Nell had spent teaching him the rudiments of envisioning structures from them. The three-dimensional CAD perspectives were better, but, whether there was some mental block operating in his head, or the fact that the perspectives were idealized and ultimately out of their otherworldly context, Henry could not see what the fuss was over. Just buildings. Only another city. Why not just build it in Arizona or something and pretend it was the moon? Why not—

Stop kidding yourself. Nell was going. He was staying here.

Nell spent her last four days on Earth with Henry. At this time, a little of the passion returned to their love. It was ragged and hurried, but the immediacy of their predicament added a fury to their sex, so that it blazed like blown coals.

Nell left on the Tuesday shuttle from SeaTac. Henry had thought that he would not see it off, but found himself getting up and getting ready long before Nell had to go. They drove to the airport in silence. Nell would take an orbital scramjet to Stevenson Station, geosynchronous over North America, then depart on the weekly moon run on Thursday.

Their final kiss was passionate and complete. The desperation of the previous week was gone, and in its place was a timeless togetherness, as if they always had and always would be sharing that kiss. And Henry understood, in the throes of that kiss, that this timelessness totally encompassed his desire, past and future. I mate for life, Henry thought, and I have found my mate.

And then the scramjet carried Henry's love away.

From: Living on the Moon
An Essay Concerning Lunar Architectural Possibilities
by Nell Branigan

My artistic model for this city is the living cell.

I envision smooth, warm walls curving to low-arched ceilings, whose opacity will change with the changing light and landscape. I imagine the environmental support systems and operating machinery of the cell showing bluntly here and there, but incorporated—literally—into the function and form of the whole, just as mitochondria and chloroplasts are in living cells.

I imagine a city of light and subtle colors, stretching out and up in graceful curves, runners, and points, stretching like a neuron, with neurotransmitters sparking off the end of dendrites and axons, sparking back to the Earth—or outward, into the greater emptiness beyond.

Mornings were not so bad. Henry had not taken the Stanford position after all, but had moved back to Georgia, to a log cabin that had once been his grandfather's hobby project. He scratched out poems and within six months had another book ready. He was mildly famous now—or so he supposed, for he had stopped paying attention to such things—and the book brought an unprecedented advance. For the first time in his career, Henry would not need to teach or live off of one grant or another. And Nell regularly sent home an enormous sum from her paycheck, since she had very little to spend it on and wanted him to use whatever he might need of it.

The Project would provide him a trip to the moon and back once a year. Henry counted the days until the trip with alternating hope and trepidation. It wouldn't be the same as being together with Nell. It might be worse than not being with her at all. He couldn't say when, but after a while he realized that he had decided not to go.

Nights were terrible. Nell would call often and once a week use the full-virtual interfax. Henry imagined his grandfather coming back to life and entering the cabin—only to find the cabin haunted by a ghost. Nell's form moved and spoke with Henry on these weekly visitations, and then was gone. But the short transmission delay was enough to tell him it was not Nell, there, on Earth, Georgia. He could not smell her hair or kiss her face. They could only stare into one another's eyes over 384,000 kilometers.

Henry prided himself on not breaking down in front of Nell, but some nights he stayed awake, crying until morning. Especially during the full moon. It hung oppressively in the dark, shone as if it had reason, as if it

had passion. But all of its brightness was just a reflection. The moon was distant and dead, only a virtual world, an apparition of meaning, tricking the eye. Henry tried to be brave, to not pull the curtains on it, but many times he could not stand the light, and yanked them closed.

But he forced himself to watch the news reports, and follow the more accessible architectural journals. Progress on the moon was quick, but there was an enormous amount of work to be done in transforming the pre-existing colony into a real city, with the attendant support structures and contingencies for change. It soon became obvious that the Project was going to run into delays, perhaps lengthy ones.

But the city was going to be built. Lower-cost trips up and down Earth's gravity well, and the new micro construction techniques had made the economics of low gravity manufacturing feasible, and the communications and transportation base the moon was already providing meant the colony had long been breaking even financially. The moon had begun to turn a profit. And soon, skilled and semiskilled workers would be needed, by the thousands. The moon was going to become many an emigrant's destination.

So they were building a city, both for those already there, and for those who would come. Sophisticated systems had to grow, and grow together precisely. Changes must be made to accommodate small miscalculations or the random aberrations of molecules. Myriad design problems must be met and mastered, and Nell had to be out on the surface, constantly consulting with contractors and crafters as to changes and adaptations, or inside watching command and control simulations in virtual. Yet enclosures of unprecedented physical security were being built, for paper-thin walls could shield against vacuum and meteor strike. And, with one-sixth the gravity, there were long arches, massive lintels, never possible on Earth. A city of cathedrals, it seemed to Henry.

As Nell's city took shape, Henry began truly to see the magnitude and wonder of the work his wife had envisioned. Yet still, it was the moon, and the only life was human life—human life on a grand scale, he must admit. But no wild waterfalls. No briar patches giving life to form, bringing form to life.

And then, one day before Nell's weekly visit, Henry received a signal from Lunar Administration. He immediately knew something was wrong, for this was a day that Nell expected to be too busy even to call.

He flicked his virtual fax to full interactive, expecting Nell to explain to him what the big deal was.

Instead, a chubby, professionally dressed woman appeared before him.

"Dr. Colterman?"

"Just Mister." Henry blinked to see her. There was dust in the room, and some particles danced brightly in her image, as they might in sunlight.

"I'm Elmira Honner."

"You're—" Henry vaguely remembered the name.

"Supervisor of the Lunar Project."

"Ah. Nell's boss. Yes. What?" He realized he sounded curt. Why was this woman calling him in Georgia, reminding him of the moon?

"I'm afraid I have bad news."

Oh, God. The vacuum. The lifeless stretches. But maybe not—

“Your wife was killed this afternoon, Mr. Colterman. Nell Branigan is dead.”

She had been killed in a construction accident while supervising the foundations for a communications center. The micromachines had thought she was debris and had—almost instantaneously—disassembled and transported Nell and two others, molecule by molecule, to be spread out over a twenty-kilometer stretch. The algorithm that had caused the harm had not been one of Nell’s, but a standard Earth program modified by one of the contractors without previous clearance. The glitch was based on the fact that the moon’s surface was lifeless. The algorithm hadn’t needed to recognize life on the lunar surface before, had done its job in directing the microconstruction elementals, and so the bug had gone undetected. Until now.

Henry said nothing. He bowed his head and let pain slosh over him, into him, like the tide. Nell, dead on the dead moon. Nell.

Honner waited a respectful moment. Henry was vaguely aware that she hadn’t signed off.

“Mr. Colterman?” she said. “Mr. Colterman, there is something else.”

Henry’s eyes began to tear, but he was not crying yet. Brief transmission delay. Three-hundred-eighty-four-thousand kilometers. Not yet. Not even grief was faster than light. “What?” he said. “What else do you want?”

“Your wife left something. Something for you. It’s on the edge of a secluded crater, some kilometers away from the colony.”

Something? Henry could not think. “What is it?”

“We’re not exactly sure. We thought you could, perhaps, tell us.”

“Yes?”

Honner seemed more uncomfortable now, unsure of herself, and not used to the feeling.

“You’ll have to come, Mr. Colterman. It isn’t something that even full virtual can really . . . encompass. Also, we’re not exactly sure what to do about this thing—”

“No.”

“Mr. Colterman, sir, respectfully, I—”

“Don’t you see that *I can’t* . Not now. There’s nothing—” His voice broke into a sob. He didn’t care. He was crying.

“Mr. Colterman, I’m sorry. Mr. Colterman, Nell told me she wanted you to come and see it. She said it was the only way she could ever get you to visit the moon.”

“She told you that?”

“I was her friend.”

“She wants me to come to the moon.”

“I’m very sorry, Mr. Colterman. If there’s anything we can do—”

“Nell wants me to come to the moon.”

He spent most of the scramjet ride to Stevenson Station gazing numbly at the Earth, and most of the lunar transport time working and reworking a poem. He called it “The Big Empty,” and it was done just before the transport landed.

Honner met him at the dock, and together they took a skimmer to the crater where Nell had left . . . whatever it was that remained. Henry watched the gray-black dust skirt underneath the skimmer, and thought: That is Nell. Now this dust has a name.

When they got to the crater, at first Henry did not understand what he was seeing. Honner suggested they debark, and they both donned the thin-skinned surface suits that Henry had seen in virtual, and never believed would be real protection. Apparently they were. He walked to the edge of the crater, to a beacon that was flashing faintly against the black sky. The beacon was attached to a greenish stone, with one side chiseled flat. On that face was the simple inscription

For Henry

He gazed out over the crater, down its bumps and declivities, trying to discern—

“It isn’t actually a crater,” Honner said. Her voice seemed pitched for the distance she stood away from him, and it took Henry a moment to realize his headgear had some sort of sophisticated transceiver embedded in it. There was, of course, no air here.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve begun a search of her notes, but so far we have no explanation. Nell . . . grew this, as far as we can tell.”

“Grew?”

“In a manner of speaking. There was no crater here before. Also, it changes. We don’t think it’s getting bigger, but we do have our concerns. As you’re aware, microinstantiation poses certain risks—” Honner appeared to have run out of tactful ways of expressing her misgivings. She came to stand beside Henry at the crater’s edge. “It seems to be powered by earthshine, if you can believe such a thing—”

Nell grew this. The words resonated in Henry’s mind. And then he saw it for what it was. Portions and rows. The undulations of corn and wheat, the tangle of tomatoes, the wispy irony of weeds, here and there. Not a copy, not even an imitation.

For it was made from the rocks and dust of the moon, inhabited by microconstruction machines, and animated by Nell’s algorithms. Nell’s vision. Nell. An expression. An evocation. Of course, of course. Life on the moon.

“It’s a garden.”

“What? I don’t see that.”

“It’s a sculpture. No. It’s a garden. I think people are meant to go down in there.”

“I still don’t see—”

Art is the symbol of life, and the embodiment of the life it symbolizes, Nell had said. This was not a real

garden, any more than the painting of a tomato was a real tomato. But it was the way gardensfelt . And if anybody knows how gardens feel, what it is like to lie down among the tomatoes, it is me and Nell, Henry thought.

Henry touched the carved letters on the green stone. “Yes, I think it’s pretty, Nell,” he said.

Life on the Moon
by Henry Colterman

*After I ventured into the Big Empty,
a smaller movement between hard
and fast stars,
after I ventured to the moon, and the
dust of the moon,
and to those smooth ceramic halls,
those lustrous and benign
spaces, and to the evaporated surface,
the empty mineral stretch and score,
I could not find you.
You moved on.*

*Yet you are still there.
You are in the valence between spaces.
I cannot kiss the fall of your hair;
I cannot lie
beside you in the silence.
Not yet.
You hang mute and bright.
You rise gently from the undermass,
the crystal and stone, like a sleeper
half-waking, then back to dreams
of the moon, subtle as lips,
now harsh and warm as breath.
Rise and fall.*

*Nell, for love,
you have given the moon seasons.*

A Dry, Quiet War

I cannot tell you what it meant to me to see the two suns of Ferro set behind the dry mountain east of my home. I had been away twelve billion years. I passed my cabin to the pump well, and taking a metal cup from where it hung from a set-pin, I worked the handle three times. At first it creaked, and I believed it was rusted tight, but then it loosened, and within fifteen pulls I had a cup of water.

Someone had kept the pump up. Someone had seen to the house and the land while I was away at the war. For me, it had been fifteen years; I wasn’t sure how long it had been for Ferro. The water was tinged red and tasted of iron. Good. I drank it all in a long draught, then put the cup back onto its hanger. When the big sun, Hemingway, set, a slight breeze kicked up. Then Fitzgerald went down and a cold cloudless night spanked down onto the plateau. I shivered a little, adjusted my internals, and stood motionless, waiting for the last of twilight to pass and the stars—my stars—to come out. Steiner, the

planet that is Ferro's evening star, was the first to emerge, low in the west, methane blue. Then the constellations. Ngal. Gilgamesh. The Big Snake, half-coiled over the southwestern horizon. There was no moon tonight. There was never a moon on Ferro, and that was right.

After a time, I walked to the house, climbed up the porch, and the house recognized me and turned on the lights. I went inside. The place was dusty, the furniture covered with sheets, but there were no signs of rats or jinjas, and all seemed in repair. I sighed, blinked, tried to feel something. Too early, probably. I started to take a covering from a chair, then let it be. I went to the kitchen and checked the cupboard. An old malt whiskey bottle, some dry cereal, some spices. The spices had been my mother's, and I seldom used them before I left for the end of time. I considered that the whiskey might be perfectly aged by now. But, as the saying goes on Ferro, we like a bit of food with our drink, so I left the house and took the road to town, to Heidel.

It was a five-mile walk, and though I could have enhanced and covered the ground in ten minutes or so, I walked at a regular pace under my homeworld stars. The road was dirt, of course, and my pant legs were dusted red when I stopped under the outside light of Thredmartin's Pub. I took a last breath of cold air, then went inside to the warm.

It was a good night at Thredmartin's. There were men and women gathered around the fire hearth, usas and splices in the cold corners. The regulars were at the bar, a couple of whom I recognized—so old now, wizened like stored apples in a barrel. I looked around for a particular face, but she was not there. A jukebox sputtered some core-cloud deak, and the air was thick with smoke and conversation. Or was, until I walked in. Nobody turned to face me. Most of them couldn't have seen me. But a signal passed, and conversation fell to a quiet murmur. Somebody quickly killed the jukebox.

I blinked up an internals menu into my peripheral vision and adjusted to the room's temperature. Then I went to the edge of the bar. The room got even quieter . . .

The bartender, old Thredmartin himself, reluctantly came over to me.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked me.

I looked over him, to the selection of bottles, tubes, and cans on display behind him. "I don't see it," I said.

"Eh?" He glanced back over his shoulder, then quickly returned to peering at me.

"Bone's Barley," I said.

"We don't have any more of that," Thredmartin said, with a suspicious tone.

"Why not?"

"The man who made it died."

"How long ago?"

"Twenty years, more or less. I don't see what business of—"

"What about his son?"

Thredmartin backed up a step. Then another. "Henry," he whispered. "Henry Bone."

"Just give me the best that you do have, Peter Thredmartin," I said. "In fact, I'd like to buy everybody a

round on me.”

“Henry Bone! Why, you looked to me like a bad ’un indeed when you walked in here. I took you for one of them glims, I did,” Thredmartin said. I did not know what he was talking about. Then he smiled an old devil’s crooked smile. “Your money’s no good here, Henry Bone. I do happen to have a couple of bottles of your old dad’s whiskey stowed away in back. Drinks are on the house.”

And so I returned to my world, and for most of those I’d left behind, it seemed as if I’d never really gone. My neighbors hadn’t changed much in the twenty years local that had passed, and, of course, they had no conception of what had happened to me. They only knew that I’d been to the war—the Big War at the End of Time—and evidently everything turned out okay, for here I was, back in my own time and my own place. I planted Ferro’s desert barley, brought in peat from the mountain bogs, bred the biomass that would extract the minerals from my hard groundwater, and got ready for making whiskey once again. Most of the inhabitants of Ferro were divided between whiskey families and beer families. Bones were distillers, never brewers, since the Settlement, ten generations before.

It wasn’t until she called upon me that I heard the first hints of the troubles that had come. Her name was Alinda Bexter, but since we played together under the floor planks of her father’s hotel, I had always called her Bex. When I left for the war, she was twenty, and I twenty-one. I still recognized her at forty, five years older than I was now, as she came walking down the road to my house, a week after I returned. She was taller than most women on Ferro, and she might be mistaken for a usa-human splice anywhere else. She was rangy, and she wore a khaki dress that whipped in the dry wind as she came toward me. I stood on the porch, waiting for her, wondering what she would say.

“Well, this is a load off of me,” she said. She was wearing a brimmed hat. It had ribbon to tie under her chin, but Bex had not done that. She held her hand on it to keep it from blowing from her head. “This damn ranch has been one big thankless task.”

“So it was you who kept it up,” I said.

“Just kept it from falling apart as fast as it would have otherwise,” she replied. We stood and looked at one another for a moment. Her eyes were green. Now that I had seen an ocean, I could understand the kind of green they were.

“Well then,” I finally said. “Come on in.”

I offered her some sweetcake I’d fried up, and some beer that my neighbor, Shin, had brought by, both of which she declined. We sat in the living room, on furniture covered with the white sheets I had yet to remove. Bex and I took it slow, getting to know each other again. She ran her father’s place now. For years, the only way to get to Heidel was by freighter, but we had finally gotten a node on the Flash, and even though Ferro was still a backwater planet, there were more strangers passing through than there ever had been—usually en route to other places. But they sometimes stayed a night or two in the Bexter Hotel. Its reputation was spreading, Bex claimed, and I believed her. Even when she was young, she had been shrewd but honest, a combination you don’t often find in an innkeeper. She was a quiet woman—that is, until she got to know you well—and some most likely thought her conceited. I got the feeling that she hadn’t let down her reserve for a long time. When I knew her before, Bex did not have many close friends, but for the ones she had, such as me, she poured out her thoughts, and her heart. I found that she hadn’t changed much in that way.

“Did you marry?” I asked her, after hearing about the hotel and her father’s bad health.

“No,” she said. “No, I very nearly did, but then I did not. Did you?”

“No. Who was it?”

“Rall Kenton.”

“Rall Kenton? Rall Kenton whose parents run the hops market?” He was a quarter-splice, a tall man on a world of tall men. Yet when I knew him, his long shadow had been deceptive. There was no spark or force in him. “I can’t see that, Bex.”

“Tom Kenton died ten years ago,” she said. “Marjorie retired, and Rall owned the business until just last year. Rall did all right; you’d be surprised. Something about his father’s passing gave him a backbone. Too much of one, maybe.”

“What happened?”

“He died,” she said. “He died, too, just as I thought you had.” Now she told me she would like a beer after all, and I went to get her a bottle of Shin’s ale. When I returned, I could tell that she’d been crying a little.

“The glims killed Rall,” said Bex before I could ask her about him. “That’s their name for themselves, anyway. Humans, repons, kaliwaks, and I don’t know what else. They passed through last year and stayed for a week in Heidel. Very bad. They made my father give over the whole hotel to them, and then they had a . . . trial, they called it. Every house was called and made to pay a tithe. The glims decided how much. Rall refused to pay. He brought along a pistol—Lord knows where he got it—and tried to shoot one of them. They just laughed and took it from him.” Now the tears started again.

“And then they hauled him out into the street in front of the hotel.” Bex took a moment and got control of herself. “They burnt him up with a p-gun. Burned his legs off first, then his arms, then the rest of him after they’d let him lie there awhile. There wasn’t a trace of him after that; we couldn’t even bury him.”

I couldn’t take her to me, hold her, not after she’d told me about Rall. Needing something to do, I took some tangled banwood from the tinderbox and struggled to get a fire going from the burnt-down coals in my hearth. I blew into the fireplace and only got a nose full of ashes for my trouble. “Didn’t anybody fight?” I asked.

“Not after that. We just waited them out. Or they got bored. I don’t know. It was bad for everybody, not just Rall.” Bex shook her head, sighed, then saw the trouble I was having and bent down to help me. She was much better at it than I, and the fire was soon ablaze. We sat back down and watched it flicker.

“Sounds like war-ghosts,” I said.

“The glims?”

“Soldiers who don’t go home after the war. The fighting gets into them and they don’t want to give it up, or can’t. Sometimes they have . . . modifications that won’t let them give it up. They wander the timeways—and since they don’t belong to the time they show up in, they’re hard to kill. In the early times, where people don’t know about the war or have only heard rumors of it, they had lots of names. Vampires. Hagamonsters. Zombies.”

“What can you do?”

I put my arm around her. It had been so long. She tensed up, then breathed deeply, serenely.

“Hope they don’t come back,” I said. “They are bad ones. Not the worst, but bad.”

We were quiet for a while, and the wind, blowing over the chimney's top, made the flue moan as if it were a big stone flute.

"Did you love him, Bex?" I asked. "Rall?"

She didn't even hesitate in her answer this time. "Of course not, Henry Bone. How could you ever think such a thing? I was waiting to catch up with you. Now tell me about the future."

And so I drew away from her for a while, and told her—part of it at least. About how there is not enough dark matter to pull the cosmos back together again, not enough mass to undulate in an eternal cycle. Instead, there *is* an end, and all the stars are either dead or dying, and all that there is is nothing but dim night. I told her about the twilight armies gathered there, culled from all times, all places. Creatures, presences, machines, weapons fighting galaxy-to-galaxy, system-to-system, fighting until the critical point is reached when entropy flows no more, but pools, pools in endless stagnant pools of nothing. No light. No heat. No effect. And the universe is dead, and so those who remain . . . inherit the dark field. They win.

"And did you win?" she asked me. "If that's the word for it."

The suns were going down. Instead of answering, I went outside to the woodpile and brought in enough banwood to fuel the fire for the night. I thought maybe she would forget what she'd asked me—but not Bex.

"How does the war end, Henry?"

"You must never ask me that," I spoke the words carefully, making sure I was giving away nothing in my reply. "Every time a returning soldier tells that answer, he changes everything. Then he has two choices. He can either go away, leave his own time, and go back to fight again. Or he can stay, and it will all mean nothing, what he did. Not just who won and who lost, but all the things he did in the war spin off into nothing."

Bex thought about this for a while. "What could it matter? What in God's name could be worth fighting for?" she finally asked. "Time ends. Nothing matters after that. What could it possibly matter who won . . . who wins?"

"It means you can go back home," I said. "After it's over."

"I don't understand."

I shook my head and was silent. I had said enough. There was no way to tell her more, in any case—not without changing things. And no way to say what it was that had brought those forces together at the end of everything. And what the hell do I know, even now? All I know is what I was told, and what I was trained to do. If we don't fight at the end, there won't be a beginning. For there to be people, there has to be a war to fight at the end of things. We live in that kind of universe, and not another, they told me. They told me, and then I told myself. And I did what I had to do so that it would be over and I could go home, come back.

"Bex, I never forgot you," I said. She came to sit with me by the fire. We didn't touch at first, but I felt her next to me, breathed the flush of her skin as the fire warmed her. Then she ran her hand along my arm, felt the bumps from the operational enhancements.

"What have they done to you?" she whispered.

Unbidden the old words of the skyfallers' scream, the words that were yet to be, surfaced in my mind.

*They sucked down my heart
to a little black hole
You cannot stab me.*

*They wrote down my brain
on a hard knot of space,
You cannot turn me.*

*Icicle spike
from the eye of a star
I've come to kill you.*

I almost spoke them, from sheer habit. But I did not. The war was over. Bex was here, and I knew it was over. I was going to feel something, once again, something besides guile, hate, and rage. I didn't yet, that was true, but I could feel the possibility.

"I don't really breathe anymore, Bex; I pretend to so I won't put people off," I told her. "It's been so long, I can't even remember what it was like to have to."

Bex kissed me then. At first, I didn't remember how to do that either. And then I did. I added wood to the fire, then ran my hand along Bex's neck and shoulder. Her skin had the health of youth still, but years in the sun and wind had made a supple leather of it, tanned and grained fine. We took the sheet from the couch and pulled it near to the warmth, and she drew me down to her on it, to her neck and breasts.

"Did they leave enough of you for me?" she whispered.

I had not known until now. "Yes," I answered. "There's enough." I found my way inside her, and we made love slowly, in a manner that might seem sad to any others but us, for there were memories and years of longing that flowed from us, around us, like amber just at the melting point, and we were inside and there was nothing but this present with all of what was, and what would be, already passed. No time. Finally, only Bex and no time between us.

We fell asleep on the old couch, and it was dim half-morning when we awoke, with Fitzgerald yet to rise in the west and the fire a bed of coals as red as the sky.

Two months later, I was in Thredmartin's when Bex came in with an evil look on her face. We had taken getting back together slow and easy up till then, but the more time we spent around each other, the more we understood that nothing basic had changed. Bex kept coming to the ranch, and I took to spending a couple of nights a week in a room her father made up for me at the hotel. Furdy Bexter was an old-style McKinnonite. Men and women were to live separately and only meet for business and copulation. But he liked me well enough, and when I insisted on paying for my room, he found a loophole somewhere in the Tracts of McKinnon about cohabitation being all right in hotels and hostels.

"The glims are back," Bex said, sitting down at my table. I was in a dark corner of the pub. I left the fire for those who could not adjust their own internals to keep them warm. "They've taken over the top floor of the hotel. What should we do?"

I took a draw of beer—Thredmartin's own thick porter—and looked at her. She was visibly shivering, probably more from agitation than fright.

"How many of them are there?" I asked.

"Six. And something else, some splices I've never seen, however many that makes."

I took another sip of beer. “Let it be,” I said. “They’ll get tired, and they’ll move on.”

“What?” Bex’s voice was full of astonishment. “What are you saying?”

“You don’t want a war here, Bex,” I replied. “You have no idea how bad it can get.”

“They killed Rall. They took our money.”

“Money.” My voice sounded many years away, even to me.

“It’s muscle and worry and care. You know how hard people work on Ferro. And for those . . . *things* . . . to come in and take it. We cannot let them—”

“—Bex,” I said. “I am not going to do anything.”

She said nothing; she put a hand on her forehead as if she had a sickening fever, stared at me for a moment, then looked away.

One of the glims chose that moment to come into Thredmartin’s. It was a halandana, a splice—human and jan—from up-time and a couple of possible universes over. It was nearly seven feet tall, with a two-foot-long neck, and stooped to enter Thredmartin’s entrance. Without stopping, it went to the bar and demanded morphine.

Thredmartin was at the bar. He pulled out a dusty rubber, little used, and before he could get out an injector, the halandana reached over, took the entire rubber, and put it in the pocket of the long gray coat it wore. Thredmartin started to speak, then shook his head and found a spray shooter. He slapped it on the bar and started to walk away. The halandana’s hand shot out and pushed the old man. Thredmartin stumbled to his knees.

I felt the fingers of my hands clawing, clenching. Let them loosen; let them go.

Thredmartin rose slowly to one knee. Bex was up, around the bar, and over to him, steadying his shoulder. The glim watched this for a moment, then took its drug and shooter to a table, where it got itself ready for an injection.

I looked at it closely now. It was female, but that did not mean much in halandana splices. I could see it phase around the edges with dead, gray flames. I clicked in wideband overspace, and I could see through the halandana to the chair it was sitting in and the unpainted wood of the wall behind it. And I saw more, in the spaces between spaces. The halandana was keyed in to a websquad; it wasn’t really an individual anymore. Its fate was tied to that of its unit commander. So the war-ghosts—the glims—were a renegade squad, most likely, with a single leader calling the shots. For a moment, the halandana glanced in my direction, maybe feeling my gaze somewhere outside of local time, and I banded down to human normal. It quickly went back to what it was doing. Bex made sure Thredmartin was all right, then came back over to my table.

“We’re not even in its time line,” I said. “It doesn’t think of us as really being alive.”

“Oh God,” Bex said. “This is just like before.”

I got up and walked out. It was the only solution. I could not say anything to Bex. She would not understand. I understood—not acting was the rational, the only, way—but not my way. Not until now.

I enhanced my legs and loped along the road to my house. But when I got there, I kept running, running off into the red sands of Ferro’s outback. The night came down, and as the planet turned, I ran along the

length of the Big Snake, bright and hard to the southwest, and then under the blue glow of Steiner when she rose in the moonless, trackless night. I ran for miles and miles, as fast as a jaguar, but never tiring. How could I tire when parts of me stretched off into dimensions of utter stillness, utter rest? Could Bex see me for what I was, she would not see a man, but a kind of colonial creature, a mash of life pressed into the niches and fault lines of existence like so much grit and lichen. A human is anchored with only his heart and his mind; sever those, and he floats away. Floats away. What was I? A medusa fish in an ocean of time. A tight clump of nothing, disguised as a man? Something else?

Something damned hard to kill, that was certain. And so were the glims. When I returned to my house in the star-bright night, I half expected to find Bex, but she was not there. And so I rattled about for a while, powered down for an hour at dawn and rested on a living-room chair, dreaming in one part of my mind, completely alert in another. The next day, Bex still did not come, and I began to fear something had happened to her. I walked partway into Heidel, then cut off the road and stole around the outskirts, to a mound of shattered volcanic rocks—the tailings of some early prospector's pit—not far from the town's edge. There I stepped up my vision and hearing, and made a long sweep of main street. Nothing. Far, far too quiet, even for Heidel.

I worked out the parabolic to the Bexter Hotel and, after a small adjustment, heard Bex's voice, then her father's. I was too far away to make out the words, but my quantitatives gave it a positive I.D. So Bex was all right, at least for the moment. I made my way back home, and put in a good day's work making whiskey.

The next morning—it was the quarteryear's double dawn, with both suns rising in the east nearly together—Bex came to me. I brought her inside and, in the moted sunlight of my family's living room, where I now took my rest, when I rested, Bex told me that the glims had taken her father.

“He held back some old Midnight Livet down in the cellar, and didn't deliver it when they called for room service.” Bex rubbed her left fist with her right fingers, expertly, almost mechanically, as she'd kneaded a thousand balls of bread dough. “How do they know these things? How do they know, Henry?”

“They can see around things,” I said. “Some of them can, anyway.”

“So they read our thoughts? What do we have left?”

“No, no. They can't see in there, at least I'm sure they can't see in your old man's McKinnonite nut lump of a brain. But they probably saw the whiskey down there in the cellar, all right. A door isn't a very solid thing for a war-ghost out of its own time and place.”

Bex gave her hand a final squeeze, spread it out upon her lap. She stared down at the lines of her palm, then looked up at me. “If you won't fight, then you have to tell me how to fight them,” she said. “I won't let them kill my father.”

“Maybe they won't.”

“I can't take that chance.”

Her eyes were blazing green as the suns came full through the window. Her face was bright-lit and shadowed, as if by the steady coals of a fire. You have loved this woman a long time, I thought. You have to tell her something that will be of use. But what could possibly be of use against a creature that had survived—will survive that great and final war—and so must survive now? You can't kill the future. That's how the old sergeants would explain battle fate to the recruits. If you are meant to be there, they'd say, then nothing can hurt you. And if you're not, then you'll just fade, so you might as well go out

fighting.

“You can only irritate them,” I finally said to Bex. “There’s a way to do it with the Flash. Talk to that technician, what’s his name—”

“Jurven Dvorak.”

“Tell Dvorak to strobe the local interrupt, fifty, sixty tetracycles. It’ll cut off all traffic, but it will be like a wasp nest to them, and they won’t want to get close enough to turn it off. Maybe they’ll leave. Dvorak better stay near the node after that, too.”

“All right,” Bex said. “Is that all?”

“Yes,” I said. I rubbed my temples, felt the vague pain of a headache, which quickly receded as my internals rushed more blood to my scalp. “Yes, that’s it.”

Later that day, I heard the crackle of random quantum tunnel spray, as split unsieved particles decided their spin, charm, and color without guidance from the world of gravity and cause. It was an angry buzz, like the hum of an insect caught between screen and windowpane, tremendously irritating to listen to for hours on end, if you were unlucky enough to be sensitive to the effect. I put up with it, hoping against hope that it would be enough to drive off the glims.

Bex arrived in the early evening, leading her father, who was ragged and half-crazed from two days without light or water. The glims had locked him in a cleaning closet, in the hotel, where he’d sat cramped and doubled over. After the buzz started, Bex opened the lock and dragged the old man out. It was almost as if the glims had forgotten the whole affair.

“Maybe,” I said. “We can hope.”

She wanted me to put the old man up at my house, in case the glims suddenly remembered. Old Furly Bexter didn’t like the idea. He rattled on about something in McKinnon’s *Letter to the Canadians*, but I said yes, he could stay. Bex left me with her father in the shrouds of my living room.

Sometime that night, the quantum buzz stopped. And in the early morning, I saw them—five of them—stalking along the road, kicking before them the cowering, stumbling form of Jurven Dvorak. I waited for them on the porch. Furly Bexter was asleep in my parents’ bedroom. He was exhausted from his ordeal, and I expected him to stay that way for a while.

When they came into the yard, Dvorak ran to the pump and held to the handle, as if it were a branch suspending him over a bottomless chasm. And for him it was. They’d broken his mind and given him a dream of dying. Soon to be replaced by reality, I suspected, and no pump-handle hope of salvation.

Their leader—or the one who did the talking—was human-looking. I’d have to band out to make a full I.D., and I didn’t want to give anything away for the moment. He saved me the trouble by telling me himself.

“My name’s Marek,” he said. “Come from a D-line, not far down-time from here.”

I nodded, squinting into the red brightness reflected off my hardpan yard.

“We’re just here for a good time,” Marek continued. “What you want to spoil that for?”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. One of Marek’s gang spat into the dryness of my dirt.

“Go ahead and have it,” I said.

“All right,” Marek said. He turned to Dvorak, then pulled out a weapon—not really a weapon though, for it is the tool of behind-the-lines enforcers, prison interrogators, confession extractors. It’s called an algorithmic truncheon, a trunch, in the parlance. Used at full load, a trunch will strip the myelin sheath from axons and dendrites; it will burn up a man’s nerves as if they were fuses. It is a way to kill with horrible pain. Marek walked over and touched the trunch to the leg of Dvorak, as if he were lighting a bonfire.

The Flash technician began to shiver, and then to seethe, like a teapot coming to boil. The motion traveled up his legs, into his chest, out his arms. His neck began to writhe, as if his corded muscles were so many snakes. Then Dvorak’s brain burned, as a teapot will when all the water has run out and there is nothing but flame against hot metal. And then Dvorak screamed. He screamed for a long, long time. And then he died, crumpled and spent, on the ground in front of my house.

“I don’t know you,” Marek said, standing over Dvorak’s body and looking up at me. “I know *what* you are, but I can’t get a read on *who* you are, and that worries me,” he said. He kicked at one of the Flash tech’s twisted arms. “But now you know me.”

“Get off my land,” I said. I looked at him without heat. Maybe I felt nothing inside, either. That uncertainty had been my companion for a long time, my grim companion. Marek studied me for a moment. If I kept his attention, he might not peer around me, look inside the house, to find his other fun, Furly Bexter, half-dead from Marek’s amusements. Marek turned to the others.

“We’re going,” he said to them. “We’ve done what we came for.” They turned around and left by the road on which they’d come, the only road there was. After a while, I took Dvorak’s body to a low hill and dug him a grave there. I set up a sandstone marker, and since I knew Dvorak came from Catholic people, I scratched into the stone the sign of the cross. Jesus, from the Milky Way. Another glim. Hard to kill.

It took old man Bexter only a week or so to recover fully; I should have known by knowing Bex that he was made of a tougher grit. He began to putter around the house, helping me out where he could, although I ran a tidy one-man operation, and he was more in the way than anything. Bex risked a trip out once that week. Her father again insisted he was going back into town, but Bex told him the glims were looking for him. So far, she’d managed to convince them that she had no idea where he’d gotten to.

I was running low on food and supplies, and had to go into town the following Firstday. I picked up a good backpack load at the mercantile and some chemicals for treating the peat at the druggist, then risked a quick look-in on Bex. A sign on the desk told all that they could find her at Thredmartin’s, taking her lunch, should they want her. I walked across the street, set my load down just inside Thredmartin’s door, in the cloakroom, then passed through the entrance into the afternoon dank of the pub.

I immediately sensed glims all around, and hunched myself in, both mentally and physically. I saw Bex in her usual corner and walked toward her across the room. As I stepped beside a table in the pub’s middle, a glim—it was the halandana—stuck out a long hairy leg. Almost, I tripped—and in that instant, I almost did the natural thing and cast about for some hold that was not present in the three-dimensional world—but I did not. I caught myself, came to a dead stop, then carefully walked around the glim’s outstretched leg.

“Mind if I sit down?” I said as I reached Bex’s table. She nodded toward a free chair. She was finishing a beer, and an empty glass stood beside it. Thredmartin usually had the tables clear as soon as the last drop left a mug. Bex was drinking fast. Why? Working up her courage, perhaps.

I lowered myself into the chair, and for a long time, neither of us said anything to the other. Bex finished her beer. Thredmartin appeared, looked curiously at the two empty mugs. Bex signaled for another, and I ordered my own whiskey.

“How’s the ranch,” she finally asked me. Her face was flush and her lips trembled slightly. She was angry, I decided. At me, at the situation. It was understandable. Completely understandable.

“Fine,” I said. “The ranch is fine.”

“Good.”

Again a long silence. Thredmartin returned with our drinks. Bex sighed, and for a moment, I thought she would speak, but she did not. Instead, she reached under the table and touched my hand. I opened my palm, and she put her hand into mine. I felt the tension in her, the bonework of her hand as she squeezed tightly. I felt her fear and worry. I felt her love.

And then Marek came into the pub looking for her. He stalked across the room and stood in front of our table. He looked hard at me, then at Bex, and then he swept an arm across the table and sent Bex’s beer and my whiskey flying toward the wall. The beer mug broke, but I quickly reached out and caught my tumbler of scotch in midair without spilling a drop. Of course no ordinary human could have done it.

Bex noticed Marek looking at me strangely and spoke with a loud voice that got his attention. “What do you want? You were looking for me at the hotel?”

“Your sign says you’re open,” Marek said in a reasonable, ugly voice. “I rang for room service. Repeatedly.”

“Sorry,” Bex said. “Just let me settle up and I’ll be right there.”

“Be right there *now*,” Marek said, pushing the table from in front of her. Again, I caught my drink, held it on a knee while I remained sitting. Bex started up from her chair and stood facing Marek. She looked him in the eyes. “I’ll be there directly,” she said.

Without warning, Marek reached out and grabbed her by the chin. He didn’t seem to be pressing hard, but I knew he must have her in painful grip. He pulled Bex toward him. Still, she stared him in the eyes. Slowly, I rose from my chair, setting my tumbler of whiskey down on the warm seat where I had been.

Marek glanced over at me. Our eyes met, and at that close distance, he could plainly see the enhancements under my corneas. I could see his.

“Let go of her,” I said.

He did not let go of Bex.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked. “That you tell me what to do?”

“I’m just a grunt, same as you,” I said. “Let go of her.”

The halandana had risen from its chair and was soon standing behind Marek. It—she growled mean and low. A combat schematic of how to handle the situation iconed up into the corner of my vision. The halandana was a green figure, Marek was red, Bex was a faded rose. I blinked once to enlarge it. Studied it in a fractional second. Blinked again to close it down. Marek let go of Bex.

She stumbled back, hurt and mad, rubbing her chin.

“I don’t think we’ve got a grunt here,” Marek said, perhaps to the halandana, or to himself, but looking at me. “I think we’ve got us a genuine skyfalling space marine.”

The halandana’s growl grew deeper and louder, filling ultra and subsonic frequencies.

“How many systems’d you take out, skyfaller?” Marek asked. “A couple of galaxies worth?” The halandana made to advance on me, but Marek put out his hand to stop it. “Where do you get off? This ain’t nothing but small potatoes next to what you’ve done.”

In that moment, I spread out, stretched a bit in ways that Bex could not see, but that Marek could—to some extent at least. I encompassed him, all of him, and did a thorough I.D. on both him and the halandana. I ran the data through some trans-d personnel files tucked into a swirl in n-space I’d never expected to access again. Marek Lambrois. Corporal of a back-line military police platoon assigned to the local cluster in a couple of possible worlds, deserters all in a couple of others. He was aggression-enhanced by trans-weblink anti-*alg* coding. The squad’s fighting profile was notched to the top level at all times. They were bastards who were now *preprogrammed* bastards. Marek was right about being small potatoes. He and his gang were nothing but mean-ass grunts, small-time goons for some of the nonaligned contingency troops.

“What the hell?” Marek said. He noticed my analytics, although it was too fast for him to get a good glimpse of me. But he did understand something in that moment, something it didn’t take enhancement to figure out. And in that moment, everything was changed, had I but seen. Had I but seen.

“You’re some bigwig, ain’t you, skyfaller? Somebody that *matters* to the outcome,” Marek said. “This is your actual, and you don’t want to fuck yourself up-time, so you won’t fight.” He smiled crookedly. A diagonal of teeth, straight and narrow, showed whitely.

“Don’t count on it,” I said.

“You won’t,” he said, this time with more confidence. “I don’t know what I was worrying about. I can do anything I want here.”

“Well,” I said. “Well.” And then I said nothing.

“Get on over there and round me up some grub,” Marek said to Bex. “I’ll be waiting for it in Room Forty-Five, little lady.”

“I’d rather—”

“Do it,” I said. The words were harsh and did not sound like my voice. But they were my words, and after a moment, I remembered the voice. It was mine. From far, far in the future. Bex gasped at their hardness, but took a step forward, moved to obey.

“Bex,” I said, more softly. “Just get the man some food.” I turned to Marek. “If you hurt her, I don’t care about anything. Do you understand? Nothing will matter to me.”

Marek’s smile widened into a grin. He reached over, slowly, so that I could think about it, and patted my cheek. Then he deliberately slapped me, hard. Hard enough to turn my head. Hard enough to draw a trickle of blood from my lip. It didn’t hurt very much, of course. Of course it didn’t hurt.

“Don’t you worry, skyfaller,” he said. “I know exactly where I stand now.” He turned and left, and the halandana, its drugs unfinished on the table where it had sat, trailed out after him.

Bex looked at me. I tried to meet her gaze, but did not. I did not look down, but stared off into

Thredmartin's darkness. She reached over and wiped the blood from my chin with her little finger.

"I guess I'd better go," she said.

I did not reply. She shook her head sadly, and walked in front of me. I kept my eyes fixed, far away from this place, this time, and her passing was a swirl of air, a red-brown swish of hair, and Bex was gone. Gone.

*They sucked down my heart
to a little black hole.
You cannot stab me.*

"Colonel Bone, we've done the prelims on Sector 1168, and there are fifty-six class-one civilizations along with two hundred seventy rationals in stage one or two development."

"Fifty-six. Two hundred seventy. Ah. Me."

"Colonel, sir, we can evac over half of them within thirty-six hours local."

"And have to defend them in the transcendent. Chaos neutral. Guaranteed forty-percent casualties for us."

"Yes, sir. But what about the civs at least? We can save a few."

*They wrote down my brain
on a hard knot of space.
You cannot turn me.*

"Unacceptable, soldier."

"Sir?"

"Unacceptable."

"Yes, sir."

All dead. All those millions of dead people. But it was the end of time, and they had to die, so that they—so that we all, all in time—could live. But they didn't know, those civilizations. Those people. It was the end of time, but you loved life all the same, and you died the same hard way as always. For nothing. It would be for nothing. Outside, the wind had kicked up. The sky was red with Ferro's dust, and a storm was brewing for the evening. I coated my sclera with a hard and glassy membrane, and, unblinking, I stalked home with my supplies through a fierce and growing wind.

That night, on the curtains of dust and thin rain, on the heave of the storm, Bex came to my house. Her clothes were torn and her face was bruised. She said nothing as I closed the door behind her, led her into the kitchen, and began to treat her wounds. She said nothing as her worried father sat at my kitchen table and watched, and wrung his hands, and watched because there wasn't anything he could do.

"Did that man . . .," her father said. The old man's voice broke. "Did he?"

"I tried to take the thing, the trunch, from him. He'd left it lying on the table by the door." Bex spoke in a hollow voice. "I thought that nobody was going to do anything, not even Henry, so I had to. I had to." Her facial bruises were superficial. But she held her legs stiffly together and clasped her hands to her stomach. There was vomit on her dress. "The trunch had some kind of alarm set on it," Bex said. "So he caught me."

"Bex, are you hurting?" I said to her. She looked down, then carefully spread her legs. "He caught me

and then he used the trunch on me. Not full strength. Said he didn't want to do permanent damage. Said he wanted to save me for later." Her voice sounded far away. She covered her face with her hands. "He put it in me," she said.

Then she breathed deeply, raggedly, and made herself look at me. "Well," she said. "So."

I put her into my bed, and he sat in the chair beside it, standing watch for who knew what? He could not defend his daughter, but he must try, as surely as the suns rose, now growing father apart, over the hard pack of my homeworld desert.

Everything was changed.

"Bex," I said to her, and touched her forehead. Touched her fine brown skin. "Bex, in the future, we won. I won, my command won it. Really, really big. That's why we're here. That's why we're all here."

Bex's eyes were closed. I could not tell if she'd already fallen asleep. I hoped she had.

"I have to take care of some business, and then I'll do it again," I said in a whisper. "I'll just have to go back up-time and do it again."

Between the first and second rising, I'd reached Heidel, and as Hemingway burned red through the storm's dusty leavings, I stood in the shadows of the entrance foyer of the Bexter Hotel. There I waited.

The halandana was the first up—like me, they never really slept—and it came down from its room looking, no doubt, to go out and get another rubber of its drug. Instead, it found me. I didn't waste time with the creature. With a quick twist in n-space, I pulled it down to the present, down to a local concentration of hate and lust and stupidity that I could kill with a thrust into its throat. But I let it live; I showed it myself, all of me spread out and huge, and I let it fear.

"Go and get Marek Lambrois," I told it. "Tell him Colonel Bone wants to see him. Colonel Henry Bone of the Eighth Sky and Light."

"Bone," said the halandana. "I thought—"

I reached out and grabbed the creature's long neck. This was the halandana weak point, and this halandana had a ceramic implant as protection. I clicked up the power in my forearm a level and crushed the collar as I might a teacup. The halandana's neck carapace shattered to platelets and shards, outlined in fine cracks under its skin.

"Don't think," I said. "Tell Marek Lambrois to come into the street, and I will let him live."

This was untrue, of course, but hope never dies, I'd discovered, even in the hardest of soldiers. But perhaps I'd underestimated Marek. Sometimes I still wonder.

He stumbled out, still partly asleep, onto the street. Last night had evidently been a hard and long one. His eyes were a red no detox nano could fully clean up. His skin was the color of paste.

"You have something on me," I said. "I cannot abide that."

"Colonel Bone," he began. "If I'd knowed it was you—"

"Too late for that."

"It's never too late, that's what you taught us all when you turned that offensive around out on the Husk and gave the Chaos the what-for. I'll just be going. I'll take the gang with me. It's to no purpose, our

staying now.”

“You knew enough yesterday—enough to leave.” I felt the rage, the old rage that was to be, once again. “Why did you do that to her?” I asked. “Why did you—”

And then I looked into his eyes and saw it there. The quiet desire—beaten down by synthesized emotions, but now triumphant, sadly triumphant. The desire to finally, finally die. Marek was not the unthinking brute I’d taken him for after all. Too bad for him.

I took a step toward Marek. His instincts made him reach down, go for the trunch. But it was a useless weapon on me. I don’t have myelin sheaths on my nerves. I don’t have nerves anymore; I have wiring. Marek realized this was so almost instantly. He dropped the trunch, then turned and ran. I caught him. He tried to fight, but there was never any question of him beating me. That would be absurd. I’m Colonel Bone of the Skyfalling Eighth. I kill so that there might be life. Nobody beats me. It is my fate, and yours, too.

I caught him by the shoulder, and I looped my other arm around his neck and reined him to me—not enough to snap anything. Just enough to calm him down. He was strong, but had no finesse.

Like I said, glims are hard to kill. They’re the same as snails in shells, and the trick is to draw them out—way out. Which is what I did with Marek. As I held him physically, I caught hold of him, all of him, *over there*, in the place I can’t tell you about, can’t describe. The way you do this is by holding a glim still and causing him great suffering so that they can’t withdraw into the deep places. That’s what vampire stakes and Roman crosses are all about.

And like I told Bex, glims are bad ones, all right. Bad, but not the worse. *I am the worse.*

*Icicle spike
from the eye of a star
I’ve come to kill you.*

I sharpened my nails. Then I plunged them into Marek’s stomach, through the skin, into the twist of his guts. I reached around there and caught hold of something, a piece of intestine. I pulled it out. This I tied to the porch of the Bexter Hotel.

Marek tried to untie himself and pull away. He was staring at his insides, rolled out, raw and exposed, and thinking—I don’t know what. I haven’t died. I don’t know what it’s like to die. He moaned sickly. His hands fumbled uselessly in the grease and phlegm that coated his very own self. There was no undoing the knots I’d tied, no pushing himself back in.

I picked him up, and, as he whimpered, I walked down the street with him. His guts trailed out behind us, like a pink ribbon. After I’d gotten about twenty feet, I figured this was all he had in him. I dropped him into the street.

Hemingway was in the northeast and Fitzgerald directly east. They both shone at different angles on Marek’s crumple, and cast crazy, mazy shadows down the length of the street.

“Colonel Bone,” he said. I was tired of his talking. “Colonel—”

I reached into his mouth, past his gnashing teeth, and pulled out his tongue. He reached for it as I extracted it, so I handed it to him. Blood and drool flowed from his mouth and colored the red ground even redder about him. Then, one by one, I broke his arms and legs, then I broke each of the vertebrae in his backbone, moving up his spinal column with quick pinches. It didn’t take long.

This is what I did in the world that people can see. In the twists of other times and spaces, I did similar things, horrible, irrevocable things, to the man. I killed him. I killed him in such a way that he would never come to life again, not in any possible place, not in any possible time. I wiped Marek Lambrois from existence. Thoroughly. And with *his* death, the other glims died, like lights going out, lights ceasing to exist—bulb, filament, and all. Or like the quick loss of all sensation after a brain is snuffed out.

Irrevocably gone from this time line, and that was what mattered. Keeping this possible future uncertain, balanced on the fulcrum of chaos and necessity. Keeping it free, so that I could go back and do my work.

I left Marek lying there, in the main street of Heidel. Others could do the mopping up; that wasn't my job. As I left town, on the way back to my house and my life there, I saw that I wasn't alone in the dawn-lit streets. Some had business out at this hour, and they had watched. Others had heard the commotion and come to windows and porches to see what it was. Now they knew. They knew what I was, what I was to be. I walked alone down the road, and found Bex and her father both sound asleep in my room.

I stroked her fine hair. She groaned, turned in her sleep. I pulled my covers up to her chin. Forty years old, and as beautiful as a child. Safe in my bed. Bex. Bex, I will miss you. Always, always, Bex.

I went to the living room, to the shroud-covered furniture. I sat down in what had been my father's chair. I sipped a cup of my father's best barley malt whiskey. I sat, and as the suns of Ferro rose in the hard iron sky, I faded into the distant, dying future.

Radio Praha

Smoke

In the beginning, there was only smoke. Smoke alone, smoke curling into smoke, swirling over itself, bodying forth from nowhere into nowhere. And by its own curl, its own turn and swirl over, around, through itself, there appeared the first cigarettes.

History arises from the smoke, and not the smoke from history.

I have never been able to tell a tale at a party, or have a joke come off as anything but stilted. The problem is, smoke gets in my eyes. I become fascinated by the forms it takes as it wafts about. I get confused and I digress, and there is no end to it. So if I am to tell you the story of Peter Eastaboga, you must keep this in mind. There is a beginning, and there is a middle, but what is the end?

Prague and Smoke

There is a bar in Prague, in old Vinohrady, where expatriots of a certain type are to be found. It is not reviewed in any of the guidebooks and has never been mentioned in the English-language newspaper (or, for that matter, in any of the Czech dailies). It is the sort of place you hear about from a friend of a friend. Practically everyone in Prague, in the Czech Republic, in Central Europe, smokes like there's no tomorrow. Prague itself smokes, from thousands of ancient furnaces burning cheap lignite coal, from the exhausts of automobiles. I do not smoke. I never have. Most of the time, I don't mind dying so much, but smoking kills you in a particularly gruesome way. But smoke is why I go to U Mlhy. For the smell. It is a smoky, smoky joint. I never claimed to be a consistent man.

Smoke is also my job. I am a consultant for Briar-Greerson, the American, British, and Dutch agency

that handles the advertising for Phillip Morris in Central Europe. After college, I got the hell out of the Midwest, first to Seattle, where a friend of my father's gave me my starting job in the marketing end of advertising. From there, I began a looping spiral of the United States, taking most of my twenties to reach escape velocity. To California, then St. Louis, then to New York, where I was on the team that introduced Heartland Cigarettes to the "American workingwoman." Since I come from redneck stock, I knew exactly what to do. Tractor pulls, beauty shops, bowling-alley taverns—you name it, I got our name on the walls, the ashtrays, the cocktail coasters.

After Heartland was established, Briar-Greerson offered me the job in the Czech Republic. I took them up on it, and got the hell out of the entire Heartland.

I am the Marlboro Man. I think of new ways to get the guy into the faces, and the psyches, of good Czech citizens. I am the one who sells the shops their signs, the signs that have the shop names written in very small type under the big red letters, in English, COME TO MARLBORO COUNTRY . I am the person who finds new places to put up illegal billboards. In public parks? Why not? Officials can be bribed. In a widow's meager yard lot? Why not? The rent we pay her, practically nothing to us, doubles her pension. I am the one who buys airtime between the American shows, dubbed into Czech, that fill Prague television. I place the ads on Kiss 98 FM, *nejlepší hudba* from the sixties to the nineties. It's an incredibly easy job, and it gives me plenty of time to spend in taverns and *kavarnas* . That is how I ended up finding the U Mlhy.

For practical purposes, you can divide the ex-pats in Prague into three classes. First, there is the bohemian crowd, *bohemian* with a small *b* , please. These are the hippies, artists, small-time journalists, and wannabe writers. They crowd places such as the FX Café or the Globe Coffeehouse, up in Holesovice. Then there is the international business community, who visit the deracinated neon-lit hotel bars and pubs of the Nové Mesto. These groups interact a great deal more than you might expect. The ex-pat hucksters need the feel of romantic legitimacy, since they are not making the kind of salaries they would back home. "At least I'm in Kafka's Prague," they tell themselves. The hippies need real jobs every once in a while in order to buy dope. Both groups know enough Czech to order from the menus, and that is all.

And finally, there are . . . the others. We are the bleed from the first two groups, the droplets from the hard squeeze. The malcontents, the disappointed, the marginal, the hardpan scratchers. This is where you'll find the one-man importer-exporters who run their business out of seedy apartments. Here is the cheap dope the hippies are forever searching for, and never manage to find. Here are the midlevel businesspeople who either don't care for the power lunch or for whom it would do more harm than good. Somehow or another, usually through necessity, we have managed to learn the language. The U Mlhy collects us like an old cobweb. There is no spider anymore, but you're stuck, nonetheless.

A Foggy Night

The waiter said that Peter Eastaboga lost his wife in childbirth just before the Revolution. And he killed a man, too, said the waiter; he killed a man who was once highly placed in the KGB. They say it was because of a drug deal, but it was over a woman. I know this because he told me himself, the waiter said.

I think he is a little crazy since his wife died. He comes in here and talks to his wine glass.

He does what?

He talks to his wine glass. And he smokes like few men I have ever seen. One off the tip of the other.

At the U Mlhy, you heard such stories about Peter Eastaboga. You sat down in the old furniture and listened to its joints creak as you settled. The chairs were upholstered in faded ruby reds and vermilions, tattered, with the frame of the chairs poking out like bones. The tables were mismatched with each other and with the chairs; they were coated three layers thick with battered lacquer. You took out a novel, probably a detective story, and began to read. But then someone you knew, or at least someone who was familiar to you, would come in. He'd look at you, raise an eyebrow. You'd motion with your head to the chair across the table, and he'd sit down. He would light a cigarette, pull the ashtray across the scratched tabletop. You'd set down your book, open-faced, beside you, as if you meant to take it up again in a moment. Then the other would breathe out, and begin to talk.

"Summer's coming. It's gonna be hot as hell."

"Um hmm."

"The Smichovské Nádraží metro terminal is air-conditioned, you know."

"You could go there for lunch. Bring *aparek v rolicku*. Get out of the sun."

"I have to be in Hradec Králové tomorrow. Meeting a guy about a load of snake antivenin from Azerbaijan, if you can believe it."

"They have poisonous snakes there?"

"Adders, I guess. Eastaboga would know. Haven't seen him in a while, though."

And then you would hear about Peter Eastaboga, who, during one civil war or another, ran a load of medical supplies to the Caucasus and traded them for Muslim textiles to sell to upscale rug shops in the States.

Or the time Eastaboga got the chief hit man for the Warsaw Mafia out of a jam with his boss's wife.

"He got offered exclusive right to freight-forward Czech cigarettes to Warsaw. Exclusive. But he turned it down. Said he couldn't stand the dirty drag you get from a Petra."

"'You don't have to smoke them,' the hit man told him. 'Just make money off of them.'"

"'I don't trade in things I wouldn't use myself. It's my only principle.' That's exactly what Eastaboga said. That guy, the hit man, he comes in here sometimes, and he told me this himself. Jesus Christ I'd go out of business in a day with that kind of principle."

One night, early in the evening, U Mlhy was empty except for me. The waiter, the one who told me about Eastaboga losing his wife and killing a man, was taking a break at my table and smoking Petra cigarettes. Eastaboga, whoever the hell he is, is right, I thought; Petras are the foulest blend of shag this side of Shanghai. I offered the waiter a Marlboro Light 100, and he took it, looked at it philosophically, so I gave him the whole pack.

He lit one, and pointed with his lighter. "Is it good, your book?" he asked me in Czech.

"It's about a man and a horse," I told him.

"How do you think Sparta will do on Friday?"

"I don't care about football. But don't they always win?"

"Sometimes not," he said. "Depends. I have some money on them for Friday, though. They play Bobby in

Brno. Those Moravians throw smoke bombs and plum brandy on the field and shout ‘*vítejte v peklu,*’ welcome to hell, so the bookies think Sparta will be intimidated, but I have faith in them.”

“How many crowns of faith do you have in them?” I asked.

“A thousand crowns of faith.”

“Your wife is not going to be happy if hell wins.”

“Don’t tell me about that.” The waiter puffed contemplatively on the Marlboro Light. “But I have for you that crystal you wanted. Do you think you can pay for it tonight.”

The waiter’s brother-in-law was a master carver at Chribská, a glassworks north of Prague in the Ližické Mountains, and he and the waiter did a side business with pirated goblets and bottles.

I’d agreed to buy a few items. I didn’t really need any, but they were ridiculously cheap and of good quality—at least the waiter’s samples had been. I was thinking of sending them back to the States as gifts.

“Let’s see it, then,” I said. He snubbed out his cigarette, unfinished, and went into the back behind the bar. While he was gone, a man came in, dripping wet. It had been threatening to rain all day, and obviously the downpour had begun while I was in U Mlý. The man folded his umbrella and took off his coat. For a moment, we made eye contact.

“*Dobry vecer,*” he said, then added in English, “Well, if you like rain.”

“*Dobrý den,*” I nodded. He went to a corner and found a seat.

The waiter returned with his arms full of crystal.

We quibbled about the price, I more for form’s sake than anything else. While we were dickering, the man in the corner got up and drew closer. I glanced at him, and his eyes were on the glass. It seemed almost as if he were being drawn to it. The waiter glanced at him uncomfortably, but when the man remained silent, the waiter returned to dealing with me. When we’d settled on a price, the other man was sitting at the next table. I bought a set of goblets, but turned down a garishly engraved decanter that the waiter insisted should go with the glasses.

“I am parting a family.” The waiter shook his head ruefully as he took my money. “This is a sin against heaven.”

“See you in hell, then,” I told him.

“Bring Marlboro Lights,” he said, and took the remaining glass away.

After he’d gone, the man at the next table nodded to one of my goblets. “May I?”

“Sure.”

He picked it up and turned it under the single light bulb that dangled on a black electric cord from the roof of the pub.

“*Sklárny Chribská,*” he said. “These are seconds, you know, though you can barely see the imperfections. They’d ordinarily go back to the furnace.”

I shrugged. “My relatives expect the cheap stuff from me.”

“Oh this is good stuff,” the man said. “Just not the best. He’s even got the 1414 seals put on them.”

“What do they mean?”

“The year the glassworks was founded.” He carefully set the glass back with its mates. “That decanter you turned down was pretty ugly. You have a good eye.”

“Thanks. Would you like to join me? We’ll have some wine in these and break them in,” I said. It wasn’t a pun in the Czech.

“Sure.”

When he told me his name was Peter Eastaboga, I must have looked surprised because he laughed and shook his head. “That fucker’s been telling tales again,” he said in English, and nodded toward the waiter.

“Not just him,” I said.

“No,” he said. “I suppose not.”

We shared a bottle of wine and then another. My Czech began deteriorating, and Eastaboga switched over to English for my benefit. I asked him if it were true that he was former CIA, and he said yes, that was so, but he’d given that up in 1989, after Havel’s Velvet Revolution. “What the hell else was I going to do? Run a bureau in some cocaine swamp?”

“It wouldn’t be Praha.”

“Yes, beautiful old broken Praha,” he said and smiled, almost to himself. He swirled the lees of his glass and drained it, then took a long drag on one of my Marlboros. Smoke coursed through the bare bulb light and into the room’s dark corners. “And there was a woman.”

The Woman at the End of History

Her name was Marta Plášilová. I didn’t find this out the first night I spent with Peter Eastaboga, but there were many others—a summer and autumn’s worth. I don’t know why he took to me—maybe it was because I let him talk without judging him, or really saying very much at all. This was no virtue on my part. He chain-smoked Marlboro reds and every breath was words made visible, every story was a cloud of smoke. It took the shape of the U Mlhy; it hung in our clothes, got in the wrinkles of my skin. It was the smoke that fascinated me.

In the scheme of things before 1989, Marta didn’t amount to much. She was from Hradec Králové, a city northeast of Prague. Her father was a lawyer, and her mother worked in a museum, but neither was a party member—and so not *nomenklatura*—and it seemed a miracle when Marta was admitted to Charles University in Prague to study German and Russian.

But, of course, there was no such thing as a miracle in the socialist workers’ paradise of Czechoslovakia, and soon she found that the state had plans for her that didn’t include literature and that she had better do what they wanted. Marta went to work for the state security forces soon after she graduated, and during the 1980s, she and Eastaboga were in the same game, only on different sides.

“She was a little thing,” Peter told me. “Dark and all gathered in on herself like a lump of coal. But there was something *intense* . . . like a flame smoldering around her. Like all that darkness gathered so tight it started to burn.”

She wasn’t a diplomatic cocktail-circuit spy, but neither was Peter.

“She started as a low-level courier, using her German and Russian. She blended into cities. But pretty soon even her blockhead bosses got wise to how . . . *deviously* she thought. How she never got *noticed* , much less suspected or caught. She was running counteroperations against us when I first had anything to do with her. She’d found out this Škoda electrical engineer that old Barney Hines had recruited back in 1979. He was a good source. Highly placed for technical data. Marta turned that guy like winter turns a leaf, and he was feeding us bullshit for three years before we finally figured it out. I met the guy again not long ago. Took him a while to work his way back from Siberia, but she kept him from being disappeared forever when he stopped being useful.”

Marta and Peter played cat-and-mouse for several more years. During that time, someone finally got a picture of her, and he caught a glimpse of her once as she was making a drop at the Náměstí Míru metro station.

“I thought of her as this spider that was always lurking behind everything that frustrated me,” said Peter. “Sometimes it seemed like this whole place—Přaha—was her web. *Washer* . You can bet I fantasized about Marta Plášilová. But there wasn’t really anything evil about her. She was just talented at what she did. Incredibly patient. Underneath everything else, she was still this lawyer’s daughter from Hradec Králové. She actually believed in justice.”

While she was working the counteragent at Škoda, she found out the real project that was going on there—the project about which the CIA had heard strange rumors that had lead them to try to penetrate the Škoda Electronics Cooperative in the first place.

“It was the early eighties, and they were still working with *vacuum tubes* . Maybe if the integrated circuit hadn’t come along in the West, we would have found the same thing out. But maybe not. In the blackbox division, they were using master glassblowers—mostly indentured dissidents, you know: ‘Work for us and we won’t turn your family out of the panelak’—to run the manufacturing. Those guys were producing tubes the likes of which the world’s never seen, let me tell you. We got hold of a few and they were beautiful, even to an untrained eye. I remember showing one to this engineer friend of mine who teaches at CalTech and him just shaking his head in wonder.

“Exquisite. Perfect. But what’s the point?” That’s what he said.

“And that’s what we were wondering.

“And then one night I was sitting in here, in the U Mlhy—over there at that corner table. All of a sudden, my light was blocked. I looked up, and there was Marta Plášilová. Marta Plášilová where there’d been empty air. She sat down right across from me and told me the answer to the vacuum tube puzzle.”

He took a cigarette drag, coughed. “They say I’m the one who turned Marta Plášilová. But that’s bullshit. Marta turned herself.”

Spies & Lovers

“She was the deepest we ever penetrated the Czechs, as far as I know. Even then, I had my suspicions about the people back in D.C. We’d had too many good agents suddenly gone east for their health. You understand that the human intelligence guy is the *operative* , and his foreign contact is the *agent* , right? Anyway, nobody but me knew exactly who she was. I felt like I was running two operations, one against the Czechs, and one to keep Washington confused.”

Electrostatics, crystal interaction with the atomic weak force, fractals and chaos—the Czech scientists had a lot of theories, but they really had no idea exactly how what they’d stumbled on worked.

“Marta had a satchel with her that night at the U Mlhy,” Peter told me. “And she took a radio out of it. At least it was this box that looked like an old-fashioned radio from the fifties maybe. The word the Czechs used for it was the same as ours. Then she turned it on.”

It was as if the world dissociated around them. The air, the space around the radio itself, *bent*, like a television screen that’s lost its vertical hold. Peter tried to stand up, but there was *noup* to stand into. Every movement put him back in his seat.

“What the fuck are you doing, Miss Plášilová?” he said.

And then, as Marta adjusted the dial on the radio, shapes began to coalesce about them. And voices. One voice that he recognized. His own. But his own doubled, trebled. Repeating a sentence that had a cadence, but no sense to it. Because in each of the doublings of the sentence, a slight variation was made.

What the fuck what the hell what is it what are you doing what Marta are you Marta Plášilová?

He dropped the cigarette he was smoking and it tumbled endlessly toward the floor, curving, trailing smoke—smoke and reimposed smoke until it hung like a gray knot in the air, with a tiny red center, throwing sparks.

Marta twisted the tuning knob on the radio very slightly, and the world came into focus; the cigarette fell.

“Look around,” Marta told him.

The U Mlhy was still. Smoke hung in the air. Smoke hung in the air and *did not move*. The waiter was frozen in the middle of wiping the bar. An overturned glass of beer was caught in the midst of sloshing. There was a buzzing monotone note that was a single moment of conversation and noise, a single note of dissonance.

“It’s just you and I,” Marta said. “For as long as we want to be together.”

The CalTech engineer that Peter trusted told him that as near as he could figure, the device created an interference pattern across possible worlds generated within a specific chunk of space-time. It caused those worlds to fill in on top of one another instead of radiating off to wherever such things go.

“You could tune into the immediate future, and make it cancel out itself,” said Peter. “The radio made a little bubble around itself, and *inside* that bubble, you were *outside* of the time and space the rest of us have to live in. Until the batteries wore down.”

“And were the batteries in or out of our common time?” I asked him.

He smiled, shook his head. “That was what the Czechs couldn’t figure out. It was like the batteries *flickered*. So the radio eventually ran down. Marta found all that out. Marta found out everything, and told me.”

She did it for all the women from Hradec Králové who weren’t *nomenklatura*. All the useful and talented people without connection or power who always seemed to be the ones doing the sacrificing for the progress of the state.

“Think of how they will use this if they solve the battery problem,” she said. “They’ll have a thousand years in the blink of an eye. Generations of people working for men like . . . for men like the ones I work for.”

“Her eyes were dark and burning when she told me this,” Peter said. “We were in this sad little safe

apartment over in Nové Butovice that we used to meet in. It was up on the tenth floor of a crumbling-down panelak. The only thing you could see out the window was more panelaks.

“That was the day when she first kissed me. She just *jumped* me. She’d been so distraught and worried about what would happen to her parents if she got caught, and I was trying to be something like a brother to her. I never even saw the passion, and then it was completely *there*. It was everything that she was. That we were. That’s the way she was. She wouldn’t chance doing anything unless it mattered completely.”

“I have to fight them,” Marta had said to Peter as they became lovers. “I have to do this because I know what it is like to have a life that you live and to have another life that you want with all your heart.”

1988

Nothing ever got fixed in Prague, and what got done was done badly back then. Chunks of old building cornices fell on pedestrians and timber scaffolding was erected to shield the sidewalks. The trams creaked and flashed through the streets as they’d done since before the Second World War, wearing the steel rails down a bit more with each passage. There was no such thing as progress. Panelak skyscraper cities of cheap concrete were caving in and falling apart fifteen years after being built.

Times were difficult and the stores were empty. Peter and Marta loved one another amid the decay.

“Once a week or so, she would use her clearance to get into the room where they kept the radio. She’d just turn it on and walk out with it, right under the guards’ noses. She had all the keys. And she’d meet me, usually in Nové Butovice. We’d both get into the radio’s field.”

The radio didn’t actually form a bubble. The shape was more like a three-dimensional waveform—it stretched out farther in some directions than others, depending on how the vacuum tubes were configured at the time. When the radio was “tuned out,” occurrences would pile up on top of each other, like they did when Marta first showed Peter the radio. It was like a black hole’s event horizon—only it would be crossed as soon as the radio operator turned the knob to get “in tune.” The act of tuning seemed to carry through, to get completed in all possible worlds. So far, nobody had tried to take his hand off the knob in midturn.

The Czechs were working on making bigger radios that were not portable but that could create a field larger than a room. They’d only managed to make one other. It was enormous—it took up two stories at the Škoda plant—but it only gave them about double the containment space. There were theories that two radios used in unison might exponentially strengthen the signal—maybe even create a wavy pattern as big as a city. But nobody had any idea what would really happen when two radios were nested together.

“Marta became very different when we made love in the radio’s field,” Peter said. “So did I. I hadn’t let myself have too many feelings for a long time. I don’t know if I ever had very many to begin with. But now we were two spies who were in a place that was totally secure, completely safe for that moment—and that moment could last for hours.

“I’ll never forget that little pallet bed in the Nové Butovice panelak. It wasn’t much more than a piece of foam rubber with some sheets on it. That white pallet with her pale skin against it and her dark hair—she wore her hair cropped short, like a boy’s. Every time she was with me it could be the last, and we came to each other desperately. I’ve never felt like anything mattered so much to me because it mattered so much to her.

“We did our spook business too, of course. She’d tell me what she’d learned. And then I’d give her the duplicate recharged batteries, and she would go. She’d be back five seconds after she left. That was how long it took for me to come inside radio time with her and then to leave her there after we were done.”

The Department of Defense went to work on three tubes that Marta got out for them, and pretty soon Peter knew they were the real McCoy, that Marta wasn’t running some convoluted operation on him. But the DOD techies couldn’t go any further. There was something that Czech glassmakers were doing, something that the defense engineers couldn’t duplicate. They couldn’t make a working radio.

Things began to fall apart. The East was going down, and somebody in the KGB wanted very much for the battery problem to be solved. If it could be, the inevitable might be forestalled, the system saved. And then it finally dawned on that somebody that he had all the time in the world. All he had to do was put his engineers into the second, big radio’s field. They could work on smaller devices until the big one’s batteries wore down. Then they could quickly put in a fresh set and drop back out of time to work some more. The work could progress at a miraculous pace! Why not?

There was the worry about the “nesting problem” of having a separate radio within a radio field. There was the one theory of exponential strengthening. And there was the theory that the two radios would cancel one another out—and cancel out all the futures within the scope of either. And there was the fact that nobody had any goddamn idea what would actually happen when they tried the experiment.

But these were not exactly the children of high officials who would be at risk, after all. And besides, they were only Czechs and not Russians.

All that would be necessary was good security: a rotating shift of guards, and a political officer who was familiar with the project to oversee them. This political officer would be the one to turn the knob, to tune them in. It should be someone proven, but expendable. Marta Plášilová drew the assignment.

“I remember the day she told me about this,” Peter said. “We were lying naked on the pallet. I offered her the chance to get out of there, to come to the West.

“‘And what would I do there in America?’ she asked me. ‘Surf in California?’

“‘Why not?’ I said. ‘There are places in the world that are not so gloomy.’

“She just shook her head. ‘But I am gloomy,’ she said. She pouted and I kissed her bunched-up lips and cradled her in my arms. ‘I don’t want to take my gloom to a strange, bright place. I want Praha to become a bright place and I will lose my gloom with her.’

“‘It is bright now,’ I said to her. ‘Here in this part of Praha.’

“‘Yes, here with you, my love. This is enough happiness for me.’

“‘A moment? Less than a moment?’

“‘It will have to do.’

“But I drew her to me and I held her and we made love again. Not yet, I thought. The gloom can wait awhile. Not yet.”

Peter and I had been drinking red wine when he told me of this. He dipped his fingertips in the wine and rubbed one finger lightly about the rim of his glass. The glass was crystal, and it sang a single pure note.

“Did I tell you? She smelled like rain. Whenever we were together like that, she always smelled like rain.”

Marta did not defect. There was never really any chance that she would. She went ahead with the radio experiment.

“We planned it all out very carefully. She had me believing that we could pull off the ultimate spook trick and subvert the entire project. Some of the engineers and glassmakers were already Marta’s agents—they’d given us good intelligence—and some of them had strong potential for becoming agents. Nearly all of them had a grudge against the state that Marta had ferreted out. Given time, Marta told me, she could get some hold on all of them. She could have, probably.

“I thought that she would age a year or so, and then she would be in control inside the radio, and I would get to see her again. See her in practically no time. She had me believing. She was a hell of an operative. But I think she knew from the start that this was a typical project of the Czechoslovakian government.”

On the night when they turned on a radio inside another radio’s field, Peter was at the U Mlhy. It was a different pub back then—no foreigners except for the occasional spy. He sat in his usual corner.

“I looked at my watch. I wore one back then. I counted the time. And then, everything *lurched*. The world *folded* and unfolded, like a giant had stepped on reality and crushed it down for a second, and then everything had sprung back up out of the distortion when the giant took its foot off.

“I remember this drunk next to me staring at his glass of liquor and saying, ‘Bad belorovka. Very bad belorovka.’ But it wasn’t the belorovka. I knew what it was. Something fucked up. Something went really, really wrong.”

Nothing ever got fixed in Prague, and what got done was done badly back then. There was no such thing as progress.

The Future

Everyone who knew how to make the tubes vanished in the experiment. Peter dug as deeply as he could into the matter without completely exposing himself. Nobody had ever been able to duplicate the tubes, in the East or West.

He still has contacts that will tell him of any developments. There have been none.

Then 1989 came and the rot finally got into the Eastern Bloc’s skeleton and all the eternal monuments to the inevitable dialectic crumbled and collapsed like so many panelaks that had reached the age of fifteen. A playwright dissident became president, and nobody got shot, at least in Prague.

Peter quit the CIA. He moved into a place in Dejvice, into Václav Havel’s old neighborhood. He started an export business, using some of the glassworks connections he’d made following up on how the vacuum tubes might have been produced. Eventually, he’d come to specialize in Bohemian crystal. And then he moved into more exotic goods that paid extremely well and were questionably legal. He didn’t seem to care.

This was when the legend began to grow. Peter Eastaboga could get anything for you, and nobody could intimidate him. He didn’t take foolish chances, but there was something about him . . . you knew he had a craziness that you didn’t want to fuck with.

They say he tracked down an ex-KGB colonel and shot him dead in a dacha outside of Moscow. Some said it was over a drug deal, but others who were closer to Peter Eastaboga said it truly was because

that man had had a hand in killing a woman Eastaboga loved.

He traveled many places, but he returned to Prague. There were certain seasons, certain months of the year, when he was always to be found in the city.

One night I stayed late at the U Mlhy, paying back the waiter for a football bet I'd made with him—American football, which, not surprisingly, the waiter knew better than I did. We were behind the bar, in the storeroom, and Peter perhaps thought I'd gone home already. I emerged from the back room to find him staring into a gorgeously formed goblet. In its center was one brilliant cut-glass chandelier crystal. He breathed smoke across the lip of the glass and a bit of it curled over and flowed down and around the crystal.

He didn't notice as I came up beside him, and watched the prism hues play across his face. He was speaking in a low, clear voice.

"Yes," he said. "How's the reception? Can you hear me tonight—"

And I looked into the glass myself, and I saw Marta Plášilová.

I saw her as if she were a projection from the crystal into the smoke. Curved in body, as if she were an image on a little television set with vertical hold problems. Her tiny form was broken into facets, her flint eyes shining as she smiled and nodded. He was right. She seemed very dark and, at the same time, on fire.

He took another drag off his cigarette, and that was when he noticed me. Without a word, he motioned me to sit down beside him. He continued to speak to her for a few moments. He told her about the rain and all the umbrellas without people to hold them that had been blowing down the streets when he'd gone to the Kotva Department Store at Náměstí Republiky in the afternoon.

"I thought of the pensioner ladies walking home without their umbrellas, all grumbling about how we need a good strong state again to keep the rain away."

Marta smiled, but she was fading, distorting in the smoke and light. She must have realized what was happening because she held out her hand. It almost seemed as if she touched the side of the glass. Peter reached down and touched his finger to the other side.

And then she was gone.

"You saw her?" he said.

I nodded.

"It only works with certain very old crystal," he told me. "I can't hear her. It's like a window . . . into wherever she is. She can hear me, though. I'm sure of it. I've told her how things have changed. How Praha is getting brighter."

"How did you ever figure out how to . . . contact her?" I asked him.

"Reflections," he said. "Old spies notice reflections. It was how we tailed people, how we saw to make exchanges. You never lose the skill. It wasn't long after the experiment when I first saw her. I would pass a window, and catch a glimpse of her. Distorted, spread out, and always moving away, flowing away like water on the glass. Always on gloomy days, with fog. But I knew it was her. I'd know Marta Plášilová anywhere. So I came up with the idea of using the best-made glass, the best in the world. And smoke to catch the image."

He smiled sadly, with a kind of pride. "It worked. *You* saw. Sometimes it works."

We walked out into the chill of early morning, and I pulled my long coat tight around me. It was October.

"I only get good reception on certain days in certain months. I think that she's *stuned out* most of the time. I think she's on the event horizon, where everything's happening on top of itself. That radio field is wound into Prague. Woven into the city. It's only here that I've ever seen her. But who knows? Whatever happened when they turned both radios on, it's still going on. Like the field has flowed up into time in the same way that it shapes itself in space. But I can predict it now. I know those days when she can appear. I know them by heart."

"Do you think . . . she can get back? Into our time?"

"I think that they accidentally solved the battery problem," Peter said. "I don't think she's ever coming back."

For some reason, I didn't take the tram back to where I lived in Liben at Náměstí Míru, but instead walked with him through the maze of tunnels under the National Museum and up to the top of Wincelas Square. We stood under the tail end of the statue of the old king's horse and Peter lit a smoke. It was the last he had, and he crumpled the empty pack and put it back into his coat pocket.

"There is also the distinct possibility that I'm completely crazy," Peter said. He was speaking in Czech now. "But you saw her?"

"I saw her."

"Do you suppose that you and I are *both* crazy?"

"I don't know. It's surely possible," I said.

The sky began to lighten behind us, and the castle glinted darkly on the western hill across the Vltava River.

"I was good at my job, but I didn't care about it." Peter turned to gaze at the Castle; he did not look at me. "I loved her so much," he said. "Do you think that a man can do one thing that matters, and that thing will be enough?"

"Enough to start a legend?"

"I don't care about that."

"No. You loved her. You love her still."

"I don't know why she loved me."

"I think you had a very strong belief stored up and waiting. Maybe she knew she would need that belief someday."

"I thought I was insane, but I can't stop looking into the crystal. There isn't any reason to go back to sanity even if *I am* crazy."

He finished his cigarette, dropped the stub to the concrete, and crushed it with the toe of his shoe.

"You know, my friend from CalTech came over here. I showed him the crystal trick, and he couldn't see a thing."

“No?”

“I wonder how it is that you do? Who are you?”

I took a pack of Marlboro reds from my own pocket and handed them to Peter Eastaboga.

“I’m just a guy who’s good at watching smoke,” I told him in English. “It’s practically my only skill.”

He nodded and opened the new pack of cigarettes. He took one from the pack, lit it, and held it in his mouth. We shook hands. Then he took the cigarette into his hand and breathed out gray smoke into the gray dawn.

“Well, good morning.”

“Good morning, Peter.”

He turned from me and walked down the hill, past the McDonald’s and toward the Old City, the Staré Mesto. I knew he would keep smoking and walking and cross the Vltava and climb up through the Malá Strana and make his way on foot to his apartment in Dejvice where she would never be waiting for him. And would always be waiting for him. On the other side of his fine old crystal.

I know these things. I am the Marlboro Man.

Aconcagua

I approached the Antarctic peninsula on a southeastern tangent, working in and out of storms. After several weeks, whipping snow replaced rain squalls. I ran them undercanvassed, awed by the fierce, incessant blast of wind, like a steady breath from a giant skull. All I had out were storm trysail and storm jib, but Approach crashed along far above her official hull speed. If I were racing against anyone but myself, I would have won.

—Jeremiah Fall,
Still Life at the Bottom of the World

The drive up the Andean highway was pleasantly frigid, and Jeremiah Fall’s new filling was smooth under his tongue. It felt good to get away from the chilly desert clime of Mendoza to the truly cold high places. Gil Parra, a local *andinista*, drove, and Jeremiah sat in the passenger’s seat, listening to him sing horrible Argentine folk ballads.

They were in Parra’s Citroën, a car that always looked to Jeremiah like a Volkswagen that had been crunched longways between two semis. The little automobile could go practically anywhere, Parra claimed, and proved it by taking it many miles down the snow-covered mule trail that left the main road near Puente del Inca. The drive completely terrified Jeremiah. Argentines did not share the same consensus reality with Americans when it came to driving, he had long ago decided. In the Argentine driving universe, stop signs meant “speed up and beat the other guy through the intersection,” and hazardous road conditions were obstructions brought about by tidal wave or earthquake—everything else was *no problema, eh? Sí. ¡Ay caramba! Sí.*

The only other human being they saw on the way was a shivering private standing outside of the army checkpoint. The Argentine military permeated the country like a bad case of rash on a dog. Police and military roadblocks and checkpoints were a daily way of life. Jeremiah found it both annoying and sinister. They always asked you your destination and your business. What possible reason could they want to know such a thing, and how could they check to see if you were telling the truth, anyway? What it came down to was that they were trying to intimidate the citizens, let the people know who was really

in charge and who could pull the rug out from under the democracy at any time they wished. Jeremiah made it a habit to answer all questions asked by police or military with a lie.

Today, however, the private was obviously a poor kid far from home. He couldn't have been much over eighteen, and as he leaned into the Citroën and asked them where they were going, he was shaking so badly that Jeremiah was terrified that he'd accidentally pull the trigger on the machine gun he had strapped over his shoulder and discharge a few rounds into two innocent mountain climbers. Parra handled the situation quickly and well, however. He slipped the poor kid a little money in the bargain, and promised to carry a letter to the boy's parents on their way back out. As they drove away, Jeremiah noticed that the private was not wearing any socks.

"They make them provide their own," Parra answered when he commented on the fact. "It's part of their conscription duties. If they don't have any, they don't have any," he said, and shrugged. The shrug was the universal method used in Argentina to comment on the government's inanities. That, and the ubiquitous graffiti.

After another five miles or so—Jeremiah had tried to break the habit of always thinking in miles instead of kilometers, feet instead of meters, but never could—the trail became truly impassable. Snow had avalanched down the steep banks of the valley they were driving along and sealed off the way. Parra found a relatively level and sheltered place to park, and they got their equipment out and strapped on their snowshoes. It would be a long, long approach hike in to the mountain. Most of the people who attempted Aconcagua in the summer hired a team of mules and a guide to take their stuff on the two-day trip to the base camp at Plaza de Mulas. No guides worked in winter, and besides, a mule could gain no footing in the snow it would have to walk through. Parra had climbed the mountain over ten times, however—though never before in winter—and knew the way well.

They walked diagonally up the side of the valley for a ways, hoping to reach a plateau that Parra knew to be a few hundred feet up, and so to avoid the danger of an avalanche that continuing down the bottom of the valley would bring. Jeremiah couldn't see the Vacas River, which ran below, under a thick layer of snow and ice, but he could make out its meander by the shape of the valley floor. He imagined it twisting and turning in dark and secret tunnels down through the valley. Had anyone ever tried to run a snow-caved river with a kayak? But this one would be impossible; it was little more than a creek. He'd save that idea for later when he got old and would have to let the elements do most of the work.

After a half hour of climbing, they reached the plateau, and after that, the walking became much easier. The plateau was flat for a couple of hundred feet from its edge to where it met the rising valley walls. It was very much like a step cut into the side of the valley by some giant race of gods. Maybe the same ones who'd created the Incas? Jeremiah thanked whatever process it was that had led to the easier going. Still, his pack weighed nearly a hundred pounds, and he was feeling the first effects of the altitude. This always happened to him: a day of intense mountain sickness, after which the thin air would not bother him at all. At least he'd kept in decent shape, running every day while he'd lived in Mendoza. Many times his route would take him up to see old San Martín, and the grotesque obelisk that marked his crossing of the Andes.

In winter, Mendoza clung to the *cerros* like lint, like a fungal infection. Low ceilings, low spirits, low everything. For months, Jeremiah had longed for high places, but all he'd had was a room on the third floor of an old hotel that had been converted into efficiency apartments. These were rented out to rich tourists from Buenos Aires in the summer. In the winter, he paid a modest rate. Third-floor rooms were the cheapest because they would be the first to collapse when the next big quake hit.

Earthquakes were a way of life in this city. If you didn't like some piece of architecture, stick around for a few years and it would get shaken down to its foundations. There was still rubble poking through the

irrigated shrubbery from the one that had hit a few years ago. Many killed, forty thousand people homeless.

Yet Mendoza was not a city that made one think of death. Mendoza was, instead, fine wine (okay, *wine*, anyway, at least) and *thindoñas* in high heels. You could get good and bloody *chorizos* here, with mustard that would reanimate a week-old corpse and sauerkraut that could serve as an astringent in a medical emergency.

He also had the highest view in town, such as it was, because due to the earthquakes, no building was over three stories in Mendoza. Only old General San Martín on the top of Cerro de la Gloria had a better view. Jeremiah had spent hours in his apartment, gazing down the Calle 25 de Mayo over the bare sycamores that lined the street to the Andes beyond. Or making love to Ánalia, his *andinista* dentist with the perfect white teeth.

Two days ago, he'd had no idea he would be here, with Parra, on the way up Aconcagua. Sure, he'd intended to climb Aconcagua sometime. But life in Mendoza had been . . . not easy . . . settled. After the special hell of Vinson, Mendoza was, if not heaven, then at least Limbo. Limbo just before the Judgment Day. Before the earthquake.

Up here, there were no trees at all. This side of the Andes was a high desert. That made the approach easier on the feet, but harder on the soul for Jeremiah. He did love trees. He loved to be above them, looking down at the texture they gave to the mountains. The sky was clear, but the wind was shifting and unsteady. More than once, Parra stopped short and looked around, sensing something in the air that he did not like. When Jeremiah asked him what it was, he could not say. "Maybe a storm. I don't know. Nothing." And they walked on. And on.

It was late winter, but the days were still very short. They were on the wrong side of the range for lingering sunsets. When the sun dipped below the western peaks, the air became leaden with cold. Nevertheless, Jeremiah and Parra decided to push to the base camp, and donned headlamps so that they could see as they walked. Jeremiah liked to hike at night in the winter, for the colder temperatures froze the snow fast and made avalanches less likely. But they couldn't depend on that. And they couldn't be certain that a massive avalanche wouldn't sweep them off the plateau and into the valley below, to lie buried under snow until spring, then to become fertilizer for wreaths of wildflowers.

I might not mind ending like that, Jeremiah thought, and despite its morbidness, the idea comforted him. He felt chilly, but strong. The cold, however, was getting to Parra. Once or twice he stumbled, but insisted that they press onward. The moon came up, nearly full, and the snow shone bony blue, as if it were capillaried with blue-tinted oxygenated blood. All along, they were steadily climbing. Jeremiah's head began to pound and his bowels felt loose and weak. He knew the symptoms, and knew that there was little to be done except drink lots of water and endure. After about two hours of snow-shoeing in the darkness, they came to the Plaza de Mulas, the base camp. They had reached 13,700 feet.

Parra flung his pack to the ground and sat with his head on his knees. Jeremiah patted him on the shoulder and began to set up camp. He got out the tent; it was Parra's, but Jeremiah had used many like it. He took the shock-corded poles and flung them out onto the snow. He always enjoyed how this seemingly random, energetic action was the exact technique for getting the separate pole sections to slide into the broadened fitting of the section next to it. The shock cord kept the sections together and lined them up. Then Jeremiah shook the poles and all the pole sections clicked into place, forming long pliant ribs for the tent. Next, Jeremiah leveled out a spot of snow and laid a sheet of plastic over it. The plastic would be under the tent and would provide further protection and waterproofing for their floor. He threaded the pole ribs through sleeves in the tent and notched them into holes on the tent's four sides. When he was done, the tent stood domed and taut. He picked it up and placed it on the plastic ground

sheet. Next, he jammed their ice axes and ice tools into the snow, and anchored the four corners of the waterproof fly, which covered the tent, to the axes. He stood back and looked over his handiwork with pleasure. He loved tents, loved their smallness and coziness. A tent was all that was *necessary* for human shelter. All else, he often felt, was ostentation.

Jeremiah's apartment in Mendoza had been about the size of a tent, and a medium-sized one at that. Maybe that was part of the reason he'd felt so comfortable there, so reluctant to leave, to get on with things. That, and Ánalia. Just before he'd seen her for the last time, he'd torn himself from the small window—from gazing out in Aconcagua's general direction—and spent a half hour trying to get the apartment into some kind of presentable shape.

Papers cascaded from the brick-and-board desk like a calving glacier. He hesitated to touch them. The avalanche danger was great, and he could fall into one of those crevasses between the pages and never hit bottom.

Still, he thought that he should make it seem to Ánalia that he had been writing today. You should finish your book, she'd told him. If you finish your book on your Antarctic trip, I will trust you to pay me for that silver filling. That was how he'd met her. A cavity. At thirty-five years old. In Argentina. After he'd spent his last precious unconverted dollars on new, necessary climbing rope.

When he'd gotten the paper somewhat under control, he'd sat staring at his typewriter—*her* typewriter—thinking about Antarctica. Trying to think about the bottom of the world. But nothing came. Yet surely he could get together five hundred words to show Ánalia. She couldn't read English, anyway. If it were bad, he could tell her it had lost something in the translation. He had to write soon, in any case, because he needed to buy supplies. He'd spent the last of his advance money getting back from the Antarctic and getting settled in Mendoza. The climbing equipment wouldn't be a problem; he'd made sufficient friends within the local *andinistas*, the climbing community, to beg or borrow what he would need. He already had his ax, his boots, and his crampons. He had his down sleeping bag, still salt-caked, his pack, his parka, a stove, long underwear, and wind pants. He would need to buy food, though, and fuel bottles. The *andinistas* had some sort of weird reluctance to loan out fuel bottles. He never should have given his own bottles to the guys at Palmer. I am entirely too generous, Jeremiah thought. Charlie Worth, his old climbing partner, had told him that many times, but he'd never taken it to heart. Jeremiah resolved to become more acquisitive.

He'd like to start by acquiring Ánalia for the entire afternoon. He knew she'd only committed to staying with him during siesta, but Jeremiah surveyed his current needs and found that three hours would not be enough. Yet there was little that he had left to barter with. His promises were meaning less and less to Ánalia, of that he was sure. It was funny how women trusted him so completely when they first met him, then gradually lost faith. The opposite should be the case. Why did it always come down to either keeping his promises to himself or keeping them to other people? Were love and a meaningful life mutually exclusive in the long run? For a moment, he saw the face of Mandy Asterwood in his mind's eye. His other climbing partner. The dead one. Her happy windburned face smiled at him. Just before she fell three thousand feet. Stop it.

Traveling *and* women. Traveling *or* women. Which was the correct logical operator?

There was nothing to write today, and he wanted Ánalia desperately. Women. On a gloomy day like today, he would choose a woman over anything. He stared at the blank paper in his typewriter until Ánalia knocked at his door.

He opened it, and once again was struck by how stunning she was. Ánalia was dark for an Argentinian. This country was populated with European stock, and it constantly surprised Jeremiah to hear Spanish

coming out of the mouths of the fair and blonde. But Ánalia's parents had been Uruguayan immigrants, and there was Indian in her blood. She was honey-tan, after the fashion of Polynesian women, with jet-black hair and obsidian eyes. Today she was all in white, down to her white shoes. Most Argentines dressed like sleazy Assembly of God clergy, as far as he had seen. But Ánalia was far from being a country preacher's wife.

She was smart and quick, as a woman had to be in this country of male-dominated profession. Yet she was kind. She was used to making tiny moves that hurt her patients as little as possible, and that attitude carried over into her relationship with Jeremiah. He appreciated her gentleness, even when she was probing.

Ánalia giggled as he pulled her toward him. "Do I smell like teeth?" she asked because he'd once made an offhanded comment about that certain smell that dental offices had. Today she had on a trace of subtle perfume.

"Jaguar teeth," he said and kissed her neck. "Grizzly bear teeth, shark teeth." A kiss for each. "Giraffe teeth."

"Giraffe teeth?" She drew back playfully. "I brought you something, Jeremiah." She always pronounced the *J as Dj*. He liked that. Djeremaya was the name of a much mellower man than Jeremiah, certainly not a man who could pronounce doom on Israel.

"What is it?" he said. He hoped it was nothing expensive, for which he would feel a debt to her.

She reached into her purse—an off-white purse to accent her outfit, he supposed—and pulled out a small package. She handed it to him, and he started to rip off the wrapping paper.

"Careful," Ánalia said. He unwrapped it more slowly.

It was exquisite. A wooden frame surrounded a mountain scene that was formed and colored by the iridescent wings of butterflies. It fitted neatly into the palm of his hand. As he turned it into the light, the overlapping scaly hills flashed and shimmered, as if the mountains were aglow with spring wildflowers.

"That big purple one in the back is Aconcagua," Ánalia said. "How do you like it?"

"I like it very much," he said. "It's amazing. How do they do this?"

"I don't know. They are very inexpensive, though. I have several myself."

He set the butterfly mosaic down on his desk and pulled Ánalia close. "Thank you," he said, and kissed her. They kissed hard and deep. Her teeth felt like curved porcelain under his tongue.

Parra climbed wearily inside the tent and dragged his nonpointy equipment along with him, but Jeremiah lingered outside. He got out his camp stove and attached the fuel line to one of Parra's fuel bottles, into which he'd put his stove's pump assembly. He gave the pump a few strokes, then lit the stove. He let it warm a moment and build the natural flow pressure out of the fuel bottle, then set some snow upon it inside a moistened stainless steel pan. The snow began to sizzle and steam. While it was melting, Jeremiah gazed up at the moon.

It was stark white this evening, a bunched, hard stone in the sky. I'd like to climb that, Jeremiah thought. On a small self-contained expedition, bringing nothing but himself, leaving no trace of his passing. The moon shots were so wasteful and bottom-heavy. They were bureaucratic ladders to the sky. Like the siege tactics of expedition mountaineering—necessary perhaps, but ugly, unsymmetric. An alpine expedition to the moon. Now there was an idea! But not even Charlie Worth had the funding for that

one.

Charlie did have the funding for Everest, however, the next lowest solid matter. There was money enough. Was there time? Jeremiah looked into the sky, feeling his smallness, his inconsequence. I am thirty-five. I will be thirty-six by summer. Was he too old for Everest? No. People over fifty had climbed it. But they had struggled up, and the climb had nearly done them in. Up above, the Southern Cross hung mournful in the sky, with the Magellanic Clouds smeared across its crosspieces like shining blood.

What it came down to was endurance and will.

And the ability to face the ghosts of those who had died on the two previous attempts he'd been a part of. The chance that it would happen again. Death at the bottom of a three-thousand-foot scream. Jeremiah shuddered.

The wind whipped up and his snow sizzled faintly, and again Jeremiah was a lone man under a big black sky. To the west was the blank east face of Aconcagua, glowing an impassive white. It seemed possible that he could question the mountain, the old Inca god, and get some sort of response, some sort of direction. But Jeremiah knew from long experience that the mountains did not answer. Or at least they did not answer directly. Like God. After all these years, he still believed. But he knew better than to pray. After a while, Jeremiah made tea for himself and took a cup in to Parra.

When he got inside the tent, Jeremiah removed his plastic overboots, then the felt liners, wrapping them in a stuff sack. He rolled out his thermal pad and his down sleeping bag, and shoved the liners into the sleeping bag's toe. He did not want them to freeze overnight and give him frostbite while he was climbing tomorrow. Then he got into the bag. It was very cold at first, but he'd brought warmth in with him, and the down retained most of what his body produced. Soon he was relatively comfortable. The bag smelled a bit moldy, a bit salty. He thought of Ánalia, in her small house on a narrow street in Mendoza. Ánalia, sleeping naked, brown among her white sheets. The wind flapped the tent. All tents were like this, everywhere. It was a separate universe he could crawl into, on any mountain on any continent. A cocoon, the stationary point around which all the relative world spun. Tents were a constant in his life.

He awoke before dawn and found that his headache had passed and his diarrhea was no longer a problem. He was over his altitude sickness, and well on the way to becoming acclimated. He'd had much the same experience in climbing Vinson in Antarctica, but there the diarrhea had been a special problem because dropping his pants to relieve himself was a life-threatening maneuver in the cold. In the Himalayas, at much greater elevation, the mountain sickness had laid him up for two days, not merely with discomfort, but with exhaustion and unmoving muscles. He slept it off between fevers and vomiting, in a Sherpa's hut. Then, on the third day, he was just *well*. There was no gradual emergence; he walked out of the hut, up the trail, and joined the climbing party at base camp. By the next day, he was on the mountain.

So he was used to the altitude once more. Without disturbing Parra, Jeremiah slipped into his liners and boots—cold, but bearable—and went out to start breakfast. He would need to melt a lot of snow this morning. He needed to force himself to drink large amounts of water before he began the real climb. The eastern sky colored, and Jeremiah heard Parra stirring within the tent.

“Oatmeal's cooking,” he called out, his voice a strange thing in the natural quiet.

“Nick's American Bar and Grill opens early these days,” Parra said, with a laugh. It seemed that the tent was talking. “Where are my biscuits and *dulce de leche*, you stinking *norteamericano*?” After a moment, Parra stumbled out and held out his metal cup. Jeremiah filled it up with mush.

“Yvon Chouinard will not touch this stuff,” Jeremiah said, wolfing down a big spoonful of his own.

“The great climber does not eat oatmeal?” Parra was incredulous.

“He got picked up for vagrancy when he was bumming out to Yosemite one time. Spent eighteen days on a work crew eating nothing but oatmeal once a day. Now he can’t stand the taste of it.”

Parra looked with compassion at Jeremiah. “You Yankees have it very tough when you are young, let me tell you.”

“Don’t call me a Yankee,” Jeremiah said. “Don’t ever call me that!”

“What are you then, amigo?” Good question. Middle-class Southern white boy who accidentally ended up soloing the seven summits of the world? Well, five of them so far, anyway. And Everest would not be a solo, most likely. But he was digressing, as usual, avoiding the question.

“I don’t know. But I’m not a Yankee.”

They broke camp within an hour and started up the mountain. After snow-shoeing another mile, he saw that rocks began to poke through the snow, and then gravelly scree. Soon the snow became mixed with ice and scree entirely, and became too steep for snowshoes. They replaced them with crampons. Their weight was more concentrated over a smaller space now, and when there was no ice or rock to support them, they plunged hip-deep into the snow and had to plow forward. The process was very physical, and while it was tiring, Jeremiah felt fine and strong. Parra began to lag behind. The day was very cold, and the wind stole away much of the warmth they generated. Jeremiah estimated the wind speed to be about fifteen knots. This worried him somewhat, for it could be an augur of storms. When they got to Camp 1, he would ask Parra what he thought.

Suddenly, from behind him, there came the familiar chilling roar that filled many a climber’s nightmares. Avalanche! It was far to their right, but angling down the slope of the mountain toward them. Where was Parra? There. He was a dot, far below Jeremiah, almost hidden by some rocks. Jeremiah watched in horror as the avalanche’s edge caught the rocks and sprayed upward over them, like breaking surf. It was not a large avalanche, but any avalanche was big enough to kill a man if it caught him just right. Parra was lost in the powder. Jeremiah turned around and ran down the slope in long strides, turning to either side as if he were skiing.

“Gil,” he called out. “Gil Parra!”

“I’m here. I’m okay.”

Parra had seen the avalanche coming and made a run for the rocks that jutted out of the slope. He’d just made it to their lee side when the edge of the avalanche struck. He’d escaped with nothing worse than a dousing of snow.

“That scared the shit out of me!” he said.

“Me, too.”

“I don’t think it would have got me, even if I hadn’t made it to the rocks,” Parra said. He was gabbling in a high nervous voice. “But it would have knocked me down. Maybe I would have broken something in the fall. Probably not.”

Jeremiah agreed, but did not want to discuss the matter at the moment. Parra was badly shaken. He got out the stove and heated up some tea for Parra and himself. After drinking this, Parra seemed to calm down. They set out again. Jeremiah regulated his pace so that Parra could keep up.

The sun had already sunk behind the mountains when they reached Camp 1. Chile, many miles on the other side of the rock and snow, was still bathed in light, but Mendoza would be turning on the streetlamps about now. *Ánalia* would be finishing up at her office. She always took a hot *maté* after work, the Argentine equivalent to the American South's iced tea—they drank it morning, noon, and night.

Two days ago, *Ánalia* had not been able to make a *maté* for her siesta. After kissing Jeremiah, she went to the hot plate in the apartment, but the water kettle, sitting nearby, was empty. The only source of water was the bathroom down the hall.

"I guess I will have to skip *maté* and get to the more important things," *Ánalia* said, dangling the kettle by one finger. It slipped off and clanged back onto the cold eye. She stared hard at Jeremiah with what must be deep longing—for few desires were strong enough to make an Argentinian give up her afternoon *maté*.

"Take a long siesta," he said. "I want you all afternoon."

"I have patients waiting already, Jeremiah."

He drew her toward him and took her purse from her, set it down, then began to undo her blouse. "I'm selfish today. Let them wait."

She laughed at this, but it was an uneasy laugh. Jeremiah finished with the blouse and it fell away. She moved to unbutton his shirt, but he stopped her. He wanted to take off her bra first. He loved the way women looked with only a skirt on. *Ánalia*, he corrected himself. I love the way *Ánalia* looks that way. He reached around and found the catch to her bra, and with a rubbing motion, as if he were crushing an insect between his thumb and fingers, he undid it. Every time he did this, *Ánalia* would gasp. He suspected she was humoring him, but he liked even her false surprise.

"How do you do that so well?" she asked. "I love the way you do that!"

Practice. That was the real answer, which, of course, he dare not utter. Instead, he took a nipple between his lips and licked the tip. She gently pulled away and backed up, knowing that he wanted a full view.

God, she was gorgeous. A flush under her tawny skin, crinkled nipples—brown almost to blackness. She wore no jewelry, which, when he'd first noticed, both surprised and pleased Jeremiah. Her white skirt made her skin seem even darker. She ran her long fingers over her chest, cupped a breast. Invitation enough.

What really rattled him down to his soul was this combination of European and Native American expressed in *Ánalia*—as if the races had reblended to form the original ur-woman, the Earth goddess from the beginning. It was always women like this who moved him the deepest. Mandy was a sort of exception. Mandy with her perpetual mountain tan, but white as the driven snow under her long underwear. Yet still a mix of light and dark, the earth and air, in her personality. I loved her, Jeremiah thought. I love *Ánalia*.

After *Ánalia* had helped him undress, she unzipped and dropped her skirt, leaving only her curious white shoes. He knelt before her, hoping that she would take as worship what was really only a way of taking off the irritating shoes. When he stood up, he picked her up—he was pleased that his upper body strength hadn't completely deserted him since the summer—and took her toward his bed.

Or not the bed this time, he thought. As he walked, she wrapped her legs about his waist and, reaching

down, guided him within her. He took her to the window and leaned her back into the wall next to it. As he leaned into the wall, into Ánalia, he could see, in the corner of his eye, the distant Andes over the bare sycamores and squat buildings. He could not actually see Aconcagua from here, but he knew it was there, waiting. Frozen in place, waiting.

Let the mountain wait.

Ánalia wrapped her legs around his ass and pulled herself up and down his torso, spreading their sweat between them for a smooth slide, as if they both were covered with oil.

And then, of course, the phone rang.

He'd forgotten that he even *had* one. The ringing filled the little room with a loud insistency. Jesus Christ, where was it? Ánalia realized at the same time as Jeremiah did that there was no ignoring the sound. He eased back and she put her feet onto the floor. He pulled himself from her reluctantly, and the damn phone kept up its shrill buzz. Where the hell did the sound come from? He began to search the room, and Ánalia laughed at him jumping about bewildered and stark naked.

Finally, Jeremiah found the telephone under a layer of paper and extricated it with an effort. He couldn't remember anybody ever calling him since he'd moved in here. He wasn't in the habit of giving out his number to local people he met, and he'd told his parents only to use the number in an emergency. He wasn't sure if he'd given it to Ánalia, even. But then, she lived nearby, and physical contact was so much more enjoyable.

"Hola?"

"Don't you 'hola' me, you piece of white trash from Alabama!"

"Charlie!" he said. It wasn't a question.

"How the hell are you, Jeremiah Fall?" Charlie Worth sounded drunk. Or at least extremely happy.

"I'm doing okay."

"Great, great." Charlie was silent, even coy. Strange. Charlie Worth was a Texan, one of the most confident climbers Jeremiah had ever met, and a big-time financier to boot.

"What do you want, Charlie?" Jeremiah went over to the bed—the phone would barely reach—and sat down.

Again with the trace of coyness in his voice, Charlie said, "Why? Am I disturbing you?"

"Would I let you disturb me?" Jeremiah looked over at Ánalia. She was smiling, a bit nonplussed, since she could not understand the English he was speaking. "It's an old friend," he said in Spanish.

"Somebody there with you?" Charlie asked. "I should have known. But if I can't even call you in the middle of the day and not interrupt your fun, I don't know when it would be possible!"

"It's okay, Charlie. What do you want?"

"You getting over climbing Vinson yet?" Charlie asked. After Jeremiah had gotten back from Antarctica, Charlie had been the first person he'd called to brag to.

"I'm getting there."

“Feel like doing some more climbing soon?”

“Could be. What’s up?” What *was* up? Surely Charlie wasn’t about to offer him a place on a climb. Hadn’t Charlie quit for good after that horrible storm cost him most of a foot on Nanga Parbat?

“I was thinking about climbing Mount Everest, myself,” Charlie said, deadpan. “I was wondering if you’d like to come along.”

So, it was a joke he wasn’t getting. Maybe he’d been away from the States for so long that American humor didn’t make sense to him anymore.

“I’m serious as a heart attack,” Charlie said, correctly interpreting Jeremiah’s silence. “I want to climb Everest. I’m willing to pay large sums of money to be able to do so, and I’m asking you if you want to do it with me, Jeremiah Fall.”

Right. Charlie Worth climb Everest. At forty, with one and a half feet.

“Charlie, you may be biting off more than you can chew,” Jeremiah said, trying to let his friend down easily.

“Don’t patronize me, you son of a bitch!” Charlie shot back. “You’re as bad as that damn guide!”

“What damn guide?”

“I climbed the Eiger, Jeremiah. I said I’d never climb again, but I did it.”

“*You* climbed the Eiger?”

“Hell, yes, I did! And I want more. Higher!”

“Don’t you think you should try something intermediate? Like maybe K2 or something?”

“I mean it, Jeremiah,” Charlie said. Jeremiah could tell he was getting agitated, getting into that excited-nervous funk that only Charlie could achieve with wince-producing perfection. “*Everest, Jeremiah!*”

Everest. Just the thought of her made Jeremiah shudder. He always thought of her that way, as female, as if she were a boat, with her high mast puncturing the stratosphere and trailing a great permanent plume like a masthead pennant. For the last ten years, she’d filled his dreams. And there was one dream, the bad one, which he would awaken from shuddering and sweaty. He and the other climbers he had known were clinging to the mountain like sailors clinging to the rigging, caught in a hurricane. Then the screams as one by one they lost their grips and fell into the miasma below. Finally, Jeremiah was the only one left. His hands were black with frostbite and he watched in horror as his fingers separated from his palms, oozing away like bananas squeezed in two. There was no way to hold on any longer, with only broadened stumps for hands. And Jeremiah fell. And fell. And *fell*.

Ánalia saw Jeremiah shake at the memory and came over to the bed and put her arms about him.

“What’s got into you, Charlie?” he heard himself saying.

“I decided that it was necessary for me to climb it.”

“Why, for God’s sake?”

Charlie was quiet for a long time, and the line almost sounded dead. It was amazing how little static there

was on it, considering the distance.

"I've asked you that same question a bunch of times, and you've never given me a satisfactory answer," Charlie finally said.

Well, he's got me there, Jeremiah thought. Everest. A third attempt. Up until now, he'd put the mountain out of his conscious mind. *Since Mandy fell and I couldn't catch her.* But Everest was always there, looming massively in his dreams, his nightmares, his desires.

"Just how are you planning to go about this little adventure?" Jeremiah asked. "You know we're talking three-quarters of a million to a million?"

"I'm prepared to invest whatever it takes. I have ten million that is relatively liquid, and I can get more if it's necessary. A lot more."

Ten million. Charlie's expert system interpreter was apparently selling very well. That solved *that* problem.

"There's permits," Jeremiah said weakly. "You know Nepal is hell on giving out permits, and there's no way you're talking about trying the Chinese side."

"No, I think Nepal is the way to go," said Charlie, sounding like a hardheaded businessman closing in on a deal. "There are several expeditions that have permits for next summer, I understand. I'll bet you know one of those expedition leaders, and that you could suggest to them that, ah, we could give them a good price for a chance to participate."

"Bribe our way onto a team?" It had been done. Climbers took funding where they could get it, and sometimes it came with extra human baggage.

Everest.

Jeremiah tried to remember who had permits for next year. The Japanese had a team. Akima was the leader. There was a Canadian-American effort out of Seattle, too.

I can't believe I'm even considering this, thought Jeremiah. I am a barbarian. No ethics. Noway . No fucking way.

But *Everest* .

"You think about it, Jeremiah," said Charlie. "I'm ready to do this. I need your help or there's no way, though."

"I'm sure you could find some way to arrange it without me," Jeremiah replied.

"Maybe. But we climb well together. Have you ever thought that the reason you didn't make it up Everest those other times is because you didn't have me along?"

"You had retired. At least that's what you told me."

"Yeah, well, now I'm *un* retired."

Suddenly, the entire conversation was enormously funny to Jeremiah. He couldn't control himself; he was shaking with mirth. Ánalia held him tighter and caressed him. She probably thinks I'm in pain. Maybe she thinks someone has called to tell me—that my parents died or something.

“Don’t worry,” he told her. “It’s nothing. It’s okay.”

“Okay?” she whispered.

“Well, more or less.”

“Hey, tell her howdy for me, whoever she is, won’t you, Jeremiah?” said Charlie.

“Uh huh.”

“And you think about this. This is my dream, Jeremiah. I need this, more than I’ve ever needed anything before. It’s a matter of life and death for me.”

“I see,” said Jeremiah.

“I mean it.”

“I know.” And *he did*. He could tell Charlie Worth was not shitting him.

“Call me in a week,” said Charlie. Then he hung up. Jeremiah stayed on the phone as the connections broke—U.S. to satellite to Buenos Aires to Mendoza—one by one. Click. Click. Click. Click.

He slowly hung up the phone. He found that he had lost his breath for a second and was breathing in quick gasps. The room smelled very much like sex.

“That was Charlie,” he said. “My best friend and partner since I was twenty years old and climbed my first mountain.” And then he told her the rest. After he finished, Ánalia was silent for a long time.

She pulled back a little bit. There was the tiniest crack between them, Jeremiah thought. Just big enough to jam in a finger for a good hold in rock climbing. But flesh was not rock.

“Do you think you are going to do this?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Then let me ask you another question. Do you think there is a place for me in this thing?”

The question he dreaded. The question he had been asked so many times, and had never known how to answer.

“I don’t know that, either.”

“When are you going to know?”

“I have to decide what to do soon. There are many arrangements to be made.”

“You have to climb Aconcagua very soon, then.”

“Yes.”

“It can’t wait for summer?”

“This summer, I will be in Nepal making preparations. It’ll be winter there, of course. *If* I go.”

“Who will go with you to Aconcagua?”

He looked at her long, hard, objectively. She was too soft. Not because she was a woman. Nothing of the sort. Because she wasn't him.

"Some *andinista* I know. Gil Parra, probably. But I was thinking of soloing the summit."

"I couldn't make it?"

"No."

"You will go this week?"

"It would be best. Gil could go, as support."

"That would probably be for the best," she said. The crack was widening. In space, in time.

"Then there is something I would like to tell you," Ánalia said.

"What? What is it?"

"You have another cavity developing. I saw it when I filled the other. I knew you didn't have any money, and silver is expensive."

"Ah."

"I will cancel my appointments this afternoon and fill it for you."

He looked at Ánalia closely then. She was crying softly, dabbing her eyes with the cover from his bed.

I cannot say why I decided to sail to Antarctica alone. I do know where and when I came up with the notion of climbing the Vinson Massif. I was working my way through the infamous Rock Band of Mount Everest. This was my second trip to the mountain, and I had every hope of being on the summit team. Everest is not only the highest point on Planet Earth, it is—perhaps beside the point—the highest peak in Asia. I had already climbed McKinley—Denali it is also called—in Alaska, so I had North America's highest point under my belt. I thought that, after I finished the big one—Everest—I could go and do the rest in short order. This was not to be.

As we neared the summit of Everest, the team that was to establish the last camp before the top made a mistake. Nobody knows what the mistake was. Or maybe it was not a mistake. Maybe it was a pure accident. Accidents and mistakes have the same outcome in the Himalayas. One of the members of that team was a friend. A woman I had loved, and asked to marry me. In all, three people fell to their deaths, roped together physically, by fate, by the mistake of one team member. By the accidental callousness of the universe. Like ants on the sticky tongue of the anteater.

I found her body the next day, but it was too dangerous to carry her out. I knew she wouldn't have wanted me to risk it. After that, I went sailing for a long time. Some months later, I found myself in New Zealand.

—*Still Life at the Bottom of the World*

For the first time that night, Jeremiah took from his pack the little mountain scene made from butterfly wings that Ánalia had given him. In the light of the waxing moon, the colors were gone, but the texture was accented, so that the mountains looked furry, as if they were covered with great hordes of moths.

He and Parra set up the tent in the flattest place they could find and partially buried it in snow, for the insulation. Jeremiah was not entirely happy about the location, though it did not look prone to avalanches.

There was a gully off to the side a few hundred yards that the falling snow would most likely channel down if it did come in the night. Winter mountaineering was in every way a careful man's game.

After they'd burrowed into their sleeping bags, Jeremiah discussed the weather with Parra.

"I think there is a storm coming," Parra told him. "But I'm not sure when. We may have several days . . . I do not have so much experience in the winter here."

"Tomorrow we will climb to the Berlin hut."

"That is something I wanted to talk with you about, amigo," said Parra. "I'm beginning to think your solo idea is the best one."

They'd discussed it before. Jeremiah had done the other five highest continental peaks alone. Of course Kilimanjaro and Elbrus were merely long walks. And climbing Australia's Kosciusko was comparable to hiking up Cheaha, back in Alabama. Denali had been a bitch, though. He'd done that one in winter, also. But Jeremiah had never experienced hardship like he had on Vinson. After the sheer unmaning cold, the worst part was knowing that, even though there was a small contingent of well-wishers below in base camp, if he hurt himself, the nearest hospital was hundreds and hundreds of miles away—and the airplane came on schedule, period. Even if you were dying. That was the way it had to be in the Antarctic.

But Parra had been uncertain about whether he wanted to make the winter ascent, and it was mostly Parra's equipment, after all. Jeremiah had decided to let the mountain take care of the decision. Apparently, it had done so, just as Jeremiah had expected.

"Do you want to stay here, or go down to Plaza de Mulas?" Jeremiah asked. "And are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure," Parra said. "I am feeling bad luck for myself on this one. But it will be okay for me to stay here and keep some hot tea on for you."

Parra was making a brave gesture, and Jeremiah respected it. He could not have found a better person to come into the Andes with. Parra would be a perfect team member on Everest.

"Thank you, amigo," Jeremiah said. "When I come back down, I may have something to discuss with you."

"What?"

"A climb."

"Well, when you come back down, we will discuss it."

Jeremiah had difficulty sleeping that night. It was very cold, and he was going over his route again and again. He'd memorized a photograph of the winter west face of Aconcagua, but here on the mountain, there was no way to stand back and gain perspective on where he was. He'd need to be thoughtful as well as strong if he were to make it. They were at 16,200 feet. Nearly a half-mile above the tallest of the Rockies, Jeremiah reflected. Tomorrow would be real mountain climbing.

Parra woke Jeremiah up before dawn with a cup of tea and some oatmeal. They ate in silence. Jeremiah got out his pack and, by the light of his headlamp, began to examine and discard anything he wouldn't need. A day pack to carry things in. The tent would stay. He'd have to carve out a snow cave, for the climb would require one or possibly two overnight bivouacs. But not having to carry the tent's weight was an acceptable trade-off. He would not need rope. Rope was what you used when you went with a partner. It was *why* you went with a partner. Safety. No rope. An ice ax, and a shorter tool. Stove, fuel,

and food. Camera. Sunglasses. He had on long underwear, synthetic fleece pants and jacket, a toboggan on his head. Heavy woolen socks. Wind pants over the fleece pants. A down parka. A parka shell. Gaiters over his boots. Crampons. Silk undergloves. Wool gloves. Nylon overmitts to keep away the frostbiting wind.

I am an astronaut, Jeremiah thought. All I need is a jet backpack. That would make the whole thing simpler, wouldn't it? He slung his day pack into position. It was very much lighter. Maybe forty pounds. He could barely feel it.

"Go with God," said Parra. Jeremiah shook Parra's hand, then began climbing the mountain. The going was easy at first. The snow surface was hard-frozen overnight, and his crampons gripped it with precision. He felt fine, very strong. As the sun came up, Jeremiah began to sing. It was an old Eagles tune from his college days, "Peaceful, Easy Feeling." Charlie had liked that one, too. They'd nearly worn it out on the Walkman they'd carried on their bumming trip in the Chamonix Valley, when they'd done three peaks a day for a week. As the day went on, he continued to make good time. Yet the summit looked no nearer. Jeremiah began to fall into a sort of trance, but an alert trance. He carefully cramponed up the moderate slope, using classic single-ax technique expertly and unconsciously. His short ax was lashed to his day pack.

As the sun moved higher overhead, the snow's surface began to weaken. Jeremiah found himself slogging through deep drifts, sometimes up to his shoulders. The climbing was grueling, and he only made a few hundred feet an hour. The altitude also began to take its toll. No matter how good the condition he was in, there were built-in limits to what the human body could do, without proper oxygen. He used his tiredness to gauge how high he was. Quite tired at 17,000. Screaming for air was 18,000 to 18,500. Nearing exhaustion at 19,000. At 19,700 he'd had all he could take in one day. But he'd arrived at Camp Berlin. In the summer, there was an iron hut here, roofless, more of a landmark than any kind of shelter. He could barely see the tip of its frame poking through the snow. It was located in an excellent spot for avoiding avalanches, however, and Jeremiah wearily began to dig a snow cave into the snowbank that had drifted near to the hut. After an hour of work, he struck the hut's side and, amazingly, half of its front door. He dug back into the hut a ways more, then paused, his lungs and arms aching. He was very satisfied with his work, and spread his thermal pad and sleeping bag out into the cave. Then, wrapped in his bag, he lit the stove and boiled water for tea and dinner soup. Jeremiah felt very safe and comfortable, despite the cold and the altitude.

Outside, he could see, just over the lip of his cave, that the snow was blood red with the dying embers of the sun. *Practice what you preach, Jeremiah*, he heard a voice say. What the hell? He unzipped his bag and crawled to the entrance. Nobody there, but the mountainside was on fire with the sun. He was dazed by the beauty and sat for a long time, lost, mesmerized by the play of sun on snow. There were shades to the red, as the contours of the mountain caught the light in different ways. Not what you'd expect. In places, some deep crevasses and gullies were alight, as if a beacon burned within them. On the flat snow, the crystalline ice sparkled, and the spendrift cascade that was always flowing down the mountain blushed nearly pink, looking like scars on the mountain's face. But traveling scars.

And there was someone here, nearby. He could feel her presence. *Her*. That voice. Was it Mandy's? It had been so long now. With a deep sadness, he found that he could not remember what she'd sounded like. *Be careful tomorrow*, the voice said. He spun around. Did he catch a glimpse of something, someone? A flash of parka as she turned to leave? Or was it just the shimmering snow? It's the altitude, is what it is, he told himself. He slid back into his shelter and pulled his sleeping bag tight around him. He slept fitfully, hearing the voice again and again in his dreams. Sometimes it was Mandy's. But awake, he could not be sure.

When he awoke for the last time, the sky was lightening. Jeremiah had the feeling in his bones that it was going to be a dangerous morning.

Nevertheless, the climbing was not extremely difficult at first. Jeremiah came to steeper sections that had shed their snow and were covered with ice, or bare. The ice was good, for he was a strong ice climber and had a fine technique. He front-pointed up several steep slopes, driving in his ice axes, steadying himself, and then kicking in the tips of his crampons. It looked very dangerous, as if he were stuck to the mountain by the thinnest of margins, and indeed, the blades of the axes and the points of his crampons were less than an inch into the ice. But Jeremiah had climbed giant frozen waterfalls using this procedure, and was completely at home with it.

As he neared the summit pyramid, he began to face some exposure, with drops of a half-mile and more to one side or the other. Jeremiah had always been afraid of heights, and that was part of the reason he'd been so attracted to climbing. He found this fear exhilarating, for—after he'd faced it the first time—he knew that it was a fear he could overcome and use.

After Jeremiah was up the ice slope, the going got rougher. The snow and ice slopes, which had been horribly tiring, but straightforward, gave way to seracs—ice and snow blocks as big as Citroëns and shaped not unlike them—and Jeremiah had to pick his way through them carefully. All the time, he was aware that the snow underfoot could shift slightly and one of these blocks could tumble over onto him. He would die. It had happened in the great icefall near the base of Everest, though never on a team he'd been on. *His* friends seemed to die more spectacularly.

Finally, he was through the worst of this band of seracs and came out upon a slightly flattened area. Another man-made structure, half-destroyed, barely protruded from the snow. It was a shattered A-frame that had once been a hut. Camp Independencia, Parra had called it. Jeremiah decided that this was as good a place as any to take a break. He got out his stove once more and began to brew tea water. He'd had an extraordinary morning so far, climbing a little over 1,200 feet in three hours. "Who took all the fucking air?" he said. It was an old joke, a ritual really, that he performed whenever he was over 20,000 feet. He made his tea and sat quietly. His voice had disturbed the silence of the morning and, with it, some of his repose. He wanted to get that back. Only the gentle hiss of the stove disturbed the quiet. Then came another hiss from far below, the wrenching squeak of ice on ice. A thunderous roar, growing in intensity, as the sound of a car on a gravel road will as it gets closer and closer. What in God's name? Jeremiah walked to the edge of his level resting place and looked down.

Aconcagua was on the move. Ice torrents poured down either side of the mountain, while down its middle a giant section of snow had broken away and was tumbling down, taking everything in its path with it, growing, growing. It completely obliterated his path back down, turning it into an unstable mush of snow, ice, and rock. He'd never seen an avalanche so huge! He watched and watched as it rolled on and seemed never to end. He thought of Parra down below, waiting. Even such an avalanche as this would probably not make it to the flattened-out area where they'd pitched Camp 1. But who could say? This was beyond measurement, beyond belief. What could have caused it?

And how the hell was he going to get back down?

After what seemed hours, the icefall subsided. If he had not been climbing as well as he had this morning, if he'd not heeded the strange voice from yesterday, he'd have been a part of that, a corpse, rapidly freezing, lost from sight until the spring thaws. Of course, there was still that possibility.

He looked at the summit. Lenticular clouds were forming, space-saucer prophets of storm. Great. More snow's coming. No way down except maybe over the summit and down the other side. To what? There were no shepherds in the high valleys at this time of year. He'd perish with no food and no way to melt

snow for water. His only hope was that Parra had survived and was waiting for him. He had to find a way down to him. But first, he had to survive the coming storm.

Having thought the situation through, he felt better. He had all afternoon. He could dig a cozy snow cave here on this relatively flat ledge. Its position should protect it from avalanches. But, Christ, how could he tell? There was no precedent that he knew of for the way this mountain had behaved.

He began to dig, and was just finishing up the cave when the first snow began to fall. He crawled inside, made a cup of tea, then settled into his sleeping bag. It might be a long wait. Hours, if he were lucky. Days, if he weren't. With the way things had gone so far today, he'd better count on the latter. He would have to conserve food and fuel, but even with miserly rations, he had only enough to last two more days. It was far more important to keep drinking than to eat, so he sorted out all the food that required rehydration and threw it away. He hated to leave trash on the mountain, but . . . ah hell, he picked the packets back up. He might die, but he wouldn't die a litterbug. His mother had taught him that much.

Jeremiah began to feel a deep longing to see his parents once again. It had been years now. And his sister in California, even longer. Good middle-class folks.

How did somebody like me get strained out of these genes? he wondered. He'd gone to a fine copy of a fine Eastern private school. Seen what there was to be had by the rich and influential, and was none too impressed. And so he'd applied his ambitions elsewhere.

What a neat analysis. It had more open crevasses than a glacier in August. Living in the South seemed so long ago, so far away. It had no hold on him anymore. He was free. That was the thing, to let go of the past and be free. Except there was Charlie, his Texas connection. Charlie wouldn't let go. And Mandy. He could never let go of Mandy, no matter how far he fell into the future and she, like an immovable stone, remained fixed in the past, set there forever. And Ánalia? What subtle ropes attached him to Ánalia?

Outside, the wind was howling like a bear caught in a foot trap. *Like the scream of a woman falling through space.* Soon, however, snow covered the entrance hole, and the sound abated. Jeremiah slept in fits and starts. He had many dreams of falling.

In the morning, he broke out into the sunlight and found that the storm had passed. Aconcagua was blanketed with a snow coating almost as thick as the one it had had before yesterday's avalanche. Still, the path down looked impassable, ready to come loose and avalanche again. The mountainside could remain like this for some time, for weeks even. He tried to think of other ways out of his predicament and grew anxious with himself. For the first time, he was afraid. Before, there had been just too much amazement. But anxiety was useless. What the hell could he do?

He could climb up. There was that. He scanned the summit pyramid. Its exposed rock was whitish-gray, as if the rock itself were suffering from frostbite. This was icing, but should be relatively crumbly. It was too cold for a coating of verglas—the enemy of the climber trying to negotiate rock—to develop. There were many cliffs on the pyramid that were dangerously corniced with snow—snow that could give at any time and sweep him down the mountainside along with it. He could just make out the route that Parra had suggested, up a small gully that cut into the summit pyramid like a ready-made ramp. It was called the Canaleta.

Without really deciding to do so, Jeremiah found himself climbing upward. After so many mountains, it was an old habit, an instinct that took over when one was not thinking or could not think. He climbed. That was what he did.

Within a couple of hours, he was at the Canaleta. This was not going to be as easy as he'd supposed it

would be. The slope was moderate, but rock and ice cannonballs shot down it at random intervals. For once in his climbing career, he wished he'd brought a helmet. But a helmet would do him little good against one of those suckers, anyway. The trick was to be lucky and not get hit. Not a very sound technique. Jeremiah studied the falling stone and ice more carefully. There was a pattern to it, albeit a convoluted one. Stationary boulders were placed in strategic locations all the way up the ramp. If he could shuffle from boulder to boulder, only exposing himself to the falling shit on the traverses between rocks . . . it wasn't a perfect plan, but it would increase his chances greatly. And the floor of the gully was mostly ice, too steep for snow to collect. He could use his ice-climbing skills to full advantage. So. Start.

The first few traverses were easy and eventless, but as he got higher, the boulders became smaller and provided less protection. Once, a cannonball rock slammed directly into the boulder Jeremiah was sheltering behind. He ducked, but part of his back was exposed, and he was stung with the broken shrapnel of the exploded cannonball. He shook off the pain and skirted to a better shelter. And finally, he was up and out, over to one side of the gully. He was on the final ridge.

And the rest was easy. He climbed steadily through deep snow, which got harder and shallower as he got near the summit. When he crested the mountain, he was walking almost normally—except for the inch-long spikes on his feet.

There was an aluminum cross that marked the highest point on the summit; it was half-buried in snow. Jeremiah rammed in one of his ice axes and affixed his camera to a screw atop the ax. He flipped the self-timer button, jogged over to stand by the cross. The jogging left him winded and panting hard. The camera clicked. He went and set it again and got another. Proof. Okay. He finally took a good look around.

To the north and south, there was a sea of mountains that disappeared into the distance. To the east was a falling line that led ultimately to Mendoza. To Ánalia. To the west was Chile. All of the mountain peaks were below him, as far as he could see. Jeremiah Fall was standing on the highest point of land in the Western Hemisphere, 22,835 feet. Western Man, on top of the West.

From his day pack, Jeremiah took out the butterfly mosaic. It glimmered in the sun. Here's to us, Ánalia. Here's to a taste of the warm South, even in wintertime. Jeremiah set the mosaic down next to the aluminum cross. He backed away, started to take a picture of it.

No. He felt the female presence again, heard a voice and saw a flickering, just on the edge of his vision. It could have been the altitude, the lack of oxygen. *You'll need that,* said the voice.

“What do you mean?” he found himself saying. The wind carried his words away, over to the west, out toward Chile. “Tell me what you mean.”

You'll need it on Everest.

“I'm not going there. I'm never going back there. People die when I go there.”

But the presence was gone. *She* was gone.

Jeremiah was utterly alone.

With a bewildered heart, Jeremiah retrieved the picture and began his descent. Now was the time when the most concentration, the most care, was needed. He tried to free his mind of all thoughts but climbing down. To where? At least to Camp Independencia. He could hole up there. For how long? Three days. Maybe longer. And then? The way down might be easier. But no. That was no ordinary avalanche. It

would take a long time for the mountain to restabilize after that one.

A cannonball rock caromed past. It barely missed taking Jeremiah's head off. Shit. Pay attention. Once, coming down the Canaleta's final run, he slipped and fell. This was bad, for he would accelerate rapidly on the ice and shoot out of the run so fast it would send him tumbling down the mountain. With expert movement, he got himself turned right and used his ice ax to self-arrest. On ice, the procedure was delicate and required experience, else one could start spinning completely out of control. He dug in the blade and bottom spike of the ax and barely grazed the forepoints of his crampons against the ice, applying just enough pressure to keep him from sliding on past the ice ax, but not enough to stop him short and spin him around upside down. It worked, and he was lucky—for the fall had carried him nearly out of the Canaleta. He rose shakily and got all the way out as quickly as he could. *Shoom* went a block of ice, shooting past right after he'd gotten out of the way. The Canaleta was a bad place, and he was glad to be rid of it.

From this point, climbing down was easier. Still, he had to be careful, for there was no one but himself to arrest him if he started falling, and the self-arrest on the Canaleta had taken much of the strength from his arms. He doubted he could stop himself again. Noon was nearing when he got back to Camp Independencia with its wrecked A-frame. He had decided what to do. As he looked over the edge, the avalanche remains appeared as dangerous as ever. Yet there was a line of descent he could imagine that would skirt the worst of the debris—provided he could find his route once he was down there.

Everest. The voice had said he was going to Everest. That had to mean he would make it down off this hill, didn't it? Christ, I'm listening to voices in my head for advice now, he thought. It wasn't funny, and he didn't laugh. Was he going to Everest, then? Had the inarticulate right side of his brain decided that he was going and provided him with a prophetic voice to inform him of that decision? A rational explanation. He doubted it immediately.

What I really hate is standing here undecided, Jeremiah thought, freezing my ass off. I feel strong. I'm climbing well. I want to do something. He imagined what staying here for several days would do to him. First he would dehydrate after his fuel ran out and he could no longer melt snow. Or he'd try to eat snow, and die from hypothermia. If he didn't die, he'd be forced to descend in weakened condition, and he truly did not believe that the climbing conditions below were going to get any better.

"I'm going," Jeremiah said, as if by speaking aloud, his decision would somehow be recorded, known—whatever the outcome. First, Jeremiah made himself a cup of hot tea. Then he sorted his equipment. He left behind his stove, food, and fuel, taking only his camera, ice axes, and sleeping bag. If he did not make it all the way down, he might need to bivouac one more night. He'd die without his sleeping bag, of that he was sure. "Okay," he said, and started down.

The going was incredibly complex, with a mixture of snow, ice, and rock that changed composition with each step, and none of which was stable. He found himself slipping and sliding down stretches that were nearly vertical. Only by taking long loping steps for yards on end, partially out of control, was he able to retain his balance and not fall on down the hill to his death. Jeremiah tried to follow a diagonal that avoided the main line of the avalanche, but found seracs and plain old boulders constantly blocking his way. As a consequence, he had to zigzag downward, trying desperately to work his way to the left side of the avalanche's primary path.

But midway down, he came upon a line of rising stone and ice that could not be surmounted. Jeremiah tried to work his way in or around the barrier, but there was just no way. He was boxed into the most dangerous place he could be, and could do nothing about it. In fear and despair, Jeremiah turned back to his right, and descended the surface of the avalanche.

The day progressed, and he ground his way onward, downward. He hoped that the setting of the sun and the general cooling off that followed would harden the snow a bit, decrease the chances for a major breakaway. But there was no guarantee. He climbed downward.

As the sun set behind the western peaks, Jeremiah realized that he had left his headlamp back at Independencia, in his day pack. There was nothing he could do about that, either. As blackness filled the sky, he continued his descent. The darkness seemed to be sapping him of his will, as if it were creeping into his soul as it was creeping across the West. He'd just been to the top of the West, and had felt a kind of semimystic identification with it. Would the night descend on him before he could descend the mountain? Slipping and sliding, afraid that each new step would be his last, Jeremiah kept climbing down.

And the moon rose. This was immensely cheering to Jeremiah, for now the moon was practically full. He began to see better, and picked up his pace a little. Then he was off of the rock-and-ice mixture and onto pure snow. The going got tougher. He was slogging through. Jeremiah could no longer feel his feet and was certain that his toes were frostbitten. This was a shame, for he'd always thought his feet were one of the better parts of his body, and he'd had a special fondness for his toes. Probably they would have to come off. If he lived long enough to have that to worry about. He pushed on.

And thought he saw, far below—a light. But then it was gone, and he was sure that he was mistaken. Then, there it was again, far, far below. Was it Parra, in the tent with a candle lantern? As if in answer, the light flickered, then came back on. Oh God, oh God, sweet Jesus, let it be.

That was when he heard the roar coming from above him.

He couldn't see a thing. Running downward was impossible in the deep snow. All he could do was stand and wait for the avalanche to bear him away. He was going to die with a blank, bewildered mind.

Jeremiah didn't have long to wait. Within seconds, the snow was upon him. He was swept up like a stick in an ocean wave and spit out onto the avalanche surface. But soon he was rolling, being turned under again. There was something you could do. Something you did in an avalanche. No guarantee. A last hope. But he couldn't think, couldn't remember.

Suddenly, the presence was there again, rolling along with him, speaking a wordless calm. Then a word. *Swim*, she said. Yes. That was it! You kick your legs, you flail your arms; you pretend you're swimming. You *are* swimming, swimming through snow. Jeremiah swam. Swam the American crawl, like the *norteamericano* that he was.

I sailed to Antarctica in order to climb the Vinson Massif, the highest peak on that continent. I climbed it alone out of necessity, but I would have done so, anyway. For I was in mourning for a lost love, and I had thoughts of throwing myself off into that desolate wasteland. But with every step up the mountain, every plunge of my ax into the snow, I was healing. I was healing. And that is the reason I went to Antarctica, and the reason I sailed there alone, and the reason I climbed. The reason I climb. For there is a wound in me that seeing the mountains opened long ago, that seeing death on the mountains reopens often enough. And the only cure is climbing. I can only find healing for this wound in the highest of places.

—*Still Life at the Bottom of the World*

And he was swimming, and turning his head for air, and breathing, breathing, and churning, kicking, *swimming*. Then slowly, slowly, the avalanche subsided, struck a deal with gravity to hold for this one time, to hold. And Jeremiah came to rest. He lay there, facedown in the snow. Then he heard something, a humming sound, a human sound.

He picked himself up. Not five hundred yards away was Camp 1, and the glowing aura of the tent.

Jeremiah stood up and walked down to camp. As he grew nearer, he could hear the whistling hiss of a stove. He quickened his pace. After his eyes got used to the brighter light, he could see Parra, sitting half in the tent, but with the stove outside, heating water. Parra looked up at him and nearly turned the stove over and spilled everything, but regained himself. He smiled in the huge way that only Argentinians had.

“I’m back,” said Jeremiah.

“Yes,” said Parra. “And I’ll have your tea in a moment. Did you know there was a big earthquake?”

The huge avalanche, thought Jeremiah. That was the cause. That, or an aftershock. There were two avalanches.

“If I could feel it all the way up here,” Parra said, “it must have hit Mendoza hard.”

And all at once, Jeremiah knew where the voice had come from, to whom it belonged. Not to Mandy. Or at least, not to Mandy alone. The longer he lived, the deeper the hurt—and the higher the mountains must be. Suddenly, not only his feet were numb, his whole body was numb, his soul was numb. He whispered a name. It came out choked and dry, as if his throat were full of autumn leaves.

“Ánalia.”

Black Canoes

Only once did I ever think of Carol Verdane as a wren. Most people always did—a wren with big, big eyes. Carol had weak sight and wore glasses thick as stained-glass panes. Her stare could be startling when you were unprepared. But there was nothing of predatory owliness about her, so a wren she was to some. She spoke with precise locution and a clipped Midwestern accent. She was brown-haired, bird-boned, and industrious. There was little about prehistoric Plains Indian culture she didn’t know, and she’d spent a couple of years working as an ethnographer on a Sioux reservation to understand contemporary Indians better.

“It was a year before most of the Indians I knew stopped lying to me,” she once told me. “Eye contact makes Indians think you’re upset, and they’ll lie to you to make you more comfortable. They thought I was always upset.”

“You,” she said, cocking her head to catch me in her gaze, “would have gotten along fine, Edward.”

To me, Carol was not a sweet little wren at all. She had a power over me that I still do not completely understand. It was decidedly unwrenlike. Whenever we met, my unconscious mind took charge of my body. This is difficult to explain. Perhaps the best way is to describe Carol as a kind of *key*. She slipped into whatever lock kept my conscious mind battened down over what was underneath. She turned, and opened me up without the slightest difficulty. But she never turned willfully, I don’t think.

I met her at a pottery workshop up at Neah Bay on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State. I’d come to learn the traditional techniques of the Makah Indians; Carol was there because she had a Makah friend—a famous ceramicist—who was teaching the course. He introduced her to me, with a wink, as Little Wren. From the first, I felt her effect on me. We didn’t talk much at the workshop, but we went for walks together in the evenings, and Carol, who knew the stars, taught me constellations.

She slept with me several years later when she was doing graduate work in Missoula, Montana. She’d been very lonely and didn’t get along well with the few colleagues she had there. I think she was far out of their intellectual league, but she didn’t want to say this was so. I visited her over a weekend,

propositioned her on the Saturday night, and we made love, once. I drove back to Seattle across the Rocky Mountain outriders, the twisted basalts of the Columbia Plateau, rattled and only half-awake. The stars were bright, and I still remembered some of their names.

After that, every time I met Carol, the effect was even stronger. I am an artist—a potter—and I make my living off the upsurgings of my unconscious. The hinterlands of the mind are not utterly strange places to me. I cannot keep from having powerful urges—good and bad—but I like to think I have a certain social control over their expression. Whenever I saw Carol, that control vanished.

But it wasn't only desire that overcame me. Also, there were . . . other things, feelings from deep, deep in my nature. Deep in human nature. She eventually wound up in St. Louis, where she was exhibit director at the Museum of Natural History. I visited her there a few times. Once, we met on a Saturday at Blueberry Hill, a pub near Washington University, which I'd frequented when I was in graduate school. It was also near Forest Park, where Carol's museum was. I got there first and was drinking a beer when Carol came in.

I hadn't seen her in three years, and she was changed a bit. Her hair was shorter and she wore jewelry and a touch of makeup, smartly professional. I was in my usual mud-spattered tatters, and we were quite the mismatched pair. Yet it took only a moment, a beer, for her key to click into place. She politely turned me down, as she had all times but once. But getting over that wave of desire, another hit me, this one—it is hard to describe it even now—somehow deeper than the sexual.

Sitting there in cultured St. Louis, I suddenly pictured Carol and me fiercely running together. Running over a plain, a savannah, perhaps. Or through open woodland. It was a feeling, not an image, you see. The feeling was in me, in my blood and bones. My calves clenched and my toes curled with the intensity. It was a muscular joy, as if we were very hungry, and we were going to kill something, and eat it, and we were running it down.

We finished our beers, and Carol had to go back to work. I drove on, south down the Mississippi, traveling to some ceramics conference in Memphis, I think.

And as I drove into the twilight along the winding drainage of the eastern North American continent, somewhere south of Cape Girardeau I glanced through trees to the muddy river, and there in a little riverine estuary I saw a massive shape, humped and shaggy. I slammed on the brakes of my jeep, pulled over.

A woolly mammoth was standing up to its haunches in the water. It was drinking. It lifted its head, taller than the trees. Brown water dripped from its tusks.

“What,” I whispered. “What are you?”

I stared. It lowered its head—it must have been a he, with those tusks—he lowered his head and churned up the silt of the river bottom. He raised his head again with a mass of vegetation hanging from his small mouth. I watched him chew it.

When I opened the door of my jeep, he heard it click. I stumbled out—onto the road, I could have been killed by a passing car, so oblivious I was—toward the mammoth. He looked around, couldn't locate me with his weak eyes. But the sound was enough to spook him, and off he crashed into the bushes. I ran over, almost fell into the river, climbing down the embankment to the little cove where he'd been. There was nothing. But the water was swirling with mud and the nearby shrubs were chuffed up. I looked everywhere for a track, but found none.

So I drove away. There was nothing else to do. There are things in our lives, or I should say, there are

things in *my* life that happen, and are without explanation. I do not work ceaselessly seeking to explain them, and I do not think myself a deluded fool. I remember them, and cherish them if they are good, and stop questioning them when questioning finds no answer, but becomes merely a worrying at its own wounds.

Seeing the mammoth was such a thing. And it was directly related to seeing Carol Verdane earlier that day, of that I felt sure.

Two years later, I had moved back to the South, to Alabama, where I was raised. I was spending the summer on a man-made lake at the foot of the great mountain plateau called Lookout, which stretches a hundred miles from Chattanooga, Tennessee, across northwestern Georgia, and into rural northeastern Alabama. I lived in the cabin of a friend who was traveling overseas. The cabin had everything I needed: a place to sleep and cook—and a pottery studio, kiln, and a wheel.

The Little River is the only water in North America to flow entirely on the *top* of a mountain, and geologists are still puzzling out how that came to be. It has cut a deep gorge into the back of Lookout Mountain, with cliffs sometimes eight hundred feet high. The canyon floor is choked with vegetation, and no one lives down there. In those cliffs, there are caves—many of which have yet to be explored. The caves of Lookout Mountain are also famous for their pottery clays, and this was what had drawn my friend to these parts. I felt strange coming home after decades away. I'd left the South in my early twenties, seeking a wider, less provincial world, but the clays had called me back, as well. It was not long before I heard fishermen tell of a cave nearby, over on the wild side of the lake, where the Little River finally emptied itself down Lookout Mountain and into Weiss Lake.

Those who ventured it seldom went farther than a couple of hundred feet inside. There was water at the cave back, for one thing, and a great colony of bats who did not like to be disturbed during the day. What was more interesting to me than the stories was the fact, mentioned in passing, that going into the cave required good boots because the mud of that cave clung to the feet in big clumps and was almost impossible to get off.

To a potter, this sounded like heavenly stuff to work with.

I planned an expedition to the cave, but it was several weeks before I got the chance. First of all, getting there required a boat, and that was one thing my friend's place wasn't equipped with. Then I was away for a week teaching a course at an arts and crafts enclave in the Carolinas. While I was there, another potter friend of mine who lived nearby loaned me one of his two canoes for the summer. When finally I returned, it was midsummer—an awful, drippy time of the year in Alabama for those who were not brought up in the heat. For me, it felt very much like I was a kid again, just let out of school, and I was ready for an adventure.

I left the canoe strapped to the top of my jeep, brought my other gear in, then listened to my accumulated phone messages. To my surprise, there was one from Carol Verdane. She hardly ever called me—she was always quite busy in St. Louis, and usually spent what free time she had with her family in Madison, Wisconsin. But she was going to be attending a curators' conference in Atlanta, had decided to drive down, and wanted to know if she could swing by on her way back to St. Louis. I checked the date on the machine and found that her conference was actually being held at that very moment.

It took five or six calls to finally locate her, but I found that she was still up for a visit, and had been disappointed that I wasn't around. I invited her over, gave her directions, and the next day, there in my borrowed cabin was Carol Verdane, changing out of her city duds into jeans and a T-shirt.

Even then, I felt the key turning, the upsurge of—whatever it was she aroused, produced, called forth, in

me. The primitive? That wasn't quite it, but close. But I was not a complete boor, and I controlled myself well enough. Christ, she's come out here for a bit of relaxation, I thought. Not to get her bones jumped before she's got a breath of the air.

We went down to my dock, drank—whiskey for me, gin for Carol—and talked until the sun set and the moon rose full over the bow of Dirtseller Mountain away east. There was a blanket of insects a quarter mile high in that southern summer atmosphere. Near the lake surface, bass breached, snatched, and descended back to their fishy dank. Just above them, swallows flitted in quick curves and dives—always keeping to the same level, the same height above the water—back and forth to feed the gapes of their chicks in nests on the shore banks. High in the sky, in the gloaming, Carol saw bats and pointed them out to me. They flew in great three-dimensional arcs, in controlled leathery tumble, as if a man were falling about weightless in the dark blue sky, clothed in a flapping raincoat.

“There,” Carol said, pointing. “There’s another. So quiet. I’ll bet the air is full of their crying, if we could only hear it.”

I nodded, sipped my cold water whiskey, and told Carol about the cave. We carried the canoe to the lake at dawn the next morning and were on our way to the mouth of the Little River as the sun rose, following almost exactly the path of the last night’s moon, over the green hump of Dirtseller Mountain.

We paddled in silence through the bright morning. We passed Canadian geese—some of them remained year round on Weiss—and a brace of great blue herons, hunting snakes and frogs along the banks of an island. Carol gasped at the beauty of the birds, and I told her to watch them for a while, and I would paddle. We silently slid past them and into the river course.

I followed the fishermen’s directions as best I remembered and soon found a birch tree with long hatches, which was the cave’s marker. We landed the canoe, and bringing headlamps and day packs, we walked up the hill. The cave was not far, perhaps two hundred feet. It opened up grandly; there was at least a twenty-foot clearance over our heads, and forty feet on either side of us. The way down was steep, but not unmanageable, and we slipped and slid our way down to the main cavern. I stooped and fingered the ground. Wonderful potter’s clay, just waiting to be ashed and thrown on my wheel.

Stalactites hung from the ceiling, and a few stalagmites huddled in clumps on the floor. Our lights revealed that they’d been blackened by the oily touch of many human hands. There was a strange white noise that filled the air.

“Is that water, falling down a hole?” I said.

Carol listened for a moment. “No,” she said. “Bats.”

And it was. The farther back in the cave we went, the louder the sound grew until there was no mistaking it, or the smell of the bat guano. When they roosted, bats were audible. And as we got nearer, they became agitated. Shining my light down the cave’s passageway, I could see them dart in and out of the beam, looking like big, big moths.

Carol walked on ahead. She shone her light upward. The ceiling was filled with cracks and crevices, all jammed with what looked like a brown goo—but it was bats, clumped together, to keep each other and their babies warm.

“I don’t think they’ll bother us,” she said.

“But they sure don’t like us,” I added. “Maybe we should respect that.”

“They’ll get used to us,” she said. “I want to check for—signs of habitation.” She continued back. I suppressed a shudder, and followed after. I felt something touch my shoulder—a bat, I thought. I reached to swat it, convinced against all reason that it was sucking my blood. My palm came away dark.

“Oh,” I said, “shit.”

From ahead came a splashing noise. Carol had found water and stepped down into it.

“Let’s follow this a ways,” she said. “This really interests me.”

“Carol, isn’t this dangerous?” I said. “I mean, we have no idea—”

“—oh, I think it will be all right,” she called back to me. “Follow me.”

We slogged forward through utterly still water. My boots sank into the silt on the bottom, and training my light downward, I could not see the tops of my feet. We walked quite a distance back, I reluctantly, Carol plodding determinedly ahead. Finally, she stopped.

“Aha,” she said.

“What?” I came up beside her, looked to where her headlamp was shining.

There, on a small dry ledge, were perched two canoes. We went over to them. Each was wooden and of a piece, made from a single log. They were as black as pitch, as if they’d been smoked and hardened in a fire.

“These can’t be . . . do you think they’re old, Carol?”

She ran her hand along the curved stern of one of the canoes. “I don’t know,” she said. “Let’s see if they float.”

“But doesn’t that violate some, you know, archaeological tenet or something?”

“Yes, but I’m quite wet,” she said. “And I want to go deeper.”

“We could go back and get our canoe,” I said, weakly.

Carol was already tugging one of the canoes from the ledge. It slid into the water with a splash.

“What about—”

She reached inside the canoe and extracted a wooden pole, about four feet long.

“—paddles,” I said.

Both canoes were only big enough for one person, so I pulled down the other. It too had a push pole inside it. Carol pulled herself out of the water and onto the ledge. From there, she easily stepped into one of the canoes. She sat down and laid her day pack in front of her. I followed her example and, with a bit of teetering, got into the other. We continued back into the cave.

After a while, the sound of the bats receded behind us, for which I was heartily glad. A while longer, though, and the ceiling began to slope downward. Soon I was ducking to avoid masses of rock that hung down just waiting to bang a head. A couple of times, the rock succeeded. Finally, we came to a narrow place where the sides and ceiling came together. It was just big enough to fit a canoe if the paddler got on his back and pushed himself along with his hands against the ceiling.

“Uh, Carol, don’t you think this is far enough?” I said. She looked very much like she was preparing to go through the opening. “I mean, we could get stuck.”

Instead of answering me, Carol reached up and clicked her light off. Mine was still on, so I could see her there, floating in front of me in the black canoe.

“It isn’t quite far enough yet,” she said. “Really, Edward, I know you are getting a bit spooked, but if you’ll just come along with me a bit farther . . . there’s some clever pottery. I believe you’ll find it very interesting.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “And how do you know?”

“Well, stay if you must,” she said. And she poled one more time, maneuvering her canoe into the opening, then leaned back and pulled herself in. I watched as the canoe slid forward, its sides clunking against the rock. I watched as the stern disappeared, black glint into utter blackness. After a moment, staying seemed more frightening than following. I pushed forward and entered the hole.

I pawed myself along for some time. Finally, the closeness began to get to me, and I had to stop and get my breathing under control. “Carol!” I called. “Anything yet?”

Her voice came back, muffled but comprehensible. “Just a little farther.”

I gathered what wits I had and continued on. And she was right. In a moment I began to smell better air. Good air, even. And then, with a final push, I was out of the tunnel. I was out of the cave. I was in a still woodland pool, drifting in sunlight, sweet sunlight.

“There now,” Carol said. I looked around, but all was so bright, so impossibly bright, I couldn’t locate her. “Didn’t I tell you it would be all right?”

“Where the hell are we?” I asked, and then for good measure: “Where the *hell* are we?”

“This is—” she started to say. “I’ve been here before,” she continued.

Finally, my eyes adjusted. We were in a little pond, surrounded by trees. Something buzzed by my head, checked me out, and then buzzed on, iridescent. A dragonfly. At the end of the pond, a creek flowed out and disappeared in closely crowded trees. Deciduous trees—oak, hickory, maple. I recognized them. I’d learned them as a boy.

“This isn’t the Paleozoic,” I said, somehow relieved to have that cleared up. No dinosaurs; it was a good thing that there would be no dinosaurs.

“Heavens, no,” said Carol. “More like the *Paleolithic*.”

“Oh.”

“But not really.”

“No?”

“I’ve been coming here every year,” she said. “Since I was a girl. I’ve wanted to share it with someone for a long time.”

“Sort of your . . . summer place?”

“Yes, exactly,” she said, smiling. “Come on, though. They’re waiting.”

“Who is they?”

“Some people I want you to meet.”

It was then that I noticed that she’d taken off her glasses. This was pretty amazing because Carol could not see a half inch in front of her face without them—back in . . . reality. I realized that this was the first time I’d seen her unmagnified eyes since that evening in Montana so long ago.

She poled her canoe toward the end of the pool, and went out and down the stream. It was narrow, but not too narrow for the canoes. And it flowed fast enough for us to stop pushing and let it carry us along through the woods.

“Isn’t this fun?” Carol said. “Things are very easy here, sometimes.”

Soon the little stream widened out, and then it emptied into a bigger creek, this one with shoals that we had to negotiate. Then the creek flowed into flat bottomlands and left the rocks behind. We poled along for an hour at least. The sun grew high, and I took sunblock from my pack and smeared it on my face and arms.

“Want some?” I asked Carol. For some reason, this greatly amused her. She shook her head, and continued on. After another long stretch of time—I had no watch and I was losing all track of it—I saw smoke up ahead. We came to two small hills, one on either side of the creek.

And below the hills, dwellings. Houses made from pole, grass thatch, and bark. And people. Indians. Carol pushed her canoe over to the bank, and I followed along beside her. We beached the canoes, and there we stood. The people gathered round us—women, men, children who ran up and touched Carol’s hands, stroked her hips and thighs, then ran away giggling.

“Closi wa nathay,” she said, or something that sounded like that. “Mel na brodu Edward.” She pointed to me. Some of the people looked at me and smiled. A man walked up to me with quick strides and slapped me on the shoulder. I stood there looking bewildered, and he broke into a great guffaw.

“Hega thinks you are very greasy,” Carol said. “A tall man, but very greasy.”

I was tall, compared to these people, although I stand only five nine or so. Carol spoke with them further, and then we all went to the dwellings, to a fire ring that was in the middle of them. Something that smelled delicious was roasting there on a stone. I looked closer, and saw that it was a tortilla. There was a pile of them on another stone near to the fire, keeping warm. We all sat down on our haunches, and the tortillas were passed around.

“What do you think?” Carol said. “Good?”

“Wonderful,” I replied between bites. “But this isn’t quite corn, is it? It’s too . . . wild tasting.”

“Teosinte,” she said. “The grandmother of maize.”

“Eh? Eh?” Hega said, looking at me.

“How do you say ‘tastes good’?” I asked Carol.

“Nathay meda.”

“Nathay meda,” I told Hega. “Nathay very meda.”

We slept outside, by the dying fire, under the stars. They were right. They were the Earth’s stars. That

night was the second time Carol and I made love. We did it in plain sight of the people, but they discreetly turned their heads. They were used to granting privacy in this way, I gathered. Carol was a wonder of trembling warmth in my arms. I held her tight and felt her heart beating so fast I was afraid it might burst, but she pulled me down and into her, deeply into her, and I forgot about that and felt her quivering beneath me, and I was filled with animal joy.

Afterward, she lay with her head on my shoulder. She was unaccountably sobbing, quietly.

“Hold me,” she said. “Oh, hold me close.”

So I hugged her against the chill of the night.

When I awoke in the morning, Carol was already up, helping the women to gather sticks for the fire. The men—except for the old men—were nowhere to be seen. We ate tortillas, standing and moving around the fire, avoiding the shifting smoke.

“All right,” I said after breakfast. “Where are we in time?”

“We’re not,” Carol replied. “As nearly as I can determine.”

“Then where are we—period?” I asked.

“I think of it as an . . . inversion.”

“An inversion? Of what?”

“A mental inversion. It’s as if we’ve turned our personalities inside out. What is deep down gets exposed.”

“My insides are filled with prehistoric Indians? That is who I assume these people are.”

“Well, yes. You obviously have a bit of Indian blood in you. I do, too. And we’re in America, after all. Don’t you think there’s a New World topography on the inside of us, just as there is outside?”

“I hadn’t thought so.”

“Well, truthfully, anything I say is only a guess. I’m an ethnographer, for heaven’s sake, a museum administrator—not a cognitive psychologist or a theoretical physicist.”

“Have you spoken to any theoretical physicists about this?”

“No. I haven’t found anyone else who . . . I just *knew* you’d be able to come along with me, Edward. There’s something that happens when we’re together—something not rational.”

“You’ve felt it? You’ve felt it, too?”

“Of course I’ve felt it. You know, you might even be able to do it by yourself, now that you know the way.”

“Through that cave? I don’t think so.”

“There are lots of ways. I only came that way because it was . . . metaphorically correct. I thought it would be easier for you.”

“Easier. That scared the shit out me, going through there.”

“Yes, well, fright sometimes helps in finding the way.”

“I don’t like being frightened.”

“There are other ways.”

“And I presume there’s a way back home?”

Carol was quiet for a moment. “Oh,” she said. “Yes. We’ll be going back home soon.”

But that was when I noticed the pottery. Carol was right, it was fascinating stuff. They didn’t turn it on a wheel, but somehow they were able to hand-work it into magnificent shapes. Some of the vessels were so far from having any useful form that they must have been done solely for art’s sake.

One of the old men took me aside—his name was Bashi—took me down to the creek bank. Not far from the village, there was a little quarry that he’d dug into a clay bank. We gathered clay together and took it back to the village. Then he showed me how to mold it. His fine bronze hands were sure and quick, beautiful tools, gleaming wet with creek water as he continually dipped them to keep them moist. I’d never seen a potter work so fast, turning the clay, working it up and out. He got a thinner, taller pot out of his little dab than many professional potters I know could have gotten using a wheel. Bashi then watched me work a pot, showing me a trick here and there. We set them in a wood-burning kiln that Bashi explained—with hand signals and drawings—he fired twice a month, at new and full moon.

And these Indians—my interior Indians—had discovered rakku. Bashi showed me a way to work patterns into the rakku scatter, too, by applying glazes here and there to keep the crazed lines from forming. It was masterful stuff, like nothing I’d ever seen before. Rakku is produced by dipping the hot pot into some paperlike mass. Bashi showed me how they mixed the glazes. He used green straw from the long leaf pine to get the cracks so fine.

Before I knew it, the afternoon had passed, and the younger men returned. Some of them had been hunting, for they brought back rabbit and squirrel. Some had been on the hills all day—for these were not hills at all, but temple mounds, constructed by the people, one basket of earth at a time. About half the men in the village were priests, Carol told me, and this was a center of worship for a whole river valley. These men had spent the day on the tops of the mounds, burning cedar incense and praying to their gods.

“Seems like a good arrangement,” I commented. “The men get to sit around and pray, while the women and the old folks do all the work.”

“Yes, well, the men don’t do this every day,” Carol said. “They work in the fields and hunt. These people are just learning to cultivate teosinte. Soon it will become maize.”

“Why are they doing praying and such today?” I asked. “Because we’re here?”

“Because *I’m* here,” Carol said. She took my hand and led me down to the water. We lay in the sand of the creek bank and pulled the black canoes about us in a “v” for a bit of privacy. We didn’t make love, though I wanted to. Instead, Carol seemed sad, and I held her again as the sun went down and the water flowed.

“When morning comes,” she said, “do not do anything to interfere with what’s happening, no matter how much you want to.”

“Why?” I asked. “What’s going to happen?”

“I . . . I don’t want to tell you,” she said. “Just promise me.”

“How can I promise such a thing?”

“Promise.”

“All right. I promise.”

“And Edward . . .”

“Yes.”

“Stay with me. Stay with me until it’s over.”

“I will,” I replied, not knowing what I was saying. “I will stay with you.”

The men came for her in the morning, the priests. They motioned for her to get up, and Carol quickly rose and quietly followed them. She was barefoot. I yanked on my boots and stumbled along behind. No one paid any attention to me. There were more canoes on the creek bank now, many more—all black. Carol got into a large one, with a man at the stern, and a woman at the prow. As they poled away from the bank, the woman began a soft, low wailing.

I dragged my canoe into the water, and joined the throng that was following the boat Carol was in. We did not go far, perhaps a half mile. There was a wide sandbar where the creek meandered, and we beached our canoes there. The two—the man and the wailing woman—led Carol up the bank and toward what I thought was a meadow. But it was not a meadow. It was a field, obviously just tilled and planted. We—at least fifty other people—followed.

At the edge of the field was a line of trees. Carol stepped through the trees. We all stepped through the trees.

And there we stood on an asphalt roadway.

It was crumbled and overgrown, but there was no doubt. This was a paved road. And it was a road that I recognized. The road that went from Gaylesville to Leesburg, and crossed the Little River just north of my friend’s cabin. Alabama Highway 273. The W.M. “Country” Brown Bypass.

The people gathered in a circle about Carol. She stood in the middle of 273, on the dash of a fading white lane marker. Hega stepped forward. Carol quickly unzipped her jeans. She stepped out of them. She unbuttoned her blouse and let it fall to the ground. And there she stood naked, white, stippled with brown freckles. Beautiful in the morning light. But so small and vulnerable there. For the first time, she *did* look like a wren to me. A quivering little bird, trapped in our circle.

Both of his hands held small corn seed—teosinte, it must be. These he used to anoint Carol’s head, and to scatter at her feet. She stood quietly, a look of sad determination on her face.

After the scatter of the seed, she lay down upon the road way. She stretched out her arms and put her legs together.

No, I thought. Whatever will happen next cannot, must not. But it did. Hega stepped back.

He motioned to three women, who came forward and held Carol’s arms and feet taut. Then two men came.

In each man’s right hand was a big rock. In his left hand were finely carved stakes. Each was about the size and thickness of a railroad spike.

I gasped. This was too much. I stepped forward. The crowd turned to look at me, murmured. I saw Bashi, my pottery teacher, shaking his finger, in these people's gesture for "no."

"Edward," Carol said clearly. "Remember your promise."

Hega moved in front of me and gently, but firmly, pushed me back into the circle. He stood beside me.

And then the two men nailed Carol to Highway 273. They put a stake through either wrist, and one through both feet. After the stone points were through her flesh, the men beat them hard and drove them into the asphalt underneath. They crucified Carol Verdance upon the ground.

She whimpered when the first blow was struck, but did not cry out. And after that, no matter how hard they pounded, she made not a sound. When the men were done, they stepped away. The women who had been holding Carol's arms and legs stood up, too.

Hega again scattered teosinte upon Carol and upon the ground. The seed mixed with her flowing blood. Then he quickly turned, as if he could not longer bear the sight, and strode away. The other villagers—to a man, woman and, child—did likewise. They cast teosinte grain upon Carol's splayed body, then followed after Hega.

Leaving me. Leaving me with Carol Verdane.

I went to sit beside her on the pavement.

"What has happened?" I said. "What has happened to you?"

"Edward," she whispered. "Thank you for being here. Thank you, my friend."

"I . . . how can I . . . is this the future? Is this the future we have in store?"

"No, Edward. It is what I said it was."

"Inside?"

"Yes."

"I don't want this inside me."

"Inside us all," Carol said. "This is how it happens. This is how we imagined maize into being. Corn doesn't reseed itself, you know. We have to keep imagining it."

"I don't understand." I was crying now. Carol's bleeding had slowed. The hot sun was rising. I was crying and could not stop.

"Edward," she said. "Oh, Edward." There she was, nailed to the ground, and she was comforting me.

"It hurts so," she said.

"Let me take them out, the stakes."

"You know you must not."

"Oh, Carol."

"But it hurts," she said. "It always hurts so much."

The sun was hot this day, and there were no clouds. I took off my shirt and used it to shade her eyes.

After some hours, she had trouble breathing. She arched her back and gasped for air. I saw that the sun was blistering her fair skin, her fair breasts.

"I'm so thirsty," she said at noon. "I'm so thirsty, Edward."

"I'll bring you water," I said. "I can bring you water." I stumbled from the road, then realized I had nothing to carry the water in, no vessel. I went back and tore a strip from my shirt and doused it in the river.

When I returned, Carol had passed out. I dribbled water on her lips, on her chest and legs. I sat beside her and listened to her labored breathing. I rocked back and forth, thinking of everything, thinking of nothing. Near sunset, she arched her back one last time, could not catch a breath. Her breathing stopped. With a sigh, she lay back down flat against the asphalt.

"No," I said. "Oh God, no." And I had not cried all my tears after all. Sometime later, night fell. I crawled to the edge of the highway, and collapsed into the high grass there.

I awoke to the sound of a pickup truck whizzing by.

No! I thought. They'll hit her!

I sprang to my feet, but it was too late. And not too late. For there was no sign of Carol's body upon the highway. No trace of blood. I stood there in the empty road and watched the sun rise through the trees, through the kudzu. After a time, I wandered home in a daze.

When I arrived, I smelled pancakes. Pancakes cooking on my stove. I hurried inside, and she was there. Carol was there, holding a spatula over my cast-iron skillet.

"You do want breakfast?" she asked.

"How did you—"

"I decided to come out at the cave," she said. "So I could bring the canoe back."

"Was it? Was I dreaming?"

"Oh no," Carol said, not smiling now. "Oh no. Where's your day pack, for instance? Where's your shirt?"

And she was right. I was naked above the waist.

I stumbled in, went to the refrigerator, and got out the orange juice. I drained almost half a gallon.

"What's it like to be dead?" I finally asked.

"I don't remember," she said. "I never remember. I'm just back here. Or wherever I left from."

"Why do you go back?"

"So it can happen."

"So what can happen?"

"Maize."

“Why . . . what about before—”

“There were others before me, I think. There have always been others.”

“And me?” But I didn’t really care about that.

“The Morning Star. The Friend to the Sun, I suppose. But you must be something like that, or you wouldn’t have been able to go there in the first place. We would not have had the . . . resonance we do with one another. The primitive resonance.”

“How do you feel?” This was really what I cared about.

Carol laughed and flipped a pancake. “Like a new woman,” she said. “I always feel like a new woman after that.”

Carol left the next day, for she had to be back in St. Louis for work. For a time—weeks—I stuck to making pots and not thinking too much. That was the best thing to do, the only thing. And I returned the canoe to where it came from in the Carolinas. I did not go back to the cave.

But I did try out that new rakku technique, using the glazing methods I discovered over there—wherever there is. I’m doing the best work of my life here in this cabin on the lake. But my friend will return soon, and I must move on.

I wonder if Carol was right.

“You might be able to do it yourself, now that you know the way,” she’d said.

They killed her. They nailed her to a road and she bled and died.

And she returned. Like the planted maize, she returned.

So much that our lives—that human life—is built upon, made from, is that which is maybe better left forgotten. Yet humans have shaped pots for tens of thousands of years. We’ve been molders of clay almost as long as we’ve been hunters of beasts, longer than we have been planters of grain. There must be so much that was lost, but not really, truly lost. So much that is still there, somewhere inside us, waiting to be rediscovered.

But soon my friend will return soon from his travels. And then I must decide whether or not I will cross the lake in a black canoe.

Death of Reason

The sky was liquid iron at sunset. The clouds were fiery slag. The scramjet carrying me home banked over downtown Birmingham on approach to the airport. Up on Red Mountain, the Vulcan’s torch flamed scarlet for death—the beacon for another traffic accident sponged from the pavement of the city. Twenty-four hours of anonymous remembrance, then maybe the giant iron statue’s torch would burn green until somebody else spilled himself out on the black asphalt. The custom was over a hundred years old now, but people kept obliging. I once knew the woman whose job it was to throw the switch on the light. I knew her well. Abby would always have work.

But Vulcan's torch would never burn for my grandfather. His time-sharing license had expired on Maturicell two days ago. He died in his sleep. Peacefully. As they say.

The scramjet turned thrusters down and slotted into a bay at Municipal. Guide lasers flared in long lines of neon Morse code outside the window as the beams passed into and out of pockets of humidity. It was time to disembark, but I continued to gaze out at the sky full of fire and light. Twilight in the Heart of Dixie, bloody and wringing wet as usual. Welcome home, Andy Harco. Back to the city where you were poured and formed. Back to the grindstone that put the edge to your soul.

"You get too hot, and you'll lose your temper," my old friend Thaddeus the poet used to say. I guess that's what happened; that's why I left. I lost my temper in both senses of the word. But in Seattle I'd hardened the edge once again. Birmingham no longer had what it took to dull me down. And I cut back now.

I snugged my op-eds onto my nose, then gathered my wits from under the seat and out of the overhead compartment. Along with my briefcase full of peripherals, I had a bag of toiletries, a plastic Glock nine-millimeter seventeen-shot automatic, and my good blue interviewing suit and wing tips. I had not worn the suit for eight years, but I was reasonably certain it still fit. Granddaddy's funeral was tomorrow evening. I would have time to get it altered if it didn't. I had flown out of Seattle in gray shorts and a T-shirt with the faded hologo of a science-fiction convention on the chest. People had given me strange looks back there, for Seattle was in the midst of a cold snap—the temperatures were hovering in the mid-fifties in August—due to some frigid air that had descended from the Arctic. I was, however, dressed perfectly for Alabama.

I felt like a returning tourist as I got off the plane. In a way, I was. I'd been on a long vacation from Birmingham. Eight years, for my health. That is, if I'd hung around eight years ago, a bullet would have just ruined the nice gray interior of my skull. At least, that's what Freddy Pupillina had told me—more or less—when he sent me the fistful of dead roses. Southern gangsters think they're so damn subtle and genteel. But perfume on a skunk accentuates the stink even more.

But that was eight years ago, back when I was a rookie rental for the Birmingham P.D. and an unlicensed fabulist. I'd had few friends, and an extremely abrasive manner. These days, I have more friends.

I wouldn't be seeing Abby, but Thaddeus was a friend. I would look him up after the funeral. It had been a long time since we'd gotten together in person.

I should have expected the snoops to pattern me as soon as I stepped off the jet. For the most part, the only people who travel in actual are high-level business jocks, Ideal coordinating nodes, rich eccentrics—and terrorists. Guess which profile I matched up with? I suppose I was preoccupied with thoughts of Granddaddy, maybe of Abby, so I wasn't paying a lot of attention. While I didn't plan on seeing Abby ever again, after seeing the Vulcan from the air, she was heavily on my mind.

The snoop interceptor was a Seguridad 50 crank, maybe three or four years old. Cheap Polish bionics suspended in a Mexican-made shell. The City of Birmingham never had been exactly on the cutting edge of technology. I clicked up the 50's specs in the upper right-hand corner of my op-eds and gave them a quick glance. The 50's innards were standard bionic sludge. Its force escalator was knock-out gas, not a very thoughtful option for use in a crowded corridor, such as are found, for example, in airports. Those wacky Poles.

"Mr. Harco, may I have your attention," the crank said. The voice synth needed major adjustment. It was low filtering, and the thing sounded like a rusted-out saxophone. How could it get that grating nasal trill to come out when it didn't even have a nose? Ah, the mysteries of science.

“What is it?” I replied through tight lips. I pointedly looked away from the 50. Who knows? Maybe the thing had enough brains to be insulted. I hoped so.

“Please accompany me,” said the crank. Then red letters flashed across the periphery of my op-eds. MR. HARCO, YOU ARE REQUESTED TO FOLLOW THE ROBOT TO AIRPORT SECURITY SCREENING. PLEASE COMPLY. The font was crude, but 3-D. I have organic inner lenses in my eyewear—I don’t skimp on any of my peripherals—and the words burned on the cellwork of my op-eds like lash welts.

I blinked twice and popped up my custom V-trace menu. It had cost me six thousand, a chip of my skull’s parietal plate, and a year of bureaupain to get a license for the junk. It was not my most expensive piece of exotic junk, but it was damned near. My brain is probably as much vat-formed gray matter as it is natural—and that’s not counting the hardware interfaces.

I had no right to use the V-trace in the present circumstance, of course, but if this asshole who was cowboying me brought me up for review, he’d be asking for suspension along with me. Assuming he was a rent-a-cop to begin with. I had better stop making assumptions, I told myself, and start dealing with this shit.

I blinked the cursor to ROOT AND BURN with my left eye and closed both eyes to activate it. The message disappeared from my op-eds. I have good junk. Not the best. My junk is not really integrated into me, like that of the nodes and the rich. I couldn’t make it work without op-eds. But my junk is quality stuff when combined with my eyewear. Within a second, the status display spread across my field of vision, and iconed the real world into a little block in the lower right-hand corner of the virtual.

SIGNAL ROOTED. FEED PROTECTED. BURN OPTIONS:

1. ORIGINATING DEVICE

2. ORIGINATING CONTROLLER

3. GENERAL BURN

I chose number 2, then iconed back to reality. The crank stood absolutely still for a long moment, and I stared at it. Somewhere, someone was receiving a nasty surprise in their eyewear.

The crank finally moved. It opened a door in its casing and extended a pink tube that looked for all the world like a shriveled penis. The crank sprayed knockout gas like a scared puppy pisses. It seemed to dribble out. The chemicals probably hadn’t been changed in years, and the crank was more electric than biologic, so it didn’t have the guts to nurture complex chemicals indefinitely.

The gas did sublimate to some degree, however. Although, fortunately, the corridor was mostly clear, one of the gate attendants was walking by. The stuff billowed lazily about, and after she got a whiff of it, she started to run away. Too late. She dropped onto the carpeted floor with a dull thump.

I, of course, have been filtered since Justcorp modified me at the Academy eight years ago. Justcorp does a first-rate job. It took the crank—or whoever was directing it—a moment to figure this out. It had been squirting me like I was a cockroach that was slow to die.

I walked over and made sure that the attendant was all right. Looked like she’d taken the fall on her side and was only bruised. No op-eds. As I felt her head to make sure nothing was cracked, my fingers closed around the feedhorn wart at the back of her neck. An optical bundle in a delta configuration. She was a node with fairly expensive hardwiring. Her brain belonged to another. I quickly stopped worrying too much about her well-being. Worrying about a node is like caring about the fate of a particular dead skin cell. And anyway, the Ideal would provide, or not, as it saw fit. I wondered, vaguely, which Ideal

she belonged to.

Some of the others who were waiting on flights began to gather around the two of us. Idiots. What if I *were* a terrorist and in need of a hostage?

“Mr. Harco,” whined the crank.” We are prepared to activate all systems to persuade you to accompany me. Please accompany me.”

Big vocabulary these security cranks have.

I said nothing, but nodded for the thing to lead the way. May as well get the checkout over with and be on my way. I was on personal leave, for Christ’s sake, with specific instructions from management to stay out of trouble.

One nondescript corridor led to another until we descended an airtube into the bowels of the complex. I felt like I was being swallowed. Security always seemed to pick the most cheerless locations for offices.

The duty officer’s eyelids were charred, and he looked like a raccoon, although his appearance wasn’t that much different from what it had been before I’d burned his eyewear out, I was sure. Low-order security always wore those smoked plastic op-eds that look like windows into a black void. This guy’s own burned-out op-eds were lying, twisted and pitiful, on the desk before him. Yet even with the black eyes, I recognized the fellow.

Ed Bernam. Dandy Ed, we used to call him. He was a Guardian rental, and fit that agency’s stereotype to a T. Big, vain, mean—and unable to control snot and fart production. Guardian’s body mods on new employees were quick and cheap. The procedure adversely affected the guts and nasal tract.

Bernam picked his nose continually, but dressed well, as if he were trying to compensate for the shabbiness of his innards. He wore a blue and white uniform with a fully animated holoshield undulating on his chest. No wonder the airport couldn’t afford state-of-the-art cranks; it was dropping all its money on sparklies for the rentals. Or, knowing Bernam, he paid for his own.

“Hello, Ed. Frontline monitor still? Isn’t this supposed to be a slot to break rookies’ balls?”

Bernam scowled and sank back into the protection of his control chair.

“*Meander*Harco, what the hell are you doing in my airport?” he growled. He remembered me, evidently. Or at least remembered the fact that I hated my given name.

“Personal business,” I replied with a neutral voice. I’d had my fun with him, and now I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

“We’ll see,” he said. “The junk has flagged you. I’m going to have to pull and comp your file.”

“I’m not a terrorist, Ed.”

“We’ll see.”

Shit. This was going to take time. Public security junk is notoriously slow compared to P.D. or private corporation. It still has to access central databases, for Christ’s sake! And Bernam was going to run a full comparison, there was no doubt of that, even though there was not a reason on Earth why a terrorist would get himself doctored up to look like me. I glanced around for a chair. There was none other than the one Bernam’s fat ass was occupying, of course. That was the way of such offices. I set my suitcase and my briefcase full of peripherals down on the desks in front of him, further mangling his ruined op-eds.

Dandy Ed Bernam watched me through his raccoon mask. I checked again to make sure it *was* him before me, wishing I were plugged into the briefcase. I had downloaded all of my long-term memory into a biostatic memory froth I'd paid a half-year's salary for. That's one reason I don't let the briefcase get too far away from me. I did it so as to have more room in the old noggin for junk interface algorithms . . . and other things. What was left in my brain was memories with cheated links and little redundancy. The guy who installed it—the best in the field—told me it was foolproof, nonetheless. And so far, I hadn't found any blank spots.

This was Bernam, all right. He'd been a two-year man when I came on with the Birmingham P.D. Most Guardian rentals stay on patrol, but Bernam had worked his way up to plainclothes. Someone had joked that he did it all so that he could dress the way he wanted to every day.

Whatever the case, he hadn't done well in Vice. Management had shuffled him around a couple of times before busting him back down to patrol. Ed couldn't take it, and broke his lease. Management was not exactly mortified to see him go, especially since Guardian refunded the deposit on him. But it seems the corporation got back at Ed for losing them money by contracting him out only to places with strict uniform requirements. No more fancy duds for Ed. Yet I could see that he still had his snot problem.

What I remember most about Ed is from the day before my arraignment. He was cleaning out his locker after breaking his lease. The locker was full of designer jeans. Ed liked to affect that he was big-time management in those days. He took the jeans out and neatly folded them, then stacked them in a vinyl bag—and appeared to be inventorying them as well. Ed acted like he didn't notice me as I got dressed in my blues, but he stopped with the jeans when I closed my locker door. He looked at me hard, and I stared back.

“What the hell do you think this is?” he asked me. “The twentieth century?”

I suppose he meant that I didn't understand the intricacies of the situation I had gotten myself into, the fact that a rookie did not step on toes—particularly toes as sensitive as Freddy Pupillina's and the Ideal to which he paid tribute.

The Birmingham P.D. and the Mafia had had a good-old-boy understanding for over a hundred years, and I'd stepped over the boundaries with my bust of Freddy for an assassination he'd been stupid enough to attend to in person. But that hit had stepped over my boundaries.

The poor guy he killed had been a bug junkie for years—just one of the burnouts hanging out on Twentieth Street with mental parasites eating their every thought almost before they formed it. When I was on patrol, I took a liking to this guy. He took care of stray dogs. His problem was that he had a big mouth.

This bugman just happened to look at Freddy wrong one day and say something stupid. The nanobugs had eaten the poor guy's soul like gas on Styrofoam. *Fuck* the twenty-first century. *Fuck* the Family and its new and improved ways to hurt people.

Though of course I didn't say a damned thing to Bernam at the time, I gave his question some thought. I'm still giving it thought. Maybe this century isn't the one I would have chosen had I been given the option. Well, the fucking times had chosen *me*, and would just have to put up with my existence.

The airport junk took fifteen minutes to complete its report. Bernam had to listen to it aloud, since his op-eds were crisped.

“Meander Harco, age thirty, 6'0", eyes brown, hair brown, race mulatto.” At least this voice synthesizer had the pleasant accent of a Southern woman. Made it easier to hear all the personal shit spoken aloud.

But not that easy. “Born 12/21/65, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, contract birth, parents Julia Monroe Delacroix, mother, Marvin Harco 473A, father. Licensed cohabitation 3/15/85–12/22/88 with Abigail Wu Brimly, Birmingham, Alabama, no offspring. Education: graduated Banks High School, Birmingham—”

“Skip to the currents,” Bernam grunted. He dribbled a little spit onto his chin when he spoke. It sat there for a while, glistening in a yellow sort of way. Finally, he took out a paisley handkerchief and delicately wiped it away. Classy guy, Ed.

“Employed 2087–present by Justcorp Criminology. Leased since January 2089 to Seattle Police Department, homicide. Current departmental rank, Lieutenant. Licensing to follow: Grade 19 depth investigations, including virtual slayings. Section B coda use of harmful force, with an exemption in part 2, subparagraph 4 for biomodifications in hands, elbows, and torso.” Which meant I had built-in brass knuckles—among other neat additions. “Option 4 for use of deadly force.” Bernam smiled. He knew the kind of restrictions they had in Seattle for a license to kill. At Option 4, it was very doubtful that my junk could process the legalities of response in time for me to shoot back if someone was trying to blow me away. “License for (1) Remington angular electrochemical stungun, serial number on request. (2) Glock polymer nine-millimeter automatic pistol, serial number on request. (3) Schrade two-inch boot devices. (4) Bullard Forensics Portalab III. (5) Archco Enhanced Op-Eds—”

“Fucking illegally modified—” Bernam muttered.

“With licensed enhancements (1)—”

“Fuck the enhancements,” said Bernam. The junk was smart enough not to try and interpret Bernam’s orders literally. It skipped to the next section.

“F.A. license HARCO234319599 for genre constructions, science fiction.”

“Huh?” said Bernam in his inimitable way.

“I write science-fiction stories on the side,” I replied. “Got a problem with that?”

“You’re full of shit.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“Commendations, Official Evaluations, Resolved Offenses, and Unlicensed Activities. Warning: listing will take approximately twenty minutes for oral report.”

“Skip it. Outstandings?”

“1/3/89, Dereliction of Duty, Birmingham Police Department, on Article 6, judicial expert system appeal. Review due 8/97.”

“So,” said Bernam. “Going to get sentenced soon?”

“Going to get cleared soon,” I said. “You bastard.” I said it without heat, and Bernam grinned evilly. I wasn’t sure, but I thought he was wearing a thin coating of lipstick.

“Give me the comp,” he told the computer.

The lights went down and the infrared came on. Sensors popped from the wall and shone darkly. Another five minutes passed. Finally, the lights came back on and the junk spoke up. “Behavioral and

somatic patterns: 97 percent match. Lacking genetic evaluation—”

“I refuse a scan under Section B of the Privacy Act,” I said. It felt weird to be the one invoking a Section B. Usually I was having it invoked on me by some bad element who didn’t want to be identified.

“Shut the fuck up,” Bernam grunted. “Nobody asked you to.”

“Lacking genetic evaluation, opinion tendered: This is Meander Harco.”

“Satisfied?” I asked.

“Shut up.”

“Ed, it’s time you stop messing with me. I’m out of here in ten seconds unless you got reason to hold me.”

Ed looked at me as if he were scrutinizing a strange insect. “I knew you were dark-skinned, but I never knew you were a mule, Andy,” he said.

I stood still, expressionless. No. He wasn’t worth it. “Now you do,” I replied. I felt a great numbness grow in my gut, as if I were far bigger inside than I was outside. This was the way I felt before violence. Control. Hold on. My legal junk was spewing conflict options onto my op-eds. There were no options in my favor in this situation. Just for fun, I sifted the parameters through the Option 4 junk. It gave me the red flag. So. I could not legally kill him. Lucky Ed. This time.

“I’ve got a message for you, Andy,” Bernam said. “Freddy Pupillina wants to talk to you.”

For a second, I was nonplussed. Then this little shakedown began to make sense. Bernam was under orders from Freddy. Which meant all my previous legal evaluations were out of context and meaningless. Hmm.

“You’re mistaking me for somebody who gives a shit,” I replied.

Bernam got real quiet. He was evidently not used to anybody refusing Freddy in such a cavalier manner. But it was true: he *was* mistaking me for somebody who gave a shit.

Bernam resolved his difficulties by pretending not to hear me. “Tomorrow night, around eight, at the Sportsman,” he said. “You’re free to go now.”

“Tell Freddy I’m not coming,” I said.

“Out,” Bernam said. He closed his eyes and touched something on his chair. The chair spun around with its back to me. I stepped up to the desk where I’d laid my luggage and opened the briefcase.

“Ed, turn around.”

He did not reply and continued facing away from me. I pulled out the Glock and slid the magazine into the handle. I felt it click into position, but the plastic was noiseless.

“Ed.”

Still nothing. My legal junk was screaming, so I powered it down. I popped up a targeting menu, took aim, and fired the Glock into one of the chair’s armrests. As I suspected, there was no security breach sensing in the home office. A perfect way for an airport to cut corners. Why would you need it where you have a permanently armed guard? The crank that had led me here stood immobile in the corner,

unaware that anything untoward was going on.

Bernam was, at least, a bit more self-aware than the 50. He spun around with his hands over his head. “Jesus Christ,” he whimpered. He tried to shuffle out of his seat, and I saw that Bernam was even worse off than I’d thought. He was attached by a bundle of leads to the chair.

“Ed, you’re bonded.”

“Shut the fuck up!”

There was nothing I could do to him that was worse than what he’d done to himself. It was like being a node with none of the perks—no sense of community, no mental health plan. It made me physically sick to contemplate. An individual giving himself up to an Ideal, but staying himself. Like a dog dragging around a tick the size of an elephant. Only rentals desperate for *something* ever got themselves wired for bonding. I wondered what kind of shit Bernam had gotten into. Graft? Bugs? Booze? He would not meet my gaze.

“Tell Freddy that if he messes with me, I’ll take him down,” I said. “Tell him that.” I pointed the Glock between Ed’s eyes. This got him looking at me.

“Oh Christ,” he said. “I can’t without my op-eds, Andy.”

“That’s okay. You can tell him the old-fashioned way. You still have a link screen, don’t you? Tell him I came to attend my grandfather’s funeral, and then I’m leaving. I no longer take shit off bad elements. Tell him to stay the hell out of my way.”

“Jesus, Andy—”

“Will you tell him that?” I said. I touched the muzzle of the Glock to Bernam’s nose. A little runny snot stuck to it.

“Okay, God, *okay*, I’ll tell him!” said Bernam. He seemed sincere. I pulled the gun away and wiped the snot on his nicely starched uniform. I had to press hard to make it stick.

“Nice seeing you again, Ed.” I put the Glock away and gathered my things, then walked out. Out of the airport, out into the sweating southern night. The air, as always, had an ozone tang imparted by the huge biostatic plants downtown. And, as always, the fecal odor of bucolic acid from the plants mixed with the tang, so that the city smelled like a zombie night, decaying and electric.

Even at the airport, lightning bugs blinked in the air. They lived in the grass that grew through the cracks in the sidewalks. I ordered up a Hertz with my op-eds. It was an 87 Sagittarius, and the inductors rumbled like driveway gravel. Maybe I should have gone with one of the newer companies instead of aging traditional Hertz, but I liked the fact that all their electrostatics had the same lines as old gas-burning automobiles.

As the Saj drove me away, a couple of the fireflies smashed against the windshield, and their glowing belly-fire smeared in incandescent arches across my field of vision. If I hadn’t known better, I would have sworn they were some glitch in the virtual manifestation. But I had my op-eds menued down, and the fireflies were real. For better or worse, I was in Birmingham, in the late twenty-first century, in the frail human flesh. More or less. The briefcase full of guns and brains sat by my side.

My fictional time-traveling detective, Minden Sibley, would have appreciated the juxtaposition of the old and the new on such a night as this. He was always flitting back a hundred years or so, going after fugitives on the Timeways or just taking a short vacation in days when you didn’t have to have a license

to take a goddamn dump. But he always had to return within a week, subjective. That was the First Temporal Law, ingrained into the fabric of his being by his employer, the United States Time Company:

1. A time traveler can never harm, nor by inaction bring harm to, the resonate period to which he is native.

You could go away for a little while, but you had to return and take your place as a tooth in the cogwheel that turned the universe when it was your turn to connect up with the Big Conveyor Belt in the Sky. Or whatever. It was all lies, I thought, I'd made them up myself, so what did it matter?

Granddaddy's death had made me maudlin, I decided. There is, however, no cure for self-indulgent sentimentality so sure and quick as going to see your family, the living ones, that is, in the flesh. I disconnected from the beltway a few miles from the airport and drove my car down First Avenue North to the BrownService Mortuary. Mom's old Range Rover was parked outside. Harco, the bioenhancement company in which my father was a midlevel node, would not, of course, waste his work time by sending him to the viewing. Maybe he'd be at the funeral. Probably not. My father was a vague nothing to me, and I didn't care. And I didn't particularly want to see Mom, either.

My mother is an amalgamation of just about every kook spirituality that ever aspired to Ideation. There are feedhorns dangling from her like fat remoras. Yet she is not a node. God knows why. Probably some kind of sick balance in her mind among a variety of pathologies. She's the one who gave me my first name, as if you hadn't figured that one out already. She was also the one who saved my ass eight years before. What can I say? I love Mom, but I don't *like* her very much. At least I don't like being around her any more than I have to.

I locked my briefcase in the trunk and went inside the funeral home.

Mom was out in the hallway, talking to one of Granddaddy's relatives whom I didn't know—which included just about all of them. I never had been into the extended-family thing as a young man, though Mom had tried to get me interested in reversion genealogy at one time—that fad where some fancy junk supposedly deconstructs your DNA and gives you an op-ed presentation of life in Mesopotamia using your encoded racial memories, or whatever. Mom was convinced at the time that she was a Hittite princess and the rightful heir to the throne. I hated to point out to her that her inheritance nowadays consisted of a death zone of microbes that fried human beings as if they were insects caught in a zapper. The Middle East was no longer a pretty place, if it ever had been.

"Andy," Mom said, and disengaged herself from the relative to come and hug me. She smelled, as always, of cloistered eucalyptus. "I'm so glad you're here. Daddy will really be pleased to see you."

As I'd known she would, Mom had had a ghost made of Granddaddy. I glanced through the door and saw him, sitting by the casket and looking morosely at himself.

"Well," I said, and walked in.

Granddaddy was lying in his coffin, looking like he was made up for television. He was dressed in a gray suit that I'd never seen him wear. Mom had probably bought it for the occasion. He was a handsome man. He'd been a real looker in his youth, and the undertaker had obviously done some facial rejuvenation. Ironically, you can make dead skin look far younger than living skin, through some trade secret that I did not care to know or even guess at.

"I did live to a ripe old age," said the ghost softly.

"Yes," I said. I couldn't find it in me to be rude to the holoware. A first for me. But, however shallow and stupid, the thing was all that was left of the algorithm that had raised me and formed my own

deep-down programming.

“I wanted to say something to you.” The ghost spoke in a stiff voice, as if it were being forced into a subroutine it did not particularly like but was ordered to follow.

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t try to make eye contact. It wouldn’t be the same, no matter how lifelike they made the holo.

“First, power me down as quick as you can.”

“Mom won’t like it.”

“Convince your mother.”

“I’ll try.”

“The other thing,” he said, then was quiet for a moment, as if he were digging for something lost in his depths. But there *were* no depths to ghosts. “The other thing is, don’t take no shit off nobody. Except poor folks who can’t help it and don’t know any better.”

“I remember when you told me that,” I replied. “I’ll always remember.”

The ghost appeared relieved. He crossed his legs and turned back to looking at himself in the casket. “Almost one hundred fifty. A ripe old age.”

I left the room after another minute or so. Mom tried to get me to stay at her apartment, but I needed to be alone tonight. Also, I was a little worried about Freddy Pupillina looking me up, and didn’t want Mom to get involved in that kind of shit. She had enough problems as it was.

I found a money crank around the block and got some cash vouchers issued from my account. This would be the last traceable transaction I planned to make tonight. Just to be sure, I got out the Portalab and ran the voucher cards through a launderer. No real harm done, since they could be cashed at the Federal Reserve, but no more junk on them that could connect them to my account. Slightly illegal, but I made sure to do it away from the usual nanowatcher patch points, and out of satellite view. Being a cop hath its advantages.

I checked into a motel in Bessemer, on the west side of town, far from the funeral home and my mother’s place. The clerk—a crank (it wasn’t a classy joint)—asked for I.D. when my voucher cards didn’t produce an origination code. I showed it more fruits from the Portalab, and it legally had to be satisfied. My room was dingy and I couldn’t control the air-conditioning. The temperature was much too cold. Air-conditioning. The South was both the master of it and its slave. Nothing in the history of the region was more important.

That night, I dreamed of Abby. I often do. Nothing specific. Just her autumn hair, her slender fingers. Her breath. It always smelled like rain in leaves.

After the dreaming, I slept hard and woke up thinking I was in Seattle. Then I realized that not only was it freezing cold from the air-conditioning, but the chilled metal of a pistol was pressed against my forehead.

“Mr. Pupillina wants to see you,” said a voice from the darkness.

“Yeah,” I said. “It appears that he does.” That was when I jammed my stungun into where I estimated the voice had a crotch and pulled the trigger. I always sleep with a weapon.

There was a stifled whimper, a heavy thud, and the lights flipped on. A woman was standing by the door with the biggest damn fléchette pistol I’d ever seen. It had to be one of the Danachek 7s I’d heard of. Nasty way to die. The bullets were said actually to burrow. On the floor lay a big, bearded man in a blue suit. His index finger was through the trigger guard of a big .45.

“How the hell did you know where I was?” I asked, by way of breaking the tension. The woman’s tight expression did not loosen. She was heavysset and dark-skinned in a dirty sort of way, maybe in her late forties. Ugly as ten-day-old roadkill. She, too, wore blue, with tiny pinstripes that made her look fatter than she was, which was fat enough. Or big-boned, I should say, being a gentleman and all.

“Rental cars check in with their location every hour,” she said flatly.

“Only to the cops,” I said, then realized how stupid that sounded. In Birmingham, Freddy might not own the cops, but he sure as hell could get a little favor done for him—like a report on rentals.

“I hope this doesn’t take too long. I have a funeral to attend,” I said. The woman looked at me funny.

“So you already know,” she said. I couldn’t think what the hell she was talking about and finally decided she was talking about my *own* funeral, har, har.

She motioned me to get up. I had to step over Bluto on the floor to get to my clothes. She made me turn the briefcase toward her when I opened it. She reached for the Glock. So much for Plan B.

But I did have the rest of the alphabet to work with. I quickly slammed the briefcase shut on the woman’s hand. She cried out in pain, but kept the fléchette pistol leveled at my chest.

“Let go!” she said, fighting to control the hurt in her voice.

Instead, I twisted the briefcase as hard as I could and heard the bone in her arm break. She fired the pistol at me, pointblank. Fire and agony in my chest. The force of the bullet knocked me backward, but I managed to hold on to the briefcase, and the woman and I tumbled to the floor together. Her face came down on the studded metal cup in my elbow. Again there was the cracking of bone. She rolled off me, moaning. Her nose was a bloody mess. I kicked the pistol away from her and staggered to my feet.

After taking a moment to catch my breath, I lifted my shirt to inspect the damage. There was a hematoma on my rib cage. Through the rendered flesh and muscle, an exposed piece of my Kevlar chest plates shone gray as old bone.

The fléchette bullet lay at my feet, trying to burrow into the carpet’s nap. This sight, and the grinding pain in my chest, fired a rage within me. I kicked the woman in the side as hard as I could. She stopped moaning and passed out. This gave me less satisfaction than I’d expected. These two were just Family muscle. They weren’t made; their pain was their own. To hurt the Family, you had to hit a node. Like Freddy.

I gathered my things together and left the room. After I stowed them in the Saj, I opened the hood and found the sender box. Taking it out would leave me without traffic control. What the hell; I knew how to drive. I went to the trunk and found the tire tool. The box was full of bionics. It cracked like a skull and leaked gray-white nerve tissue and sickly yellow cranial fluid. While I was putting the tire tool back, the door to my room clicked open, and Big-Boned Bertha stumbled out. Her face was all bloody and she was obviously having trouble focusing well enough to find me. Nevertheless, I got in the car and got the

hell out of there.

My first order of business was a patch job. I had to drive way the hell south to Hoover to find a booth that could handle skin grafts on the order I needed. It took an hour and a half to get me patched up. Funny how you either die or get better really fast these days.

The booth had my DNA match, and it wouldn't be long before a sweep would root me out. Obviously Freddy cared enough to try, and had the kind of connections to succeed. I drove around aimlessly for a while, trying to match speed with the surrounding traffic so that I would not show up as an anomaly on the road control junk.

I pulled into a station for some static, and while the car was recharging, I went to the restroom and tried on my suit. I'd been wrong about it fitting. Over the last eight years, I'd put on at least twenty pounds, most of them in my chest and shoulders. At nine o'clock, when the cleaners opened, I took the suit in for altering. They put it in the nanotank and it was done in fifteen minutes. I paid with some damaged vouchers and headed in the general direction of the east side of town, toward the Church of Branching Hermeneutics, where Mom was holding Granddaddy's funeral.

But there was still plenty of time to kill before the funeral. I was dressed in the same shorts and T-shirt I'd worn yesterday, so I pulled into East Lake and did five miles around the track. The lake was gorgeous in the midday sun, clean and full of fish, judging by the anglers on the bank. Years ago, it had been a toxic cesspool, but the nanos had cleaned it up—just like the nanos in my shirt slurped up all the sweat and searched out and destroyed bacteria that made a stink.

On about the third lap, I got a decent snippet of plot for my next Minden Sibley time-travel mystery. Something about nanos eating up a body that had been sunk into a lake and Minden having to go back in time, before the murder, to make an identification. Maybe the plot could involve the Second Temporal Law. I hadn't done one of those for a while.

2. A time traveler must not endanger his own atemporal existence in any way, unless by so doing he is fulfilling his obligations under the First Law.

It always makes for a thrilling moment when a time traveler must decide between himself or the epoch that molded him. He can't exist without it, yet he won't exist if it does. Meaningless fun, though. Everybody knows time travel is impossible.

When I finished up my run, I felt like I'd just stepped out of the shower. I drove around for a few minutes until I found a resistance booth on First Avenue North, then put in thirty minutes working the weights and getting the involuntaries shocked. It had been a good three days since my last workout, and this one left me tired, but with a clean feeling under my skin. Working out is the only way I know of feeling virtuous at no one else's expense.

To give the devil his due, I went over to the Krispy Kreme on Eighty-Sixth and had a donut and coffee. The place was over a hundred years old and run by some kind of historical trust. I was served by a node in a polyester waitress getup from the last century. I'd have preferred an authentic foul-mouthed waitress in regular clothes, but they've all been replaced by cranks, anyway. The donuts were good, though, and I sat with my coffee and considered times past.

I thought about a lot of things. Abby, mostly. The night I was running for my life from Freddy's goons. Mom had pulled some strings with one of her cults, and the Children of Gregarious Breathers were all set to smuggle me out in the Winnebago they used in their nomadic travels. They were on a holy search for the promised land of perfect atmospheric ion concentration or something, and no one questioned their comings and goings. Once out of town, Justcorp could take care of me. In town, my company's hands

were tied by Freddy's maneuvering. There were two slots in the Winnebago. One for me. One for Abby. Only Abby didn't take hers. She left me that night, in the midst of my need and terror.

We were on the Southside, standing by the onion-topped Greek Orthodox Church. We were to be picked up a block away by the Breath Children.

I told her I loved her, that I'd never loved her more than tonight.

"I know," she said. She looked at me as if she were full of infinite sadness, infinite wisdom. She was practicing to be a node even then. Abby, with her black hair and brown eyes. The fingers of her left hand worrying at the silver armlet she always wore above her right elbow. "I'm not coming, Andy," she said.

"What?"

"I'm not coming with you."

I should have realized. My fear kept the truth from my mind.

It was me or Birmingham for Abby. It always had been. Part of the reason I'd fallen in love with her in the first place was her devotion to principles larger than herself, her unselfish ways. She loved cities, and this city more than any. She'd majored in urban planning in college, while I'd been studying law enforcement. We met in a criminal-law class, moved in together after I'd got my rookie slot with Justcorp and she'd been hired to monitor traffic and to flip the switch on the Vulcan when it needed doing.

After all those long nights on the traffic watch, pondering the lights, losing herself to the ebb and flow of city life, she'd fallen out of love with me, and into love of another sort. The Big Lie had caught her, before I had known what it was, before I could do anything to help her escape.

It was me or Birmingham, and Abby chose the city. She said that she loved me. She said that love for one man was not as important as love for humankind. She didn't want to give up her job at the Vulcan; she had made node. She hadn't wanted to tell me, knowing my distaste, even then, for Ideals. The city was going to wire her up in a week's time. She was in line to become the city's transportation coordinator, she said, to be on the Planning Council. In line to make *adifference*, to be something more than just one woman against the world. I could not believe what she was saying.

She had become one of those people who look right over you and don't see a person when they look at you, who are always thinking about how everything could be different, how everything can be improved. About how individual people are merely stepping-stones on the road to perfection. And gazing into Abby's eyes, I could see that I was just a point of heat on a particular street corner. No more, no less. She was listening to the buzz of everything so hard she could never hear me pleading with her to stay with me, to leave *for* me.

Abby kissed my numb lips and brushed her slender hand against my trembling face. Then I wondered, for the last time, how it was that she smelled like the rain. I swear to God she smelled like rain in the country. In green leaves. Maybe I've already told you that?

So I boarded the Winnebago alone, and didn't die. And I stayed a person. I can't say the same about Abby. My wife. Who was now the heart and soul of the city of Birmingham. Or at least the nerves.

"You make me look bad, son," said Freddy Pupillina as he settled his enormous bulk on a stool next to me in the Krispy Kreme. "Why you want to play so hard to get?"

I took a sip of my coffee before I answered him, and scanned the restaurant. There was Big-Boned

Bertha at the door. Her nose was healed, but something about it didn't look right, as if she'd turned out so ugly in the first place, her cells had purposely forgotten how to reconstruct her.

"Oh, I don't know," I replied. "Maybe it has something to do with your trying to take my badge and your running me out of town on a rail?"

"Old news."

"I have things to do, Freddy, a funeral to go to. Leave me alone."

Pupillina took one of those pauses that nodes take when they are receiving instructions from the Ideal. A kind of integration. I took a moment myself to look him over. He hadn't changed much since the day I sprayed mace in his eyes and kicked him in the balls. Perhaps he was bigger, if that were possible, with tinges of gouty jaundice in his eyes and fingernails.

"I'm sorry about your grandfather," he said. "The Family sends its condolences."

"Fuck the Family," I said calmly.

Pupillina did not react with anger. He did not appear to have instructions on just how to react to such a statement, so he continued with his spiel.

"For each of us, the time finally comes when we can no longer contribute as much as we are forced to take, when—"

"My grandfather was worth more than all of your damn Family put together," I said. "Will you cut the shit and tell me what you want, Freddy?"

"I'm just trying to be civil," he grunted. He looked morose, as if all his effort were for nothing. It was.

"I'm going to get up and walk out the door," I said. "If that creature of yours tries to stop me, I'm going to rip her fucking nose off again and shove it down her windpipe."

I threw some vouchers down for the coffee and donuts and started to stand up.

"Thaddeus Grayson is dead," Pupillina said. I sat back down. "What?"

"He's been dead for three weeks now."

It hadn't been in the papers. None of our mutual friends had called me.

"What do you have to do with it, Freddy?"

"I—that is, the Family—came into possession of the body."

Thaddeus dead. It was true. Pupillina had no reason I could discern for lying. I tried to take another drink of my coffee, but all I got was the bitter dregs. Thaddeus was the oldest friend I had, maybe the best.

"How?"

"Blast job," Pupillina replied. "Something fucking blew his mind."

"God."

"It was a slow burn. Whoever did it wanted something. It must have been agony for the poor son of a bitch."

“Who did it, Freddy?”

I was going to kill them. Option 4 or no Option 4. Thaddeus had taught me everything I knew about writing. And a hell of a lot about living a worthwhile life.

“Good question,” Pupillina said. “We don’t know.”

“Piss in orbit.”

“Honestly, we don’t. He was accidentally dumped outside of one of our establishments.”

Like hell he didn’t know. But for some reason, he was being adamant. “Why are you telling me this?” I said.

Pupillina smiled horrendously. Even his teeth were yellowing. “How’d you like that dereliction of duty charge against you dropped? How about that, Andy?”

“I’ll win the case.”

“Maybe. What if it were to be like it never happened?”

“What are you saying?”

“We need you to find out who killed Thaddeus Grayson.”

“*You* are trying to bribe *me* to be a snoop?”

“The Family needs an outsider on this one. Somebody with no, uh, leanings toward any one part of us, if you know what I mean.”

“Somebody who hates all of your guts equally and indiscriminately?”

“That’s it.

“It’s out of my jurisdiction.”

“Oh, I’ve already arranged to have you temporarily assigned to homicide here in Birmingham as specialist labor.”

“Justcorp cleared this?”

“It did.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“Yes. So?”

“Why Andy Harco? Isn’t there somebody else you could rain on?” But I was already planning the investigation. First, I’d have to talk to students and faculty where Thaddeus taught . . .

“You knew him.”

“Eight years ago.”

“You’ve kept in touch through virtual.”

“How would you know that, Freddy? That’s illegal information for an unlicensed civilian.”

“Don’t be juvenile, Andy,” said Pupillina. “I’ve got a federal license to conduct certain virtual taps.” He looked rather indignant on the matter, as if he were a man unjustly accused. He just didn’t get it that I thought he was scum, and that I was never going to just go along with things because “that’s how they were,” or whatever other fucking excuse a bad element gives for hurting other people.

“So, will you take the job? We’re going to double your salary while you’re working in Birmingham. We know you like to buy little doodads for yourself.”

“How generous.”

“Think nothing of it.”

“I will.”

Pupillina stood up with a great sigh and rustling of clothing. He sounded like a capsized ship righting itself.

“Freddy,” I said, neither standing nor looking up at him, “why’d you send the goons? You could have just told me this.”

He hesitated in answering for a moment, then snapped his lapel and smoothed down his navy jacket. I wondered what designer made blue jeans big enough to fit around that huge ass. “I was trying to give you a gentleman’s welcome,” he replied in a regal tone. What an affected asshole. The Italians had come to Alabama to work in the mines in the early 1900s, a little too late to be princes of cotton and land.

He was feeding me bullshit anyway, but I wasn’t going to get anything else out of him on that one.

“Where is Thaddeus’s body?”

“In safekeeping. But we’re going to have to let it be discovered tonight. He was due to give some reading that he never misses tomorrow—”

“Southern Voices. At UAB.” It was where Thaddeus had first made a name for himself.

“Whatever.”

“You’re the picture of cultural refinement, Freddy.”

Pupillina sniffed, a great rancid snotty sniff, then continued, “So he’s going to be found, and he’ll be in the morgue for you to look at tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“Have we got a deal, then?” Pupillina said. He held out his hand. He should have known not to do that. Christ, what a loser.

“Freddy, if my junk ever told me it was legal, I’d blow you away in a second. If I had a chance to mace you again, this time I’d stick it up the hole in your dick—if you still have one. I know who and what you are, Freddy.”

He dropped his hand. “We have a deal,” he said, and walked away. Or maybe *slid* would be a better way of describing it. Big-Boned Bertha followed him out the door, and I was alone with my thoughts once again in the Krispy Kreme. I remembered the first conversation Thaddeus and I had had, in a bar on the Southside.

“I’m going to get this city down in words,” he said to me. “I don’t give a damn how low I have to sink or how high I have to fly, I’ll do it.”

“Why?” I asked. “What’s so important about Birmingham?”

“I fit into this city, like a key. I can open it up and find a passageway, man. Find the way.”

“To what?”

He looked at me, ran his stubby fingers through his beard. “That’s the question, ain’t it? When I find out, I’ll let you know. You’ll be the first, okay?”

Thaddeus let us all know, one poem at a time. I ordered another cup of coffee and stared into it until the time came to go to change clothes and attend my grandfather’s funeral.

Mom greeted me at the door of the church. She was dressed in one of those iridescent-black grief shifts that are supposed to absorb the alpha emissions of all the nearby mourners and display them in dark patterns across the weave. Mom’s wasn’t too lively, for there weren’t a whole lot of people at the funeral. Granddaddy had kept pretty much to himself these last few years, and before—before he’d licked his drinking problem—what friends he’d had were buddies from the tavern. No close friends. Acquaintances, family. Cousins, creaky old contemporaries, their sons and daughters. Grandma had died before I was born. Mom was her and Granddaddy’s only daughter. And I the only grandchild.

We went up front to view the remains one last time, and Mom broke down. Her dress created some interesting swirls as she cried. In keeping with her ecumenical style, Mom had not used the Branching Hermeneutics clergy, but had gotten Brother Christopher, a whiff of a fellow from the Children of Gregarious Breathers, to conduct the service. He held her hand to comfort her.

“He was so handsome,” Mom said. “My father was a handsome man.”

I could not but agree.

We took our seats in the first row, and the Breather started the service with a prayer to whatever god of human potential his ilk had faith in. Granddaddy would have snorted in derision, but he’d also told me once that I should let Mom do anything she wanted for his funeral. What the hell difference would it make to him after he was dead?

So I sat through it. But despite Granddaddy’s stated wishes, I felt like saying something. I felt like giving a proper rest to this man who had shaped me more than any other. When the Breather paused in his homily, I motioned to him that I had something to say. He affected not to notice me, so I stood up and walked to the front. Mom let out a little gasp, but appeared resigned to letting me have my way. I stood in the pulpit and the Breather introduced me with a nervous smile, then sat down behind me.

The crowd shuffled around expectantly. They all had on ill-fitting suits and dresses. Working people. Elements like Pupillina would think of them as schnooks, as cattle.

“My granddaddy wasn’t much of a churchgoer,” I said. A few in the congregation frowned at this. I heard Brother Breather huff behind me. “But he always spoke of the Old Master, of how he was raised in that Primitive Baptist home out in Brookside. He was a man of God in his way. . . .”

What was I trying to say? Granddaddy hadn’t been to church in fifty years. Until he kicked the bottle, Sundays were six-beer mornings.

“His father worked the coal mines, and Granddaddy went to work in the iron foundries when he was

sixteen, as an electrician. When the biostatic plants came in, he wired the broths.”

This was going nowhere. My grandfather had survived, adapted. He was no hero of the masses. He had precious little ambition, except to lead a good life and not to hurt anybody. When it was clear that his drinking was devastating Mom, he’d given it up. Just like that. No treatment centers, no twelve steps, no phenyl therapy. It was a damned gutsy move.

“Granddaddy was the quintessential Southern city man. He was wild and he was loving. He was low-down and he would do anything for you. I’ve never known a better man. If I can be more like him, I’ll count my life well lived. But we won’t see his like again.”

Here my voice caught in my throat. Anyway, that was all. It was enough. I sat down and the Breather concluded the service with some inappropriate reflection on how we should all be grateful to the government for contracting out Maturicell for our senior citizens, so that even the poor could experience better living through virtual.

Afterward, a couple of relatives or old drinking buddies—I didn’t know which—told me that they appreciated what I said, and that they, too, had been getting sick of the “preacher’s” nonsense. They asked me if I wanted to go get shitfaced with them—well, not exactly in those words—but I politely turned them down.

Mom was having Granddaddy cremated, then shot out of a large air cannon that the Breathers operated somewhere in Tennessee. That was one ceremony I was going to miss. They say that the ashes are eventually distributed around the whole Earth uniformly throughout the stratosphere, but I like to think that the particles don’t get that high, or if they do, they come back down again. I like to think that when it rains these days, it’s raining ancestors.

“Why don’t you stay at the apartment tonight?” Mom asked me. “I have a great deal to do this evening, affairs to arrange.” She didn’t wait for me to answer, but looked around, spotted the mortuary crew, and waved them over. “Here’s the key. I’ll see you later.”

I took the plastic key and pocketed it while Mom steadfastly walked away to do whatever duties her scattered brain had created for her. It had always been like this with her. She was a combination of steel resolve and will-o’-the-wisp notions. I thought of her as a metallic butterfly bashing about in the flowers. She’d saved my ass more than once, yet I had difficulty being around her. I loved her. But you don’t have to like someone to love them.

I went back to my car and breathed out an attempt my body was making to cry. The night was just falling, and a storm was building to the west, where most storms come from in Alabama. Under the storm, the sun had set, but the sky was still burning deep red, like a very slow, very hot fire. The storm cloud spread over this brightness like black oil. Lightning bolts, staying in the air, curled into and out of the cloud, like quicksilver worms. And all of this fury was the backdrop to dozens of flashing biostatic towers, gridding the city as far as the eye could see. The air smelled like tar and mowed grass. It was sultry hot and full of electric possibility. You could almost believe the city was a living thing on an evening such as this.

“Well, son,” said a voice—*his* voice—and I nearly jumped out of my skin. It was the ghost, standing beside me, smoking a cigarette exactly as Granddaddy used to. I expected the smoke to curve to the edge of the projection parameters, then abruptly fade out. Instead, it swirled away into the air, and I would almost swear I could smell it. I looked around and saw two lampposts where a couple of holoprojectors may have been, creating the image. “It’s almost time for me to go,” said the ghost.

“Mom’s not keeping you, huh?” I tried to suppress the feeling that this actually was my grandfather. The

physical reproduction was excellent. Ghosts had gotten a lot more sophisticated since I'd last been to a funeral.

"She don't need me. She never really did."

"Yes, I guess she's got her religions. Or they've got her."

The ghost took another puff, coughed. Jeez, this thing was lifelike! Or is that "deathlike"?

"Now, don't underestimate her, Andy. We were all of us too hard on her."

I took a breath, gazed out upon the last embers of the sunset, then looked back. "I guess you're right," I said.

The ghost dropped his cigarette with a quarter-inch left to the white paper, and didn't bother to grind it out. Exactly like Granddaddy. "I want you to do something for me, son."

"What?"

"I want you to get those bastards. I want you to get them all." The ghost's eyes shone like black coal in moonlight.

"Who are you talking about, Granddaddy?" I asked, not able to catch myself before I spoke his name.

"The ones who did this to me," he said quietly.

What? I started to ask. But I knew the answer to that. I'd half known all along. The storm was breaking in the west, and lightning began to snake to the ground. "I will," I told my grandfather.

While I was watching the storm, the ghost faded away. Before I got into my car, I noticed something on the ground. It was a cigarette butt. Probably just one that had already been lying in the parking lot. But when I knelt to pick it up, it was warm.

The next morning a crank street cleaner discovered Thaddeus Grayson's body protruding from a storm drain near Five Points South. Police speculated that the deluge of the previous night had washed it there from wherever it had originally been dumped.

3

I had spent the night before at Mom's place, where she'd fixed up my old room for me. She'd used it for various kinds of religious networking for years, and the place smelled heavily of patchouli, a scent it had never had when I was a kid. Mom came in after I had already gone to bed, but I could hear her in the kitchen. Despite her avowed disbelief in grief, she was quietly crying.

I got up and went to the kitchen. I took a paper towel from the dispenser there and got some milk from the pantry. I sat down at the table, across from Mom, and said nothing. The carton of milk quickly warmed in my hand as the heat-pumping nano activated and cooled the insides.

Mom sniffed a few more times, wiped her nose on her nightgown, then looked around for something on which to dry her eyes. I handed her the paper towel.

"Daddy was so handsome today," she said. "That was what he looked like when I was a little girl."

"Yes, he was."

She used a corner of the paper towel delicately to dab her eyes. After a moment's struggle, she regained her composure—or closed herself off to true feeling once again, depending on how you look at it.

“I suppose you want his ghost turned off?” she said.

“You know I do.”

She looked at me, but not like Abby had that night. Mom may have been a ditz, but she was *alive* ditz.

“How did I produce such a hard-hearted offspring?”

“I don't know, Mom.”

“I mean, look at the kind of person I am. I have faith, Andy. Faith in things to come. I believe in keeping love alive as long as possible. Don't you want at least some part of Daddy to survive into the better world that's coming?”

I shook my head. Useless to explain, yet still I always tried. “Even if there is a better world coming, Mom, Granddaddy is dead. That ghost is like a comic-strip version of him. You know that.”

“I know that even a caricature is better than nothing,” she said.

“For you, Mom. Not for him.”

“Can't you have even a little faith, Andy?”

“No. I can't.”

“Well.” She suppressed another snuffle, then stood up. “Good night.”

“Good night, Mom.”

She went off to bed, and I sat at the kitchen table and finished my milk in silence.

In the morning, I headed into the heart of the city, to the biostatic plants and the hulking infrastructure of what was officially known as the University of Alabama at Birmingham, UAB. What the letters really stood for, everyone knew, was the University that Ate Birmingham. It encysted the south side of the city like kudzu takes a tree.

In the mid-twentieth century, the iron mills had dominated the landscape, but by the 1990s, they were heaps of rust. Twenty years later, come the biostatic revolution, grossly cheap energy, et voilà—all the towns that had big medical centers became the centers of money and power in the world.

Birmingham—after years of a massive inferiority complex—had finally got a leg up on Atlanta in the region. UAB had been a bio mecca for years.

But once again Birmingham had blown it by concentrating all of its hopes in one industry. Biostatics is old tech now, just as iron had become a century earlier—a tech that is waiting to get picked off by some hotshot genius. And the biowaste, nasty as shit because *it's* shit, deepens. Good old Birmingham was destined to become a second-rate town all over again. Or maybe the Ideals, so much more intelligent and farseeing than the leaders of the past had been, would save us. And if you buy that, I've got a near-Earth C-based asteroid to sell you, dirt cheap.

The plants are massive and bright, even in broad daylight. They shine and flash like giant test tubes full of neon gas, though what they are really filled with is reactive biomass—soybeans, pond scum, and human feces. They have a certain gross beauty.

I left my car in the parking garage at UAB and walked the few blocks to Five Points South. As I'd hoped, the Betablocker was still there, in all its shabbiness. Thaddeus had had an apartment over the bar and had practically lived in the bar's murky confines, frequently taking his meals there, such that they were. Even back when I knew him, he'd been a longtime fixture in the establishment—so much so that the proprietor had given him a cigarette lighter emblazoned with the Blocker's crest: a skull with the international nil sign encircling and bisecting it. What did it mean? No heads allowed? No thinking? That last was more likely.

I went inside. The bartender was not a crank, but a young woman, probably a student. Old-fashioned joint. I didn't recognize her, but I did stare at her for a moment. Here in Birmingham, it was common for two mulattoes to meet, but not in Seattle. In fact, it hadn't happened to me in eight years. She saw me, saw what I was staring at, and gave me a smile. Not a nod. I ordered a beer.

All the bars these days had nanobreweries, but the Blocker had an old-fashioned glass-windowed instant fermenter behind the bar. I watched the barley turn to brew before my eyes. Then it circled through some refrigeration—an old unit, with freon, not nanos—where it collected in a pool, awaiting consumption.

My tawny bartender drew it into a mug and brought it over to me. I did my duty. Not bad for the Bible Belt. A little bitter going down, but bitter suited me.

"You sure got rid of that fast," said the bartender. "Want another?"

"Sure."

She set the machine to work, then leaned on the bar near me. "I'm Trina," she said. I looked at her more closely. The smile was still there, but there was something haggard about her face, something sad.

"Andy Harco. Pleased to meet you."

She fidgeted a moment, having nothing else to say, I guessed—or else wanting badly to say something, but not knowing how. Then the beer saved her. She went to get it for me.

"You been here long?" I asked when she returned.

"Uh, no. Well, almost a year now. I guess that *is* long."

She began absently to rub the bar with a towel. Her fingers were long and supple. She was gripping the towel very tightly.

"Know a guy named Nestor Greenly?"

"Nope."

"He used to tend bar here. Long time ago."

"Yeah?"

She gave the bar a final swipe and put the towel down, then started to drift away. She was humming something slow and soft.

"I used to live in Birmingham," I said.

This got her attention. "Where do you live now?"

"Seattle."

“Really? There’s a guy who comes in here . . .*came* in here. He knows a cop in Seattle he’s always talking about.”

“I’m him.”

“Yeah.” She looked at me appraisingly. “You are, aren’t you?”

“You heard about Thaddeus?”

“I heard. I don’t know what to think.”

“Did you like him?”

She was crying now, softly. “I didn’t love him,” she said. Then I understood.

“How long were ya’ll together?”

“No,” she said. She knelt and got the bar towel again, then wiped her eyes with it. “You’ve got it wrong. We weren’t together. We just . . . once.”

“I see.”

“But he was here every day. He lives upstairs, you know.*Lived*. I haven’t seen him for weeks, though.” She said the last with a measure of acrimony.

I sipped my beer. Another customer came in, and Trina went to wait on him. He ordered a whiskey sour. It was nice to see a real human being mix a drink. Somehow it was more graceful than a crank, and I’ll bet the guy got a stiffer drink. After she’d finished, she came back over to me.

“Can I see his apartment?” I asked.

“The police have been up there,” she said. “They have it sealed off.”

“I am the police, Trina.”

“Oh. Well. Then I guess you can.” She reached under the bar and pulled out her purse. She searched around in it until she came up with a plastic key. It went with a cheap lock, no doubt, with magnetized junk. I could have opened it in two seconds without her help. But the thought counted.

There was a P.D. spiderlock on the door. It ate a couple of skin cells off my finger and let me use the key. Thaddeus’s place looked like the back room at a shoe store after a big sale. It always had. He kept things in boxes; the only furniture he owned was a bed and a desk. He had no link screen to write on, no unlinked computer either, and I knew, from asking him, that he didn’t work in virtual.

He wrote on*paper*, with the self-recharging nano pen I’d given him years ago. I’d gotten it off a bad element who wouldn’t be needing it anymore. One of Thaddeus’s favorite tricks was to stick it into the toilet to feed the nanos. This apartment still had liquid plumbing. I set my briefcase on the bed, and looked around.

The pen was on the desk, next to a pile of paper. New poetry, maybe. The place smelled of cigarettes, dust, emptiness. I sat down in the desk chair. It squeaked, but in a wooden, comforting way. The local guys had obviously been through the place. I’d scan their report later. I’m sure that Freddy’s hired help had combed it as well. I didn’t expect to find anything.

I wasn’t even sure what I was doing here. I picked up a poem. Thaddeus’s chicken scratch was almost

impossible to read. Like ancient Hebrew, vowels were merely a line, and you had to guess from context. There were mark-outs, added lines, intense revisions. No title on this one.

Then the sadness finally hit me. I laid the poem back down and sobbed once, wiped a tear. This was it. The last of Thaddeus Grayson. Ink on paper. He had been my friend.

We didn't stay in constant touch over the years, but got together every few months in virtual, found some out-of-the-way algorithm to get jangled in. He was into edge music, and lots of times we'd sit in on this or that band that was supposed to be fresh kill. When I'd first met him, back when I was a rookie rental, he'd been trying to make it in an edge act called Strategic Magnificence. They made rock-and-roll-influenced vibes with some lunar tonic imagery and, for spice, Afro-Hispanic mambito rhythms. It wasn't great stuff, but the lyrics were hot. Thaddeus wrote them all, of course. Most of the time they played at the Betablocker.

P.D. stormed the place one night looking for headjunk, and I'd arrested him for minor possession. We had a fascinating conversation about science fiction on the ride back to the station. Thaddeus read it, and was even writing some of it back then, as was I. That was before his debut at Southern Voices, before his first poems hit big in *Yardworks* and every licensing program in America wanted to give him instant tenure.

After I'd seen him through the paperwork and got him on-line with the best defense junk I knew at the time, we went back to the Blocker for a beer. The defense junk got him off with a week of public service, which he worked off the next few days by riding around with me as patrol ombudsman. What a weird-assed combination that was! But we got along, and I introduced him to Abby. This was before she and I were married.

Abby and I turned into his first listeners after that. We'd go out drinking, or he'd come over to our place (after she and I had a place) and read us his latest. We'd either critique it or tell him it was great. But it was all great. Better than anything else being written. I knew it, and even Thaddeus knew it, but he had a hard time believing that he was that good.

Christ, he could make words sing! He did not see the world as you or I, but in infinitely finer texture and variety. It wasn't so much that he had a different perspective on things, but that he seemed, rather, to embody all perspectives in his work. A complete writer. God knows, I've tried to imitate him, but my best work is a pale shadow, stark black-and-white in comparison to his infinite subtleties of tone. It was always impossible for me to be envious, however. How can you envy a natural force come into the world? It just is.

Over the years, he had taken on the physical presence to accompany his work. Thaddeus had grown, like a rock taking on moss, and lately had become an immense man. Yet the bulk seemed to be padding instead of fat, a patina of years observed. He was not a rotund, jolly fellow, but imposing. He'd been raised down in scrappy Gulf Shores, Alabama's Redneck Riviera, by an itinerant mother who was a waitress, when she was working, and he'd always retained the air of a street kid.

But no longer.

Thaddeus was gone. Cut off in his prime.

I shuffled through the other papers. More poems, a letter from a fan, a grade sheet with the names of his students. I scanned in the list, then picked up another poem.

This one was more readable.

Upside down, the leaf supports the tree

the all supports the me
Bricks, stones, walls
Quills, pens, porcupines
Death and life everlasting
together again for the first time

Obviously notes and scribbles. Then under all of this a line from Wallace Stevens:

The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

The paper wasn't dated, but I knew that Thaddeus periodically swept everything on his desk into a box, so the line had to have been written relatively recent to his death. Which didn't mean that it was worth a damn to me.

I sat there for a long time and stared at the other papers, at the grain of the desk. It was made of real wood. Thaddeus, my friend, would never write here again. I remembered the last time I'd seen him, three months ago, in virtual. We'd taken a pathway that was not quite legal down to a bar on the underside of the City—the *virtual* City that was the setting for the meeting of minds across America. The bar had junk in place that bypassed your normal tactile filters. A band called Metastasis of the Liver was pounding out some edge—and in that bar, *pounding* was what happened to your nervous system. Thaddeus hadn't talked much, had complained about his work needing a jolt.

"Maybe I'll get out of Birmingham," he said. "Maybe I'll get out of the South, even."

"You? Man, you are in a symbiotic relationship with that city. There's no way you'll leave."

"Yeah, well, I'm a little worried about it becoming parasitic, you know what I mean?"

"Like how?"

"Like all my poems are full of shit smells and air-conditioner hum. I can't get those damned biostatic plants out of my imagination. I don't know. People tell me Thaddeus is good for Birmingham. I don't know if Birmingham is good for Thaddeus anymore."

Then the band kicked in and blasted away all intimacies of conversation, imagined or real. By the time the set was over, we were both too wasted on the sound and pleasure-center jolts available in such places to resume.

Drunk. I'd last seen Thaddeus drunk and vaguely unhappy. Did that mean anything? And what was this "the all supports the me" shit? Had Thaddeus been contemplating joining an Ideal? My common sense immediately rejected the notion. Thaddeus knew what selfless idiots nodes were.

But even to such a man as Thaddeus, who, as far as I was concerned, was ten times more intelligent and ultimately powerful than any Ideal, joining up could become a strange and deep attraction. I'd seen it happen to too many good people.

I hadn't realized how long I'd sat there, brooding, until I noticed that the sun was getting low in the west and shining through the room's blinds in big dusty slants. There was no draft in the room. Evidently the building was coated with heat-pump nanos and the air-conditioning was silent. The dust motes danced about with pure Brownian motion, and I watched them form and deform, coalesce and scatter. Dead people. That was what I'd come home to.

Then they swirled into tempests and typhoons as someone opened the door and stepped into the gloom of the apartment.

Trina.

She had covered her black bartending outfit with a seersucker jacket, and now she had on op-eds. Flat, utilitarian shoes. She had a satchel that looked like it was woven of spider silk. Inside were some lumpy and heavy-looking things. Books, from the shape of them.

“You’re a student,” I said.

“Yes.”

She walked past me, sat on Thaddeus’s bed. Her op-eds were an organic blend, like mine. Pretty nice on a bartender’s salary. Maybe a rich girl, learning to live on her own.

I ran her through my identification junk and got a split screen display of her file. Trina Oswand. Twenty-five. Bartending part-time at the Betablocker and—ah ha—working on her Poetic License. Current address: 511 Twentieth Street. I blinked up her parents’ address. Mountain Brook. Where all the old money dwelled. So she was a poor little rich girl.

“Are you one of Thaddeus’s apprentices?” I asked.

“No. I work with Ammon Hamms.” Hamms was one of the poets at UAB. I liked his work, but thought it a trifle old-fashioned. It was full of misdirected racial anger. Somebody should sit the fellow down someday and explain to him just who was worthy of hate these days.

And of course Trina wouldn’t be one of Thaddeus’s charges. He wouldn’t mess around with his own students. Other instructors’ students were another matter, however.

Her voice was strained now, as it had been at the bar, as she struggled to hold in her emotion.

“I need to know what you really felt for Thaddeus,” I told her. This was true enough, but I could see that she needed to talk, that she hadn’t told anyone else her feelings about Thaddeus—because no one had ever asked.

“I loved him,” she said. She shook her head, then rubbed her forehead. While she was rubbing, she began unobtrusively wiping her eyes. “Why did this have to happen?”

“I don’t know, but I plan to find out,” I said. “Do you have any ideas? Guesses?”

She shrugged. “Gambling, maybe.”

“He played City games, went to the holofights?” Virtual casinos were not entirely legal, but not difficult to get to if you knew the system well enough. A lot of the virtual bars Thaddeus and I had been to had back rooms for gambling. And holographic computer simulations of every game imaginable were available for wagering.

“Everything,” Trina said. “City, holo, football, kingpin. He made a lot of money that way. At least he claimed to.”

This was a side to Thaddeus I hadn’t known about. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to jeopardize my ethics by telling me. Maybe he’d been afraid I’d have turned him in.

“Anything else you can think of?”

“You mean motives and stuff?”

“I mean motives and stuff.”

“No. Unless some idiot at school got mad at him.”

“Do you think that’s likely?”

“It’s guaranteed. But those people are the biggest wusses in the known universe. They wouldn’t have the guts.”

“Did he ever say anything about joining an Ideal?” I asked, as casually as possible.

“No. I don’t know. He talked about them sometimes, but like everybody does.”

“Do you think he would have told you if he was thinking about it?”

She gave me a hard stare, and I saw the sadness in her eyes, beneath the tough act. Tears flowed. It looked as though she were squeezing them out. I found myself hugging her to my chest, stroking her hair.

“Oh God,” she said. “I’ve wanted to be held all day.”

“It was tough, finding out?”

“Nobody knew about Thaddeus and me. We kept it hushed up. So there was nobody I could talk to.”

She was crying in earnest now, and, so help me, so was I. She looked up at me, smiled, wiped a tear from my face.

“Why don’t you stay with me tonight, at my mother’s?” I said. “We have an extra room.”

“Oh, I’ll be all right,” she said.

So I held her some more. She fit nicely under my chin. To Thaddeus, who was two inches taller than I was, she had probably seemed a tiny, fragile thing. Finally, she wiped her eyes on my shirt, then pulled gently away. She sat down on Thaddeus’s bed, looked around, bit her lower lip to hold back another fit of sobs.

“Can I stay here for a while?” she asked. “I didn’t know if it would be okay after the police had been here.”

“Sure. just leave everything like it was.”

“That’s the way it will always be,” she said, and smoothed a wrinkle from the sheet beneath her.

I rose.

“Okay, I’m going,” I said, then, “Is this where you’ve been living?”

“Do you think I would have let the place get into this shape if I lived here?”

“Guess not. Trina, are you really all right?”

“Yes. Everything’s copacetic.” That was Thaddeus’s word. He’d picked it up from junk hustlers a few years back. He seemed to like the way it rolled off the tongue.

“Do you really think you should be alone?”

“I don’t live by myself,” she said. “Thaddeus found me this basement room with this woman who’s big shit at city hall or something. She’s an old friend of his.”

Oh, hell. And here we go again. Floodgates opening. What will and must be about to rain down upon me like heavy sludge.

“Abby?”

“Yeah, that’s her name. You know her?”

“I used to be married to her.”

“But she’s a node.”

“I know.”

After that, Trina didn’t say anything. She found another wrinkle to work on.

I took a blank sheet of paper from the desk and wrote down my mother’s telephone number and link code on it. I also wrote down the path of the virtual feed to my op-eds—not a code I give out regularly. “If you need anything,” I said.

As I left, I instructed the spiderlock to close everything up after Trina was out, then went down through the Blocker and out into the sidewalk heat of sunset.

The Southside was beginning to come alive. College kids and young professionals in smartly pressed jeans strolled the streets, along with cream-faced hookers and bums hawking spit and tirades. The bars, jangle joints, and friendship salons were already lit up, and cars tooled in and out of the flicker of neon. The pavement smelled like money wet with urine. The sky was welted with red lines of clouds, like the nose of a drunkard.

Thaddeus had loved this town. It had haunted his dreams. On a hot August day like today, the place felt alive, like a living entity—something that far transcended the City Ideal that Abby belonged to. More basic. Maybe not more overtly powerful, but stronger deep down. That was the Birmingham I loved. And missed. Sometimes in Seattle, I woke up sweating like a southern pig in summer, in the midst of winter in the Northwest, dreaming of a southern sky red and hot with the exhalations of two million souls, the breath-prayers of the people.

Standing above the Southside was Vulcan. The torch was red, of course. I was close enough to see the eerie smile on his iron face. “I don’t know what he’s laughing at,” Thaddeus had said once. “At the way things are or at the way he made them. I’m not sure the old god believes in himself anymore.” He’d smiled bitterly.

“But I believe in him,” Thaddeus had said. “I’m his fucking prophet of doom.”

Abby. I had to see Abby once again. Maybe what the old god was laughing at was Andy Harco.

I spent most of the next day calling up the police reports on my op-eds, avoiding the inevitable. Nothing of much use. Whoever had done the blast job had cleaned up after himself very well. Freddy had lied. It

was not a slow torment for Thaddeus, but a superquick explosion. Performed, most likely, by a blast spider—an insect-sized crank that sank its fiber-optic fangs into the neck of its victim and reamed out everything that made the victim a person. Personality, memories, somatic functions. Everything.

It was the kind of hit professionals make, both to kill their victim and to destroy the recoverable short-terms that could identify the assassin.

The body was clean, as well. No marks of bondage. A small piercing hole, just below the base of the skull, where the spider dug in. Probably all Thaddeus had felt was a tingle as the thing crawled into position, then a quick jab of pain in his neck, then nothing.

After a morning of this, I drove down to P.D. to look through Thaddeus's personal effects. I could have gotten them in virtual, but it would have taken time to get them translated. And if you're not a node, virtual is just not high-resolution enough—in audio, tactile, or visual—to give you the fine detail you needed for careful examination of evidence. Add to that the fact that the junk geniuses still hadn't figured out a way to wire it for smell. Something about the reptile brain being too deep or something.

And anyway, I needed the exercise that getting out and driving would provide. The place hadn't changed much. Cranks roamed the halls, carrying hard-copy files. A few dragged perpetrators along. The perps always followed the cranks in a reluctant shuffle, stunned at the apparent temerity of their robot guards. Most cranks had in their deep programming an aversion to coercing human beings into anything. But not at P.D.

I saw a few Justcorp personnel, but a whole lot more Guardian and Humana. Administration had changed hands. A GarciaSecure rental brought me the items I requested from evidence and acquisitions. Back in my day, Justcorp had practically owned the place. But that was the way business worked nowadays—diversification. The big temp agencies were becoming dinosaurs, as all the companies scaled down and worked into the niches.

The Ideals were on the rise. Seattle was one of the few places where management in the P.D. didn't consist of nodes belonging to His Excellence, Matishui, or to another of the business Ideals. Birmingham happened to contract out to a German concern, Meyerstadt. My temporary boss was a node in Meyerstadt, I supposed, but since all my clearances were logged on the computer, I didn't have to deal with him. Or it.

Thaddeus hadn't been carrying much. No billfold. A bag full of vouchers and a link cash card. Anybody else carrying just a bag full of cash would have been suspicious. I, however, knew that this was the way Thaddeus kept up with his money. A pack of Jawolski full-filtered nano-zymed cigarettes for that cool, clean, noncancerous smoke. These didn't have the self-igniting tips. Thaddeus used the cigarette lighter given to him by the Betablocker. It was among the effects as well. I palmed it, flicked it open and closed, remembering the simple pleasure it had given Thaddeus. He'd had it translated into virtual so he could always have it with him.

The clothes were nondescript Southern. Light cotton pants, Pons walking sandals, three years out of style, a faded madras shirt. On the collar was a single drop of blood. His op-eds were cracked and taped back together. Cheap and South American.

I signed out the lighter on personal recognizance, then returned everything else to the E & A woman. I pocketed the lighter, then drove the Saj over to East Lake and went for a long, long run—nearly ten miles. Then resistance work at the nearby booth. A donut at Krispy Kreme. I was stalling.

Even knowing this, I drove back to Mom's and started in on my new Minden Sibley story. I blinked down my virtual selection menu and called up "writing office." This took my voluntaries off-line, and

formed the holo of my nondescript working space within the organic matrix of my op-ed lenses. Some people think that virtual writing is as easy as thinking—you just form the sentences in your head, and they are transformed into words on a page. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. Only nodes can think to machines, and we all know that node writing is a joke. The way it works with me is that I have to simulate typing with my hands—or come up with some analogous activity. In fact, I used an IBM Selectric from the Dark Ages. No qualitative improvement from Dickens's pen and ink, but things *are* more convenient and faster.

Working on the story wasn't entirely an escape from my professional duties, since the murder I was writing about was extremely similar to the one I was working on in real life. But instead of a dead body with no brain, I had a brain with no dead body. The nanos in East Lake—where the body in the story had been dumped—had eaten the flesh, but hadn't gotten inside the skull yet. The recoverable short-terms indicated that the victim was a man, but gave no hint as to his identity—images of his op-ed display flicking from one feed to another, comedies and documentaries, for the most part. Then a bright light from around the edges of the eyewear. Then nothing.

There was a vague hint of Ideal involvement, but in my story, the offending node didn't look a thing like Abby. Instead, he appeared remarkably similar to Freddy Pupillina.

And then I glanced up from my battered old typewriter and Granddaddy was standing beside me, reading over my shoulder.

“Not bad,” he said. “But that time-travel stuff bothers me. Why don't you write about regular people in regular places?”

For a moment, it was like old times. This, my office, was frequently where Granddaddy and I met, after I left Birmingham. Maturicell gave him four virtual hours a day, and he said he didn't like to waste it in a City that didn't exist—the big virtual City, that is, where most people conducted their virtual business. I, on the other hand, didn't care to visit the Birmingham virtual reification, for obvious reasons. So the office was the compromise, and it was just as well because all we ever did was sit around and talk. Rather, he told stories and I listened. One thing he never did, though, was read what I wrote. Reading was laborious for him. The crazy moment of hope and relief passed, and I frowned at the ghost. “What are you doing here? I thought Mom had you deactivated.”

He raised an eyebrow, smiled. “She did. Yesterday.” And how could a ghost get into virtual?

She did.

Ghosts aren't smart enough to lie, either. “Yesterday?”

“That's right, son.”

I pushed my chair back from the desk. It scraped, very convincingly, on the linoleum. I imagined the impulse traveling down the temple piece of my op-eds, making connection with the audio leads just above my inner ear. As usual, the only thing missing in virtual was smell. Would Granddaddy stink of the grave's rot, if there were smells here? No. He'd been cremated. Ashes. He'd smell gray and gone.

“What are you? Did Freddy send you to mess with me?”

“Not Freddy. I hate that bastard,” Granddaddy said. “Nobody sent me. In fact, so far nobody knows that I exist.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m not your grandfather, son. Well, I am and I’m not. He and I were friends for a lot of years, though he didn’t really know it.”

“What are you?”

“I’m a glitch in the system, son,” he said. “That’s about all I know.”

“Then in the funeral-home parking lot—”

“That was me. Not that ghost. After your grandfather died, I decided that becoming as much like him as I could would be a suitable memorial.”

Granddaddy—or whatever he was—pulled up a chair that hadn’t been there before. It was his favorite recliner, gone for years, since he’d been in the Maturicell Sensorium. He took a cigarette from his pocket, and I reached for Thaddeus’s lighter. It wasn’t there in virtual, but Granddaddy smoked self-igniters, anyway. He rubbed the end against the chair’s fabric, and it sparked to a slow burn. He took a long drag. His fingers were yellowed where he held the cigarette, just as I remembered.

“What I am don’t matter much right now, I don’t think. I want to tell you something I found out.”

“I’m listening.”

“Freddy killed me.”

“The thought had occurred to me.”

“It was to get you back down here. In person.”

“How do you know?”

“I . . . it’s inside me. Knowing.” Granddaddy leaned back in the chair, took another long drag. “Elizabeth Holder, entry clerk 17A98T4—ah hell, there’s a lot of numbers attached to her—gave the order to turn me off. Somebody named Nelson Heally told her it was all right. And he got a message from somebody else who got a message from Freddy, and the message had money attached in a . . . a rider loop. . . . Am I making any sense, son?”

Sure he was. This was the sort of thing I’d paid big money to be able to do with my op-eds. “You’re accessing computer records. Instantly.”

“Maybe so. It’s just things that I know. Like I know your grandmother’s favorite color. I was there, with him, all along. Can’t say how, exactly. In the wiring, in the plumbing, maybe.” He finished the cigarette, flicked it to the floor. There was no smell of lingering ambient smoke. The room was as antiseptic as usual.

“Freddy must have wanted to get me back pretty bad,” I said, mainly to break the silence.

“No, son. He don’t give a shit about you.”

“Then—”

“The Family needs you for something. That’s the part I don’t know. I don’t know why I should, either, ‘cause what the fuck would I know about the goddamned Mafia, come to think of it?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Hmmp.” Granddaddy stood up. “I have to go.”

“Why?”

“Starting to feel sick. Like I’m coming off a three-day drunk or something. Not used to getting this much attention paid to me, I guess.”

“Oh.”

“Well, son . . .”

“Am I going to see you again?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

“See you. Granddaddy.”

“Bye.” And he was gone, like a changed channel.

5

That night, I went to see Abby.

Trina answered the door when I knocked. She led me into the living room and went to get Abby. Not *my* living room. Abby and I could never have afforded a place like this. One wall of the room was a window. The house was up on Red Mountain, on the part of Twentieth Street that goes over the mountain and into Homewood. It hung off the side of the mountain, seemed to hang over all of downtown, and the window was a light show. At night, the biostatic plants burned like the souls of saints, the streets flickered in arachnid configurations. Everything was dark or bright, with no in-between. Trina didn’t come back. I turned from the window, looked over at the door Trina had left through, and Abby was standing there.

She didn’t move, didn’t step into the room. The only light was the light of the city through the window. Black dress, bare arms, white skin. Long raven hair. Brown eyes, lips that always pouted, no matter what her mood. Moon silver armband just above the elbow. Silver bracelet at the wrist. And, after all these years, she still wore the expression of a bewildered child.

“Thaddeus is dead.” My words sounded alien, or far away—as if I’d said them a long time ago.

“I know.” Her voice, Southern, alto, too large for her body, but feminine and detached.

“How have you been?”

“Very well.” She finally moved into the room. She drifted like a cloud. The room was very still, and I could smell her approach, as you can that of a storm.

“I hear you run the city now.”

“No, I’m just traffic.”

“Did you get what you wanted?”

“Yes.”

I turned back to the window, put a hand in my pocket, took it out. What should I do with my hands?

“Is that *you*, Abby, in there?”

She didn’t answer at first, but moved closer. I suddenly felt like crying, but did not.

“What did you ever know about me, anyway, Andy?”

“I loved you.”

“Yes. We were two people in love.” She touched my arm, drew back, touched it again. “Did you ever think that there were more important things in the world than two people, in love or not?”

I turned to face her, then. It was over. It had been over for years. Still, she was everything I’d ever wanted. But *she* wasn’t here. My small sacrifice for the betterment of mankind.

“No,” I answered. “I never for one minute considered that possibility.” I tried to smile ironically, but it hurt to do so. The touch of her hand on my arm burned like cool fire.

“Well, what is it you want?” As she spoke, a crank came into the room with a bourbon and water, something I used to drink a lot. I took it from the tray on the crank’s head. Abby stopped touching me, took a glass of water.

“I think Thaddeus was considering joining an Ideal before he died,” I said. “I was wondering if the city had been recruiting him.”

“Thaddeus? You must be joking. He hated Ideals almost as much as you do.”

“All right. Did you have any conversations with him just before his death?”

Abby stood still for a moment, her expression frozen. It was a look I’d seen before when the node is in complete integration with its Ideal. I looked around the room, but saw no obvious transmission points. A tasteful node residence, a bohemian poetry student to share the place with, antiques, wonderful views. Human, no hardware. But then, Abby’s place would be.

“I haven’t spoken with Thaddeus for three weeks,” she said.

“Well, that would be just before his death.”

“What do you mean?” Abby asked, but it was too fast, unconvincing. Nodes don’t lie very well to real people.

“He died a few weeks ago, but his body was only recently discovered.”

“I see.” I’ll bet she did.

“What did you talk about?”

“Trina. He was worried that I didn’t want her to stay here anymore, and he couldn’t afford to help her out if she needed to get a new place.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him that Trina could stay here as long as she wanted, and that he should stop betting so heavily on the holos.”

“And that was all?”

Abby sipped her water. Somehow the motion didn't look real. More like a mannequin lifting a glass to its mouth, then lowering it, with no fluids exchanged.

"He was into his bookie for a lot of money," she said. "And his bookie was Freddy Pupillina's agent. You know that. That is why he was killed, I think. That might also explain the blast job."

"That kind of job is too expensive for a small-time gambling enforcer," I said.

"Well, then. You're the expert." She said it with the contempt that all nodes have for us simple-minded individuals.

"Abby, how did you know that Thaddeus had been dead for three weeks?"

Almost, she was flustered. Again there was a moment of Ideal integration. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"Come on."

"All right. Freddy may talk like he runs the city, but he is just one voice. City has ways of checking up on the Family and keeping it in check. We know what's going on with Freddy. Frankly, we're smarter because we're made up of smarter nodes."

"Do you think Freddy did it?"

Another temporal dropout, then she said, "Yes."

"Why?"

"The gambling was a way for the Family to get its hooks into Thaddeus. Like I said, they need better nodes. They wanted him to join them."

"Why Thaddeus, for God's sake?"

"Call it an exercise in eugenics, in mental evolution. No great poet has ever belonged to an Ideal."

"Because they would stop *being* a great poet the minute they joined!"

"That's your opinion. It would be a wonderful thing for humankind if Thaddeus had joined the right Ideal. You don't understand. You can't comprehend."

"Yeah, right."

It made sense, in a sick sort of way. But why bring me in? Or was I overestimating the Family's opinion of me? Maybe It thought I would botch things up good, and that's why It had . . . killed my grandfather. To make sure the detective investigating Thaddeus's death was an imbecile.

I was suddenly fed up with the fucking Ideals, fed up with Abby and her precious City. Fuck Birmingham. Fuck all that is general, all-encompassing, bigger-than-you-and-me who knows how. There are times when a guy has to get away from principles.

"I still love you, Abby," I said. "I'm willing to give you a chance to get out of your Ideal and come back to me."

She looked at me as a child will look at a strange insect, just before it absently crushes it.

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“This is your last chance.”

There was a moment of integration. A flash of pleasure on her face as the Ideal gave her what she’d come to need. Hell, what she’d always wanted. “What do you think I’ve got?” she said, laughing softly. “Everything.”

“Nothing,” I said. I set my untouched bourbon down on top of the crank’s head and showed myself to the door. Abby breezed beside me to open it. She no longer smelled like rain. I must have brushed against her skin, but I do not remember how it felt at that moment.

I drove around for a long time in the Saj, off traffic control, off the pump and quiver of Abby’s involuntary nervous system, because that is what the traffic system of Birmingham was. A brain interlaced with nanos that reported back to networking junk, that inhabited a bioelectroquantum froth somewhere in the depths of City Hall. Each municipal function had a human overseer, just as nerves and hormones tell your body when and how to shit. And nerves and hormones, for all their complexity, are less independent entities than shit is.

I felt very independent this evening.

Driving, trying not to think, because thinking was what always got me in trouble, because thinking was what Ideals did best, wasn’t it, and all we puny humans had was our feelings, the seat of our pants? What I was feeling was a deep and abiding hatred for them, for the Ideals, and what they’d done to me, to us, to all the people. And I wanted, more than anything, to take out Freddy Pupillina. Take him out and watch as, like one of those old-fashioned strings of Christmas lights, his destruction took out the whole fucking tree.

I drove through downtown and hitched onto the bottom deck of the beltway, headed northeast. I felt like a corpuscle streaming through a capillary, a cell with no center. The lights were on when I got back to Mom’s, which should have told me something, but, idiot that I am, I walked right into it.

“Don’t even think about it,” said Big Bertha, Freddy’s goon woman. She was holding the Danachek fléchette pistol to my mother’s face. I froze. Think of something, goddamn it, Andy. But I couldn’t. Mom was still wearing the incandescent mourning dress. It shone black-red for terror.

The guy whose balls I’d fried got up from a chair and limped over to me. He grinned through his beard and slid the briefcase out of my hand.

Mom made no sound. She was grinding her teeth together so hard I could hear it across the room. Somebody was going to fucking pay for this.

“Say good-night to your mama,” said the guy who had my briefcase. He was still grinning, as if he couldn’t get his face to go back to its natural stupid scowl. His teeth were very white in the curly blackness of his beard. I wanted very much to wipe the beard, the grin, then the grinning muscles off of his face—with sandpaper.

“It’s all right, Mom,” I said. “Everything will be all right.”

“Oh, Andy. I’m sorry,” she said. “They said they were from the Mourners’ Union. So I let them in.”

“Shut up,” said Bertha.

“I should have been more careful, less trust—”

Bertha slapped her in the temple with the butt of the Danachek. It didn't knock her out. She sat stunned and hurting.

"What do you fucking want?" I said, low, almost in a growl.

"Ha," said the grin-faced goon. He pulled a stungun out from his jacket and tried to shove it into my balls. He missed and connected with my thigh. He'd turned the juice all the way up, and the last thing I remember was the tightening of every muscle in my body, impossibly tight, unbelievably painful. Then the smell of burning flesh. Then the

bliss 0, bliss 0, I am not I am we, the dark and empty center spinning black and clumped like spit thick tobacco in a greater darkness, moist, hot, trembling, needing, giving. We are spinning, we are all spins, dancing through tendrils, sheaves, and chords of thready fibrous tendrils holding us, guiding, feeding and being fed, leading always and inexorably to the dark clumped center of all, All. There is a gushing rise within . . . me . . . and a hot wheel of love in my mind, spinning, burning, shedding the blood of desire, longing for

the Darkness.

6

I awoke in a bare room in a warehouse that belonged to Freddy Pupillina. I knew that the Family had not killed Thaddeus. *Iknew*, innately, because now I had been made. I was a part of the Family. How odd, I thought, that the thing I feared so much before was now my heart's desire. It seemed that all my life was a pale shadow before this time, this being. I was a node. The very thought sent waves of pleasure flowing through me. I reached out and entered the strong mind of the Family.

Respect and loyalty. A just code and the need to keep to it flowed back. I felt lucky to be a part of such a higher purpose, a greater principle. It had chosen me when I was rebellious, a mote of nothing destined for nothingness. I was touched by a grace far greater than I.

I let the grace take me up, away. I expanded like the huge swelling erection of a god. The Family could use me properly now. I was capable of understanding.

The Ideal, Excellence, was making Its move in Washington, taking out the old imperfect alliance of Courage 3 and the Dallas-Chicago coaxials. Old Ideals must give way to the newer, the better. The Family, as always, needed to be on the winning side. Survival was at stake. But there was a lack, a need. Stale. Thought had grown stale and unproductive, moribund, with nodes like Freddy in Birmingham, Yoakam in New York. Certainly they were loyal. Good Family people.

But no geniuses. No, no geniuses. No geniuses in the Family to draw upon, to use. And Thaddeus Grayson, unattached, doing nobody any good. Freddy, the fool, couldn't even bring in this boy from his own neighborhood. I could feel the Family's longing for Thaddeus, Its brooding need for bettering Itself, to beat back the others, to control, to grow, to destroy all that was not It. I approved. If only Thaddeus weren't dead, I would personally assist in his recruitment. I knew that I could do a damn sight better job than Freddy. The Family felt my pride, knew that it was directed properly, and sent me a wave of approval. I almost fainted with the joy of it. Looking down, I saw that I had come in my pants.

Still a lot to learn about this new way of living. But I would love every minute of the learning.

What the Andy Harco part of my new wholeness had to do: find the killer. Punish the killer, for the hit was made to keep Thaddeus out of the Family. Let the killer know that the Family always either got what

It wanted or got revenge. And then I was to die.

It didn't really matter how I got rid of myself. As long as there was no Family involvement.

Of all these things, I approved.

And so, in the dirty warehouse room, I sat down to think, with the Family behind me. I examined all the Ideals at work within Birmingham—for it seemed intuitively clear to me that an Ideal had killed Thaddeus. The poem fragment was why, the logical bridge from association to association. How clear it all became now. Now that I had a real Mind.

God, if only we could have gotten Thaddeus for Us.

I reexamined the records, all of them, of Thaddeus's comings and goings for the last month of his life. I laughed when I realized how completely the Family knew everything, all that people in this city did. All that was done anywhere in which the Family was interested. What a fool I was to think I could hide anything, ever, from an Ideal.

The girl, Trina's, entrances and exits from his apartment. One time, she'd said. One time a day was more like it! Lying, silly, stupid girl.

In the midst of this examination, there was a flicker in the corner of the room. I reached to adjust something in my op-eds and realized that they were gone. I wouldn't be needing them anymore. Still the flicker. I looked up from my reverie.

Granddaddy was standing there, smoking a cigarette.

"Hello, son."

Granddaddy.

A shriek deeper and mightier than any cry of pain I've ever heard. A blast through my mind that I thought would kill me. A wave of information. No way to assimilate it, let it crash, let it pass.

And I understood, somehow, in a small part, just what Granddaddy was. And what that meant to the Ideals.

Granddaddy was spontaneous. Granddaddy had happened while the Ideals weren't looking. Granddaddy was the integrated organic heart of the city. He *was* Birmingham. More than Abby and her ilk could ever be. The city that hides behind the city, that lurks in the imagination of poets and the delusions of bums.

The city that wants nothing of people, that takes nothing, that merely inhabits the power grids, the link nets, the sewer pipes. That strengthens the people like invisible integument, holding them together in a way the Ideals never could. I looked at him again. A holoprojection, using some surveillance and defense equipment in the warehouse, probably. But more than a mere image hanging in the air. So much more.

The Ideals had suspected for years, but there was no evidence, no proof. Only the fact that the plans for incorporating all individuals seemed to drag inexorably, that somehow there was always strife when the goals of all the Minds seemed so clear.

Something was fouling things up.

And now They knew what it was. After all these years, he'd shown his face.

The Family was terrified. What if there were others? The Ideals were not prepared for organized resistance.

“You let go of that boy,” said Granddaddy.

The Family withdrew from me. *No, oh God, no. Please stay, please, I beg—*

I stumbled to my feet, dazed.

“Well, son,” said Granddaddy. “I don’t know how long I can hold ’em. Now’s your chance.”

So he knew that, too. The junk I’d had buried so deep inside me that even I couldn’t remember except in dreams. But now the time had come, and the knowledge rose to my consciousness like Queequeg’s coffin, waterproof, unsinkable. I grabbed hold, *remembered*. Andy Harco was a rider program, taken from my brain, fitted to deeper junk, a hidden soul. Andy Harco was a virus allowed to inhabit a stronger substratum. Andy Harco had rigged his own mind with a secret weapon against the Ideals.

“The men of iron ore unfluxed,” I said. “And the women with dark and carbon eyes.”

It was a line from one of Thaddeus’s poems; it was an activating code. A trigger. I felt *theme* that I’d implanted in my own brain two years ago coil out of slumber, spread out into my mind. Become my mind. The simple me at the base of all my existence. The killer me. Its sole purpose was to cleanse my brain of all traces of an Ideal. Any Ideal.

Its only job was to wipe me clean.

My briefcase. I needed my briefcase. Frantically I looked around.

“It’s over there in the corner,” Granddaddy said, pointing with the cigarette. He smiled.

And there it was. The Family had thought that I might need it. Hell, yes, I did! I picked it up and set it on my lap, flipped it open. I laid the Glock and stungun beside me, took the Portalab out as well. What was left was the froth. What was left was the static programming and the data that made up Andy Harco.

My op-eds were gone, but I no longer needed them to link up with the briefcase. Now I had an Ideal feedhorn on the back of my head. I felt the wart, hated it, knew it would always be there as a reminder. I took an old-fashioned optical cable out of a compartment, clipped one end to the feedhorn, and plugged into the briefcase. I activated the froth. All the tell-tales burned green. I downloaded my short-terms into the briefcase, to complete *theme* that was already there.

Then I looked around for Granddaddy, to tell him thanks. To tell him good-bye. He was gone.

And with that, I wiped my mind out of existence.

And

slowly

returned.

Angry.

Because I had been a part of the Family, I now had new information. I knew that the Family didn't kill Thaddeus. I knew where to find Freddy Pupillina. He was in the warehouse, going over the books with the foreman of the place. It was a nano-warehouse, with barrels of hijacked bugs from all over the new South. I passed a couple of cranks shuffling inventory on the way, but they didn't notice me.

Grin-Face and Big-Boned Bertha were standing outside the door of the office Freddy was in. They were in some sort of discussion, with Grin-Face gesticulating wildly, pulling at his beard, and Bertha shaking her head.

I hid behind some barrels, took out the Glock. I was afraid they were wearing body armor, so I took time to aim, to control my breathing. Then I shot them both, quickly, in the head.

The noise alerted Freddy, and he turned out the lights in the office. Smarter than he looks. But I knew—how well I knew—that the Family had told him what to do.

The door of the office opened, and the foreman came stumbling out.

“Don't, please don't,” he said, looking around wildly for me. “He's got a gun on me. Please don't—”

“Come over here,” I said. I waved an arm, and the foreman stumbled toward me. I took the stungun from the briefcase. When he was close enough, I stood up and zapped him. As he fell, a shot rang out and hit a nearby barrel. I smelled acrid activating nanos as the contents spilled out. These bugs were designed to alter something organic, if not precisely wood.

The floor began to seethe where the nanos touched it, to deform. Soon a section of the flooring was gone and in its place was a lump of a charred and gross thing writhing on the concrete subfloor. Then the nanos started to transform, more slowly, the concrete. Freddy had lucked into some potent stuff. Military shit, probably, bound for the Mideast.

Another shot. It popped into the foreman's back, and blood spurted. Getting sloppy, Freddy.

“Well,” I said, and stood up. Freddy fired twice more, missed by a mile. I walked toward the office. He was either reloading or taking better aim. I flung open the door. He opened up on me. Two shots in the chest, but I was ready, and they didn't knock the breath out of me. I quickly fell forward, rolled head over heels.

And came up with the stungun in Freddy's chest. When the juice hit him, he slumped down onto me, his body's own weight keeping him pressed into the gun. I kept the trigger depressed for a long time.

Freddy was a monstrously fat man. I finally put my years of weight training to good use, dragging him out to the nano barrels. I opened one of the barrels with a hand torch I found in the foreman's pocket.

Then I sat down beside Freddy, in the midst of the dead, dangling the Glock absently from one hand. In my other hand, I held Thaddeus's cigarette lighter. I flicked it on, closed the cover, flicked it on again. I tried not to imagine what I was going to do. Anything else.

I began to consider how I would end my Minden Sibley time-traveling detective story. I turned the possibilities over in my mind. None of them really suited me.

I haven't told you, hoping, I suppose, that you would have read them, that you would know it already. But in case you didn't know, the Minden Sibley mysteries usually turn on a humorous point. They are, in fact, satirical comedies of our times. At least that's the idea. Sometimes I get it right, sometimes I fuck up. But when things get really messy, when the plot has reached convolutions unknown even to brain surgeons and French master chefs, then I call upon the trusty Third Temporal Law to get me out of the

bind. Minden, good soul that he is, finds himself invoking it at least once a story. It is a tacit law, never taught to any Timeways detective, but understood by all.

3. Break any rule, break *every* rule, even the First and Second Temporal Laws. Just don't get caught.

Yes, I thought. That's the only way to wrap it up when logic escapes you and you have a mess that you have to clean up, one way or another. It's not logical, but it's rational. It's only human.

After a while, Freddy began to come around. I waited some more. He struggled to sit up. I put the Glock to his head.

"Don't," I said.

He lay still, his pig eyes flashing in his pulpy face. "Andy, please—"

"Shut up. I want to talk to the Family."

He shut up. Then there was the blank moment of integration. "We're here," said the Family, through Freddy. "Hello, Andy."

"You didn't kill Thaddeus," I said.

"No."

"I know who did. This is no longer your problem."

"Well," said the Family. "Good."

"I'm upset about being made a node."

"We felt it necessary."

"Nevertheless, I'm upset."

Freddy screwed his face into an expression of bewilderment. It wasn't much of a reach. "Do you want an . . . apology?"

"Wouldn't mean anything."

"That is true. Do you want Us to drop the charges against you for dereliction of duty?"

"You use people and kill them and don't think anything of it," I said. "Individuals mean shit to you."

"Basically, yes," said the Family. "We know it's hard for you to comprehend, Andy, but basically, that's what they are. Shit. Nothing. Individuals are a means, not an end."

"So," I said. "There's really nothing more to say."

I tipped the barrel over onto Freddy, and skipped back out of the way. The nanos did their work much faster than they had on the wood. Flesh was, obviously, the medium they were tailored to alter.

Freddy screamed horribly, and in that scream I believed—I hoped—that I heard the cries of a hundred others, hurting in unison.

When I left the warehouse, all that was left of Freddy was a puddle of primordial goo.

I went home. Mom was all right. She was in some kind of meditation trance, and the patchouli had stunk up the place real good. But she came out of it when I showed up, and flung her arms around my neck. She called me “Meander,” just like she had when I was a kid. I couldn’t find it in my heart to correct her. Maybe that *was* my deep, true name. I thought. Amazing the crazy delusions you get when you’re relieved over a loved one’s safety.

Then she noticed the two holes in my chest, both clotted black with old blood now. She screamed, covered her mouth.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m a cop. We’re used to getting shot.” After that, we didn’t say anything for a long time, which was probably for the best. Then I said, “I have a few things to clear up, Mom, and I’ll be back.”

“You can’t go,” she said. “Don’t leave again . . . Andy.” She was obviously regaining her senses.

“Everything’ll be all right. Everything’s okay now,” I said. “Nobody can touch me now.”

I took the beltway, top level, to downtown, then descended into the grid of the city. Through the decaying Birmingham Green, a leftover jungle, a hundred years old, full of bums, hurtful bugs, bad junk. Urban Renewal. The People Who Know getting it all bassackward as usual. About as effective as adding wine to vinegar.

Up Twentieth Street, through the nightwork of the Southside. Up Red Mountain, the Vulcan’s red torch looming up dead ahead. To Abby’s place. When no one answered my knock, I kicked in the door. Abby was standing in the living room, gazing out over the city.

“I was expecting you,” she said. “Even when they’re off traffic control, I still follow every car that moves in my city.”

“Your city?”

“Yes!” she said. She flung back her hair defiantly. It shone dully with neon reflections from the window. “My city.”

“Why did you kill Thaddeus, Abby?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Fuck that shit!”

“Very well, then.” She took a step toward me. “Politics. His sort of mind becomes a very important, strategic node when integrated into an Ideal. Freddy was going to get him, and with him, Freddy could have overturned the City. We couldn’t allow that.”

“I’ve heard this before. From the Family.”

She sniffed, shrugged. “Well, that makes sense. It’s only reasonable.”

“No,” I said. “Not reasonable. Hobbes logic. Billiard-ball logic. People are solids and stripes. Life does not have to be nasty, brutish, and short without a goddamned king to tell us what to do, to shove us around. There’s more to life than actions and reactions!”

“Oh, yeah? Well, what are you doing right now, Andy Harco?”

She drifted across the room toward me. Her brown eyes were intense and deep. She held her hands out toward me. I'd forgotten that she'd had artificial nails installed years ago, to break her nail-biting habit. They shone whitely, moon-colored.

“Everything you've done for the last eight years has been a reaction.” Her voice was low and soothing. For years, I'd dreamed of it, and awakened with a feeling of utter loss when I found that she was not really beside me.

That feeling washed over me now, stronger than ever before. I raised the Glock. “Justice,” I said, “is not reaction.”

She stopped, six feet from me, facing me, fearless.

“You going to take me in, Lieutenant?”

I no longer had my op-eds, but I was pretty sure what the Option 4 junk would tell me. If I pulled the trigger, I could never be a cop again.

“This is my town, Lieutenant. My town. Do you think I'll get punished? Do you think I'll spend more than a night in jail? Andy, my brain is part of what runs the jail.”

“I could take you with me. I could drive us to Atlanta.

“I'll call every cop in the metro area to stop you,” she replied. “Illegal extradition. You know that.”

I raised the Glock, took aim at her forehead. “It would be an accident,” I said. “Or you resisted.”

“The City is recording every second of this conversation.”

“I just don't give a shit,” I said. “I think this is what you are failing to comprehend.”

“Don't you, Andy? Then blow me away.” She lowered her arms. The child's sad face, those incredible lips. The silver on her arm. The fanatic zombie glow in her eyes.

I lowered the Glock. “It was jealousy, wasn't it?” I said. “Politics didn't have anything to do with it.”

Abby let out a long sigh, then said, “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“He loved Birmingham more than you. And he was a better lover, too.”

“Don't be absurd. Jealousy is for, well, nobodies. For *individuals* .”

“The City chose him, Abby. I know it for a fact.”

“No,” she said. It was almost a whimper.

“You did it yourself, didn't you?”

She smiled, sadly. “Andy, when are you going to understand, really comprehend?”

“There is no *you* .”

“The I you used to know is changed and better.”

“Good-bye, Abby.” I turned to leave. My eyes were misty, though I felt numb inside.

“Just a minute, Andy,” she said. I felt the cool touch of her hand on my shoulder, my neck. So soft, so small, her hands had been. I could almost cup them within mine. God, I had loved her so completely. Then a prickle, a sting.

Oh, shit.

The breaking of glass, a stifled scream. I spun around with the Glock at ready.

Trina stood over Abby, a broken bottle of bourbon in her hand. Abby had slumped to the floor, one side of her face webbed with glass cuts. I lowered the Glock once again, took a long breath. A blast spider crawled out of Abby’s relaxed palm and began working its way up her arm. Over the silver bracelet and the lily-white skin. Toward her shoulder, toward the porcelain curve of her neck where her spinal cord lay, a pinprick away. There was no put-back routine that could restore a mind after the kiss of a blast spider. Even the mind of a node.

“God, Andy, she was trying to do something to you!” Trina said, unable to take her eyes off her own handiwork. Her op-eds sat skewed on her nose.

“You did the right thing, kid,” I said. “The right thing.”

I reached over and worked the broken bottle from Trina’s hand. She had a damned good grip on the thing.

“I don’t think I can stay here anymore,” Trina said. “She killed Thaddeus.” Then she started crying, really crying, like she hadn’t before. I pulled her toward me, but I didn’t want to hug her on account of the dried blood from my chest wounds. I stroked her face with the hand that didn’t hold a gun. I righted her op-eds.

“Come on, kid,” I said. “Let’s blow this town.”

“Yeah,” she said tentatively, then, “*Yeah.*”

The blast spider was past Abby’s elbow now, working its way over her armlet. I could almost hear the little crank’s tiny feet clinking against the metal. It was nearly to her shoulder. . . .

We stepped into the sultry night, Trina and I. I opened the passenger side of the Saj and helped her inside. She sat there gazing up at me, trembling slightly. I leaned down and kissed her, lightly, but on the lips. Then I reached into my pocket and took out Thaddeus’s lighter.

“He would have wanted you to have this,” I said, and folded her brown palm around it.

As I closed the Saj’s door, I glanced up into the sky overhead.

The Vulcan was leering down on me, as big and bright as the labor of a hundred thousand ironworkers, a hundred thousand watts of city power, could make him. His red torch mocked me as surely as his idiotic all-knowing god smile.

I could shoot the fucker out.

I could. I leaned against the Saj and took aim. But without my op-eds, I would never hit a target that far away.

I pretended to. I pretended to pull the trigger, and in my mind’s eye, I hit that damn torch. I hit it

dead-on. But instead of blowing the death light out, in my mind's eye, the bullet changed the flame from glaring red to vivid living green.

Mystery Box

A Circle Run

The man in the long coat walked down the streets of bone. The moon was shining on the sides of bone-white buildings and on the bone-white streets. The shadow the man cast as he walked was dark and lustrous—far more alluring than the man himself. He was nondescript, except for his eyes, which were sea-green and seemed to be illuminated from within. For a moment, the man felt observed and didn't like it. He looked up at the moon. There were more people up there than there were in New York. More than there were on Earth. The light from the moon was like their twilight subconscious awareness, turned Earthward. Turned to him.

But that is only my imagination, C thought. Hardly anyone in space pays much attention to Earth, especially at night.

Tucked under C's arm was a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. There was no address on the package, but that was all right because he wasn't delivering it anywhere. This was only the semblance of delivery. He found the corner that he wanted, Church and Canal in old TriBeCa, and walked south down Church. Here the rogue strain of grist had transformed only the stone of the buildings to bone and not the metalwork. Something *had* gotten into the metal superstructure, though, because the iron ornamentation of the buildings had a blue tint to it, and was very brittle. There were places where the fire escapes had crumbled away in straight lines that mere rust would never have produced. More like broken ice.

But the air was not cold tonight. It was a mild October night, and he was glad he was wearing a coat with no quilted lining, even if it did flap a bit too much in the breeze. He wondered where he'd left the lining, but he couldn't remember. Probably somewhere in space, or back on Mercury. The lining was like a lot of things that way.

C found the address he was looking for, PERCEPIED EXPORT . At the door there was a broken iron grating pushed to the side. The outside windows were covered with sheet-metal roller casings that did not look like they would be rolled up come daylight, or ever. He wondered what he might find in the spaces between the metal coverings and the windows behind them. Something lost from the last millennium, probably. For a moment, C pictured the three-hundred-year-old skeleton of a little girl stuck there, but shook the image from his head.

It wasn't preposterous, knowing what he did of New York. For three centuries, New York had made a fetish out of children. Dead children. Live, trapped children. Over the beds of old women you would find the paintings of the Little Bone Boy, crying thick chalky tears from enormous eyes that were, somehow, still a living brown. The steps of most brownstones had their guardian children, taken from the sections of the city that had turned to bone, as perpetual wards against the bone-change coming once again for the young.

And there were darker, sexual perversities that had arisen. C knew all about them. He'd been there when it all began.

He opened the door on Church Street and went in. There was a single large room, twenty feet to the

ceiling and maybe a hundred feet long and wide. The walls of the room were piled high with wrapped packages much like the one C held under his arm. In the center of the room was a cluster of desks. Three men and two women sat on battered chairs. Four of the five chairs had no backrests, but all of the people were hunched over their desks examining data pools, so the backrests didn't seem to matter. The men and women moved their fingertips over the desktops, touching the surface here and there, here and there, as if they were using fortune-telling boards or shuffling invisible gambling chips.

C came and stood quietly near the desks. After a moment, a woman at the biggest desk looked up.

"I have something for Mr. Percepied," said C.

The woman touched a spot on her desk, freezing the invisible swirl of data before her, C supposed. He could have attuned his grist outriders to examine what the woman was looking at, but it would be useless knowledge to him. Why soak up the entropy? Do only what needs doing.

"This is shipping," the woman said. "You want receiving."

"No," C replied. "I don't think so."

"Mr. Percepied hardly ever comes into the warehouse," the woman said. "I run things here."

"I was told Mr. Percepied comes in on Tuesdays," said C, "to buy for his personal collection."

"Oh," said the woman. She seemed startled, but quickly recovered herself. "I see. We've been expecting you. I'm Hecate Minim. You must be—"

"Mr. Cornell."

She stood up and stretched. She was tall and had once been very beautiful. Now there was the red tinge of reparation grist to her skin, and her eyes were old—not the creases around her eyes, which were nonexistent, but the eyes themselves. They were the same startling green as his own.

Except I am even older than my eyes.

Despite her eyes, and for no reason that he could name, he associated the woman with the color brown. Like a moth. As he thought of his old friend, Jack Cureoak, the wandering moth of the solar system's night. This *was* Cureoak's daughter, after all.

"Mr. Percepied said you could leave whatever it is with me," Hecate Minim said.

C smiled sadly. "I'd rather give whatever it is to him," he said.

"That may not be possible," said Hecate Minim.

"It may not be," C replied evenly.

"Do you have it with you?"

"Shouldn't we go somewhere else?" C indicated the four other clerks sitting at their desks.

"They won't hear us," Hecate Minim said. "I'm on nightwatch this evening, and I locked them in virtual as soon as you came in."

"You might be surprised what can seep into your dreams," said C.

“All right, then. Let me use the bathroom and get my coat,” said the woman. She went to a closet in the back. C touched one of the men hunched over the desk. The man did not flinch or shudder. He moved his hands like insects across the wood grain of the desk surface. The woman returned wearing a coat of faded red wool. They went out into the night. She leaned against the broken iron door grate and got out a cigarette, shook it until it lit, then took two quick puffs. C noticed the brand of the cigarette, as he always did. Mandala 90s. She was breathing in a blend of marijuana and crazed Eastern logics from the kef farms out on the Gai radial, near Venus. But when she breathed out, the smoke smelled like hot sand. There must be new additives, C thought. Something all-consuming to make them smell that way.

“Is there some place we could get a cup of coffee?” he asked her.

“Coffee?” she said. “Don’t you mean whiskey?”

“I would rather drink coffee.” On Earth, the drinking of coffee sometimes had peculiar connotations. But C saw no reason to explain to her that he didn’t drink alcohol. He had watched what alcohol had done to Jack Cureoak. It had been enough to put him off drinking for three centuries.

“There’s a place on Walker,” she said. “But they have children.”

“I just like coffee,” said C. “That’s all.” They walked three blocks, saying nothing, and turned down a dark street. In the middle they came to a black door. There were black metal letters on the door that C would not have been able to read had it not been for the moonlight. The letters said NIGHT KINDERGARTEN .

The interior was lit with pinprick biolumins that twinkled like stars. Behind the coffee bar was a tank filled with preservative. A row of naked dead children was floating in it. Some were right side up; some were upside down, their hair trailing about them in the gooey liquid like rays of sun. The tank was long but narrow, and it held their bodies up against the glass. They were backlit with a blue-green lamp.

From the far rear, behind heavy black curtains, came the whimpers of the live children. Or, in truth, they would be adults who had been modified to look like children, thought C, if this place were on the up-and-up. But the grist could remake a body from the DNA up, so it was hard to tell what was really back there. The patrons could well imagine that they were groping an actual child. At twenty greenleaves for each copped feel, the kids did their best to keep up the illusion.

C remembered two hundred years before, when coffee had first started to be associated with pederasty. Now it was one of the famous forbidden attractions of old New York.

They ordered two smalls. Hecate Minim took hers dark and sweet. C, of course, took his coffee regular, like everything else. Leaving no trace was the way to stay alive.

They sat down at a table near the front where the childish whimpering wouldn’t drown them out.

“Have you considered the possibility that I am Mr. Percepied?” said Hecate Minim.

“Of course I have,” C replied. “But there are certain quantum fluctuations that I am sensitive to that tell me otherwise.” Of course there weren’t, or at least none that he was aware of, but Hecate Minim likely wouldn’t know that. In many ways, Earthers were the most provincial people in the solar system.

“I see,” she said. She sipped her coffee, and a bit of brown lipstick came off on the cup’s brim. The grist in the lipstick quickly sensed that it was no longer connected to its larger algorithm and began the migration back to the penumbra of Hecate Minim’s body. The lipstick smear faded away. C pictured all the lost bits of humanity forever following each human body around, perpetually trying to reconnect, but

the body keeps moving ahead. Until it doesn't. When we die, the rest of us finally catches up, thought C. He drank his coffee. It was tepid with too much milk and these mugs were not self-heating. He set down the cup.

"I have some memories for Mr. Percepied," he said. He had put the package on the floor beside his chair. Hecate Minim gazed down at it.

"There?" she said. "You're just carrying them around?"

"That's all you can do with memories, isn't it?" He said. "But they're not in the box. The box is something else."

She sat back, regained her composure. Her hair was black, but her eyebrows were light brown. Her skin was Caucasian, tanned—but that was only the grist. C doubted that Hecate Minim got out in the sun very much.

"He'll want to know what you've got," she said.

"Something unique," C replied. "Something from the twenty-eighth century. A manuscript. The only copy of an unpublished poem. With memory latencies."

"What is it?"

"A page from a poet's notebook. It's really quite amazing. The guy must have had a hell of a mind for observation, down to the quantum level. These may be the oldest set of memory imprints that have ever been recovered."

"You've seen it?"

"Only a thumbnail."

"Who is it?"

"You should ask me *what* is it," C said.

"Well," said Hecate Minim. "What?"

"It's a murder," C replied. "The memory of killing a woman with a knife."

"A knifing. That's not so unusual. You can buy knifings by the dozen over on Canal Street."

"No," said C. "This is different."

"How different? Who is the writer?"

"Jack Cureoak."

Hecate sat back, unconsciously licked her lips. She was very good not to give anything else away. She moved up a notch in C's admiration. "My," she said. "Really? Cureoak? The guy who wrote the poems about the outer system?"

"*Desolate Traveler* is the most famous book. And the others."

"We are definitely interested, but—"

“There’s something else.”

“What you’ve got is already pretty good.”

“There’s no record.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that it’s well established that Cureoak never killed anybody. He was a pacifist. They drafted him into the navy, but he got drummed out during the unrest in the asteroid belt. He could barely bring himself to defend *himself* in a fight. But there is a record for a man named Clare Runic. Clare Runic knifed a woman named Mamery St. Cloud to death in 2744.”

“I don’t see—”

“Clare Runic was Cureoak’s best friend at the time.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Cureoak did it. Clare Runic took the rap.”

“That was three hundred years ago. Who cares?”

“Mr. Percepied will care.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I know who Mr. Percepied is.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That hardly matters,” C replied. He drained the rest of his coffee, lukewarm or not. “Tell him I have the manuscript and the only copy of the latencies. Tell him that there is only one payment that I’ll take for them.”

“How much do you want?” asked Hecate Minim. “Percepied Export makes a small profit selling Earth memorabilia, but I promise you that Mr. Percepied himself is not a wealthy man in any sense of the word.”

“Don’t worry. Even if he were rich, he wouldn’t have enough money. He never could,” C said. “There is only one thing I want from Mr. Percepied. Tell him I want Cassady-13.”

“You’re talking gibberish.”

For the first time in weeks, C laughed aloud. “Yes,” he replied. “I am. Exactly.”

“I have to get back to work,” Hecate Minim said, attempting to appear indignant, but seeming flustered instead. “Where can we contact you?”

“I have a signifier at the Hotel Egypte on Fifty-Ninth Street.”

“That’s up in bone country.”

“Indeed,” said C. “I’m registered under the name of Cornell. Joseph Cornell.”

“You say your name like it’s not your name at all.”

C laughed again. "It may very well be my name, my dear," he said. "And, in any case, it will do."

"All right," said Hecate Minim. "I'll tell Mr. Percepied. But it may *beme* that you have to deal with."

"It is a matter of complete indifference," C replied. "All I want is Cassady-13."

Hecate Minim gathered her coat and left. After a moment, C reached over and touched the cup brim that she had just drunk from. He closed his eyes and felt the remains of her grist there, frantically seeking its mistress. But she was gone. C put the grist to his lips.

Hecate in her building. All the citizens of New York had an entire building to themselves these days, if they wanted. Some had complete blocks.

Somewhere in Chelsea. From her window, Hecate could see the Jersey shore across the Hudson. Jersey gone back to swamp and mosquitoes. Somewhere out there in the mud they had buried the Chrysler Building after it went on its rampage and had to be taken down with a missile.

Hecate setting down groceries. A rustle in the back of her musty living room.

Faint light on a wan face. Cigarette smoke rising in moted sunlight.

"Did you get the eggs?"

"No, Papa, I forgot to—"

The vision faded and there was something else in the grist remnant, something familiar, a memory of a memory . . .

But then the feeling faded, and that was all C could recover from the grist. It was enough. He went to the coffee bar and got a refill. From the back, a child cried out.

"There, there," said a man's simpering voice. "There, there."

C used the coffee to wash down the last traces of Hecate Minim.

Uracil Cern

C wandered the city in a purely random manner for the next day and a half. He couldn't sleep. In fact, C had not been able to sleep for centuries. The ability to sleep was something he'd lost as he went through more and more duplications of himself. Eventually, the heightened knife-edge sensitivity of insomnia became his natural state. Now he could hardly remember what it was like to be relaxed to the point of unconsciousness.

The real ossification of the city started in the upper thirties of Manhattan, and north of there the city was completely white. The epicenter was at Broadway and 116th, at the old site of Columbia University, but the bone-change had radiated far out into Queens, taken all of the Bronx. And Brooklyn? Brooklyn was a dangerous place. He'd only been there a few times and had no wish to return. Rogue grist still roamed the avenues, and only the grist knew Brooklyn.

The sun was hot in the bone canyons of midtown. The street-cleaning grist was functioning still in most parts of the city. It took the form of little rain clouds that moved along in ragged lines an inch above the streets. Seen from above, the sweeper clouds looked exactly like the miniature version of a storm front moving over a continent of Earth. When it reached an obstruction, it analyzed to determine whether the

obstruction was alive. If the blockage was inorganic or dead—and small—the grist broke it down. If it was big and dead, the grist sweepers cleaned it and left it there. Something had gone corrupt in the algorithm, however, and the sweepers did not recognize about a third of the streets. On these streets, the bone dust, weathered over the years from the buildings, piled up in drifts or mingled brownly with the other residue of the city. Some of these drifts were hardened to a chalk by decades of rain, but mostly the worn bone remained in loose grain form. When a wind picked up, particles swirled in choking clouds from hidden alleys and side streets. On most autumn days, you could not walk the streets of New York north of Forty-Second Street without getting your clothing thoroughly plastered with bone dust.

At one point on a purely random street that the sweepers had missed, C leaned over and with his finger took a sample of the bone from a drift. Surrounding C (surrounding almost every human being these days) was his own pellicle of grist, a kind of invisible armor of information and calculation embodied in micromachines. It was *him* as much as the meat and blood of his body were him. Maybe it was *more* him, since he had often had other bodies—growing them and shucking them like ears of corn—but his pellicle retained more or less the same programming. Perhaps that was his secret identity after all these years, hidden in the grist. Maybe all he really was, was a disembodied thought.

No. I'm a man.

He turned his pellicle to analyzing the bone sample.

The bone was as he'd left it three hundred years before, and still holding what it held within its calcium interstices, its hard-sponge caverns.

What it held—what it was designed to contain—was the Harmony code. And attached and interwoven with the code was a youthful copy of the man who was now the ruler of the inner solar system.

Let me out!

C gasped, stopped in the street, and leaned against a lamppost to catch his breath. After all these years, the ghost of Amés was still so potent! The man within the trapped code wanted to be free. No, more than that. He wanted to *rule*. To dominate.

Everything.

Let me out and things will go easy on you!

“Don't worry,” C said, though the trapped code could not hear him. “You've given me no choice in the matter.”

Let me out. Let me stop the chaos! You need me. Everyone needs me to tell them what to do. Let me out before it's too late!

With a shudder, C dropped the bone fragment.

I tried to stop him, C thought, but I only made things worse.

He had gotten what he wanted from the analysis, however. The schematics for opening up the bone lock overlaid his vision in glowing purple. He filed them away. But understanding the mechanism of the lock was the easy part. Now he had to get the key: the skeleton key that he had hidden so long ago, after he had turned it in its lock.

Columbia University, 2744. Wilson Lab, Dodge Hall. Columbia, once a great university of the land, now for the most part become an academy of spies. Met Intelligence had bought the place years before when it had gone bankrupt during the first exodus from Earth. Now they ran the college as a front. Most of the halls of higher learning had become a twisted shadow of themselves, breeding warrens for codes and ciphers. But Columbia suited Clare Runic. He had been perfectly content to move from studying philosophy there as an undergraduate to his graduate work in cryptology.

His best friends from his college days were still living in the neighborhood. Jack Cureoak, of course, never had any intention of going into the intelligence services, but inertia kept him in the same apartment that he and Clare had shared as undergraduates. He wanted to write, but this was before he had discovered his true subject and calling: restless travel about the solar system. He was waiting for the impetus to get on the road.

And also in the apartment: Mamery St. Cloud, Cureoak's friend and Clare's lover. She was working at Columbia on a project with a curious code name: "Harmony." Her boss and the head of the project team was a man named Amés. Everyone said he had a genius for administration. Things got done when Amés was in charge. Everyone also said that if you disagreed with him or got in his way, he became a real asshole.

Mamery St. Cloud disagreed with Amés and got in his way.

She believed that nanotechnology should not be used for military purposes. In the lab, she acquired a complete copy of the code that the team was working on and reverse-engineered a palliative strain. Wilson Lab was extremely secure. The only way to smuggle out the antivirus was to make it part of her own genome.

She thought she had gotten away with it.

"I may not be as smart as Jack or as clever as you are, Clare, but I know the difference between right and wrong," she said to him one night. They had made love not long before, and both of them were smoking cigarettes. She smoked Petra Ultralites back then. He smoked Mandala 75s. "Something is wrong with that code."

"Morality can't be written into an algorithm," Clare said. "Code is just code."

She climbed on top of him and sat there, still smoking. Mamery was so slight and thin, he could hardly feel her upon him.

"Well, maybe not your code." She reached behind her back to grab him. Clare felt himself getting hard once again in her hand. It was so easy back then when there wasn't so much to think about all at once. "But *some* code is bad," Mamery said.

He leaned up and licked Mamery's nipple. "Your code is good," Clare said. "A '20, if I'm not mistaken. Excellent vintage." They ground out their cigarettes in an ashtray and made love again in the smoky night, as young lovers do.

There were secret detectors in the lab. Spies in the walls. Amés found out that Mamery had taken away a Harmony antivirus.

She *did* get the antivirus back to the apartment. She scraped off a patch of her skin and put it in a sequencer (people had genetic sequencers back then that sat on tables and were as big as a fist).

Between the time when the sequencer finished its work and was downloading into the apartment's

computer storage, Paranoia 4.1a, the military grist that Amés had sent out looking for her . . . found her. By the time a copy of the antivirus was streamed into Clare's virtual space, the Paranoia had control of Mamery's brain, and Mamery St. Cloud wasn't really herself ever again.

Paranoia was a very subtle security grist, used for counter-insurgency warfare. It would take weeks before Clare and Cureoak realized that something was terribly wrong with Mamery.

It took Clare two days to find the antivirus that she had downloaded into his computer. But he found it and realized almost immediately what it was.

Only he didn't quite realize how strong it was. What a good job his lover had done. That she'd used part of her human bone-making DNA to construct the Harmony lock-down code.

But when Amés released the Harmony code into the municipal grist of New York one morning at dawn, Clare was ready with the antidote. Within hours, Mamery's bone-change had caught up with Harmony. During that time, most adults had time to flee the infected areas. But there was simply not time for a general evacuation. And one bureaucrat failed to notify another bureaucrat in the school system. Random chance and obstinacy. The schools didn't get called until it was far too late.

It was all explained as a big mistake that science would eventually take care of. Even then, the politicians were afraid to mess with the spies of Columbia.

Nobody got caught, Clare thought, when he was sitting in prison on Ganymede and considering that the crime he was serving time for was perhaps the only one he could never have committed. When he was bending his mind to unraveling the ironies of cause and effect in a quantum universe and time-based ciphers. When he came up with the idea for the box.

Curran Lice

Report!

The word exploded like a sun inside C's head. Oh Christ, it was so loud! This time he fell to his knees in the street. He held his head and moaned. It was the quantum communicator that Amés had encoded into his grist before he'd left Mercury. Amés knew instantly when C had accessed the Harmony code. That must have been some sort of trigger. And now he was blasting like a megaphone into C's language centers.

It was like Mamery, when Mamery got the dose of Paranoia and went crazy. She was in your face. You couldn't ignore her, and you couldn't get away from her. Her code had gone bad.

And you couldn't kill her, no matter how much you wanted to because you once had loved her.

Amés's blasting voice made C feel as old and ineffectual as he had the day that he'd realized Mamery was going to end up killing him and there was nothing he would or could do about it.

"I haven't got the key," C moaned. "Could you modulate your voice a little, sir? You're blowing my mind."

Get up and walk. You make me sick. This is all your fault. Think about that.

He got up. He walked. It was necessary to do Amés's bidding. Necessary for survival.

God, Amés sounded like Mamery when she was ill. Absolutely certain of herself. Absolutely certain that

you must see that her way was the best and only way, even though it was clearly insane to anyone else.

C did what Amés wanted him to do. He continued down the lonesome streets. He thought about what Amés wanted him to think about, but he would have been doing so anyway. It was unavoidable, here in the bone canyons of midtown under the noonday sun.

New York, empty skull of a city. All your brains have blown out into space. I started it all. I started it when I changed the children. I had to stop Amés; I had to stop the Harmony code from binding all the Artificial Intelligences, the Large Arrays of Personalities, to Amés's will. I thought I had to stop Amés no matter what the consequences. But after the bone-change, who would want to stay in such a petrified place as New York? Only the depraved and the hopeless. Dregs and mold and detritus.

It gives me great pleasure to have sent you to release the Harmony code. Amés was a bit less forceful in his mind. He was speaking to C from New Hierarchy Central, deep within the great halls of Mercury, but he still sounded as if he were standing right next to him. Too close for comfort. That's why I will not wipe your sneaking filth of a life from existence, Mr. C, now that I'm the boss of you. It gives me great pleasure to have sent you because the solution is so balanced and so beautiful, using you.

"Yes sir. I have made contact with the subject, and I am approaching him about the matter we discussed."

You can speak freely, Mr. C. Quantum transceiving cannot be intercepted.

Maybe not yet, thought C, but every professional bone in his body told him that there was no form of communication that couldn't be spied upon somehow or another.

"Cureoak couldn't be blackmailed," C said. "So tomorrow I'm going to kidnap his daughter and exchange her for the Cassady-13 key."

It was a lie, of course. But the ultimate outcome *would* be true in a matter of hours. Of that, C was confident. Time would tell. He must have sounded confident, for Amés chuckled. It resounded in C's mind like a beaten bell. Once again, he collapsed to one knee, then pulled himself upright.

You are a ruthless piece of garbage, Mr. C. I'll give you that. Not a shred of honor among spies, eh?

"Not unless honor happens to be expedient, sir."

C touched his temples. They were damp and hot. The sun was directly above, and he felt as if the sun were both outside and inside his head. As if he were standing in the stark, merciless landscape of his own imagination.

"Sir, you are killing me with this transmission. You took out my band filters, remember?"

I wanted to remind you of what could happen. Of how it will be if you fail in your assignment.

"I understand."

Do you?

"I understand what I am, sir."

What is that?

"A means to an end."

My end.

“Yes, sir.”

There was a certain symmetry, C thought. You had to give Amés that. Amés was a man of undeniable genius. He’d gotten control of all those interlocking directorates and authorities of the inner system Met, and he was using them. It was a great project that in many ways was also a worthy project. In the last hundred years, the Met—the great spread of interplanetary cables between the inner planets—had gotten congested and complacent. The outer system was steadily eating the business and the power away from the center, like a school of piranhas taking bite after bite out of a living carcass. Amés had tapped into the outrage of that old wallowing monster. He was about to lead it to war against the outer system colonials.

But the Harmony code was something else again. It was the one step he had not been able to take to obtain complete control. Its lack over the years was the thorn in his lion’s paw—for the Met was inoculated *against* Harmony. Whenever the Harmony code was deployed, Mamery’s bone-change would follow in an instant. At the moment, Amés was a Napoleon or Caesar. With the Harmony code operational he would be . . .

I am as a pianist to the piano, Mr. C. You are the central key that I am now striking. You are the first note in a great symphony that I will play upon the Met. You are part of a new and mighty song. You should feel lucky.

“Oh, I do,” C said to him. “I live to serve.” Which was another lie he was telling Amés, but also, in a way, the genuine truth.

C had journeyed to Earth to do the bidding of the man who was the boss of him after Amés had dug him up from the little corner of Met Intelligence that C had established and for which he was the sole operative: the Crypto-horology Division. It had been years since he’d done fieldwork. For the past decade, he’d been lost in the backwater area of horologic ciphering—safe, he thought, from notice from above. But Amés had found him, and doing Amés’s bidding now was part of the job. Before Amés had taken power, it had been C’s duty to oppose him. Now Amés was the boss, and C was back on Earth, responding once again to Amés’s drive to power.

I should feel lucky, C thought. Lucky to be alive. Freedom is a bit much to ask for, under the circumstances.

Farther. Show me what you see.

Amés transceiver was patched into C’s visual centers, and he could look through C’s eyes if he wanted.

Keep walking. Keep walking. Here. Yes, HERE!

C grasped his head and fell, his knees and elbows skidding on bone.

You did this.

A playground. Children streaming out the door, frozen now. Their faces bewildered, terrified, determined to get away as they see something really bad is coming. Something really bad and horribly white. But they could not get away. Burning sun on their white unchanging faces. Pigeon shit on their shoulders and heads.

You did this. Now undo it! And tell me in good faith that you don’t deserve to be a slave.

They can’t see me, C told himself again and again. And even if they could, *they* wouldn’t know what I

did.

C felt a sudden chill at his back, and a storm front of street-sweeping grist moved through. It saw that he was alive, parted, and moved around him, as if he were a great mountain blocking its path.

But the grist went to clean the children. Almost gently, little clouds of rainy grist swarm over their still forms. The bird shit was wiped away, and declivities where there used to be eyes and mouths were swabbed. The grist washed the bone children clean.

Then, just as suddenly as it arrived, the street-sweeping grist moved on, leaving behind a playground of gleaming, motionless children, still damp but quickly drying. They seemed to be staring at C with tears in their eyes. But that was only from the cleaning grist. They can't see me, C thought. They can't see me, and they're not crying. They can't cry. The children can't see me because they have been changed to bone.

Ire Can Curl

Mamery's mental state got worse and worse. She stopped going to work. Clare and Cureoak fed her and tried to watch over her. But the more they did for her, the more her induced psychosis told her that they were trying to manipulate and hurt her. Of course, Mamery and Clare could no longer be lovers. And after a time, Clare did not love the person Mamery had become. But as his love waned, Mamery became obsessed with Clare. If she couldn't have him, she was going to make sure no one ever could.

He locked her out of his room, and she had taken to climbing out on the fire escape and sneaking in his window on several nights. She would stand for hours over his sleeping form. Once he'd woken up to find her in his room, looking down at him and holding a pair of scissors over his heart.

Then, on August 13, 2744, Clare woke up near dawn with a dark form standing over his bed holding a bloody knife. At first he thought it was Mamery and this was finally it. He didn't want to die, but there was nothing he could do about it.

But it wasn't Mamery; it was Jack Cureoak.

"Well, I killed her," Cureoak said. "I tried for two days to get hold of a gun, but nobody would sell me one." He sat down at the foot of the bed, moved into the moonlight that was streaming through the window. He put his bloody hand on his head. "No, no, no," he said. "Nobody would sell me a gun, so I had to do it with a knife."

"Where?" Clare said. It was the first thing he thought of to ask.

"In the park. Down by the river. I threw her in afterwards. So help me, Clare, I tried to weight her down with rocks, but it didn't work. Didn't work and she floated away."

Cureoak gasped, but it seemed he could not cry.

"I watched her floating away," Cureoak said. "I've never killed anything in my life. Anyone. I watched her floating away dead down that river."

The first thing Clare felt was a tremendous sense of relief. He'd spent the last weeks believing in his heart that Mamery was going to kill him. He was only waiting to see how it would happen. Everything had been muddled and dark, but now it was suddenly clear. He knew immediately what he had to do. There was no question that Cureoak would go to prison. Clare knew that Jack Cureoak would die in prison,

like a moth beating against a window for the light of day. It was clear that the first thing to do was to take care of his friend.

“Give me the knife,” he said to Cureoak.

At the touch of the knife hilt to his hand, Clare felt the awful clarity setting in permanently, the insomniac’s night vision.

“I can’t ever kill another thing,” Cureoak said. “That was all the killing I have in me. I don’t know if I can live, now. How am I going to live?” Cureoak sobbed, choked it back again. He rubbed his face and belly. He rubbed his hands and stared at them. “I think I broke something,” he said.

“In your hand?” said Clare. But he knew that wasn’t what Cureoak was talking about.

“No. Something that’s not going to mend.”

“You saved my life.” Clare sat up in his bed, in the awful light of knowledge that he knew would never leave him now. “I’m going to help you, Jack.”

“I don’t think you can.”

“I can try.”

“Crutch,” Cureoak said. “I need a crutch.” Those were the last words he uttered that night. He finally broke into wave after wave of sobs. Clare made them both coffee and began planning what they would do in the morning after the body was found.

He would help Cureoak. That came first.

And then, someday, somehow, he was going to get back at the man named Amés. He was going to hurt Amés as much as Amés had hurt Mamery. He was going to twist Amés’s soul as mercilessly as the man had darkened the pure and kind soul of Jack Cureoak. He was going to get back at Amés. Even if it took a thousand years. Even if he had to knock all of time out of kilter to do it.

Then he could sleep.

Carr Nuclei

C was the sole rider on an R train when the call finally came from Mr. Percepied. He emerged on a corner near the Flatiron Building on Twenty-Third Street. The Flatiron’s windows were calcified, except for one clear window near the top that somehow had escaped the bone-change grist. C had once heard rumors that a single man lived in the whole edifice, that he was a crazed Ahab who ran up and down the stairs in stark frenzy and occasionally cast chairs and showers of paperclips down upon people in the street. But there was no sign of the lunatic today.

It began to rain. C went to the only automat that was still open in this abandoned sector, as per instructions from Hecate Minim. He arrived first and found a booth near the back of the store. There was the ozone-and-peaches smell of malfunctioning grist coming from the cooking machinery, and C skipped the food that was available. He contented himself with another cup of coffee, this time without milk. It tasted faintly of roast beef.

The rain grew harder outside, and Hecate Minim entered holding a paper bag over the heads of Mr. Percepied and herself. When she took it down, there was no doubt about whom C was looking at.

Mr. Percepied was Jack Cureoak.

Older, wrinkled, leaning on a cane. There wasn't any regeneration grist that could take you past three hundred all in one piece.

Will he recognize me after all these years? C wondered. But there's hardly any chance of that when I can't even recognize myself.

Hecate Minim slid into the booth across from C, and Cureoak creakily took a seat beside her, dripping wet.

"Hello, Clare," he said. "I thought you were dead."

"I don't know what you're talking about," C replied. "But I've come with a proposition for you."

"Yes, yes, yes," Cureoak said. "It doesn't matter anymore. I traveled to Pluto and back and wrote my books about it all. I'm not nearly so afraid of the big house as I was back then. For Christ's sake, Clare, I've been all the way out to *Charon* ! Do your worse; do your worse."

"You couldn't possibly be Cureoak," C said. "Cureoak drank himself to death in 2767. I've done a lot of research on this."

"Yes, yes," the old man said. "And you couldn't possibly be Clare Runic. That would be preposterous." He smiled like a crack in the sky. "Yes, well. I'm close enough for government work. First-generation dupe. First generation that there *were* dupes. Which of us wrote which books, do you think? How can it possibly matter?"

"Cureoak drank himself to death."

"I'm the Cureoak who didn't drink himself to death, who wrote the other books after *Desolate Traveler*, then went into hiding. Wrote what I had to write, then went on to something *else* ." He looked tenderly at Hecate. "I always wanted a family, and I couldn't because of my art. Then Hecate showed up. Do you remember Daphne Minim, that girl I had the affair with during our freshman year? Who'd have thought it would give me comfort in my old age? You never know what you think you know, Clare. You never do."

"It is not my intention to blackmail you." Though of course that was exactly C's intention, in a way. He had to create the appearance of blackmail so that no matter what, Cureoak would not give him the Cassady-13 code today. But he must not alienate the man so that he couldn't obtain the code *tomorrow*.

Timing was everything in this operation.

"I don't know what the hell this Cassady-13 is that you are asking about."

C almost believed him. But Cureoak had always been such a goddamn good storyteller. Liar. Both of us were gifted in that way, C thought. Maybe that's why we became friends.

"All right," C said. "This is what I have." He took an envelope from the pocket of his coat and placed it on the table.

Cureoak looked long and hard into C's eyes for a moment, then reached over and picked it up. He tore the end off the envelope and blew into it to puff it open. He tapped it against the table, and the poem fell out. He thumbed apart the folded sheet and looked down at the words. Old, old words.

Clare

*They never heard of him
down at the office
although he is well known
in his field and
a kind of genius I think*

*He lurks in tight spaces
He mixes dark soup with a hammer
Don't trust him with truths
you don't want unraveled*

*At dawn, there is dew
on the web*

"It's just a poem I once wrote," he said. "For an old friend to take with him to a sad place he had to go."

He dropped it on the table between them. Hecate quickly reached out to keep it from falling into a ring of coffee that C's cup had left. But then, watching the look of amazement on her face, C tipped his coffee over and trickled some *onto* the poem until it formed a puddle on the paper.

"What are you doing? The memory imprints . . ."

"There never were any recovered memories," C said. "This paper is much too old for that. And besides . . ." He moved the paper about so that the coffee coated all of the poem. "*I thought* this coffee was damned acidic. Look how fast it's working."

On the note, behind the poem, words began to arise where before there had been nothing. Words written in big block letters.

"Read between the lines," said C.

I, JACK CUREOAK, KILLED MAMERY ST. CLOUD. I AM SORRY FOR HER, BUT I AM NOT SORRY THAT I DID IT. SHE WAS GOING TO END UP KILLING MY FRIEND, CLARE RUNIC, AND THERE WAS NO WAY TO DISSUADE HER. CLARE COULD NOT BRING HIMSELF TO DO IT, AS SHE WAS A FORMER LOVE OF HIS. I AM WRITING THIS FOR CLARE RUNIC, IN CASE THEY DECIDE TO HANG HIM, WHICH I HEAR THEY STILL SOMETIMES DO OUT ON GANYMEDE. CLARE IS GOING TO PRISON IN MY PLACE. HE IS LIKE A BROTHER TO ME.

—JACK CUREOAK, OCTOBER 30, 2744

"Invisible ink," said Hecate Minim. "How quaint."

"If you really are Clare, then you know why I can never give you that code." Cureoak looked at the note again. "Anyway, isn't there a statute of limitations after three hundred years?"

"It isn't the three-hundred-year-old Cureoak who is going to be punished."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"There was another download. In 2765."

"Oh," said Cureoak. "Oh, my. I didn't know that. Why would I do that?"

"He was drunk. Why did he do anything when he was drunk?"

“I don’t know. *I* stopped drinking so that I could write.”

“Nobody knows why he made the dupe.”

“What is he talking about, Papa?” Hecate said.

“There was an archive in an old database,” C said. “I found it. I find everything. And when Amés took over the Met government last year, he found me.”

“Who are you?” Hecate said. “Why did you have to come here?”

“Your father and I went to school together,” C replied. “One of us became a writer. The other one became a spy. While we were in school, we both knew a woman named Mamery St. Cloud, who studied nanotechnology.”

“What?”

“The early version of grist. She had an accident with that primitive grist. It drove her insane. But in a very clever way. If she couldn’t have Clare, she was going to kill him. She told Clare that herself, but nobody believed him when he tried to get help for her. Nobody except Jack Cureoak.”

“Interesting version of the truth,” Cureoak said. “Which doesn’t change anything. None of this does. I still can’t give you the key. Maybe I’ve even forgotten it.”

“You haven’t forgotten it. You made up the recall phrase yourself.”

Cureoak snorted. “I forget a lot of what I write,” he said. “It’s an occupational hazard after three hundred years.”

“You don’t understand, Jack. The new guy in charge, he’s . . . not kind.”

“That bastard Amés?”

“Yes, him. He’s going to torture you. There is a copy of you being held in a data space on Mercury. You are to be looped for your crimes. Do you understand what this means, to be looped? Do you remember that your first self, the self that spawned you, drank himself to death? Over seven years, you drank and drank, until your gut hemorrhaged and you bled to death out your ass.” C leaned over, touched Cureoak’s old papery hand. “Amés is going to throw you in accelerated virtual and give you whiskey, and make you die over and over again. Like you did before, bleeding from a busted gut and a broken heart.”

Clan I Recur

The subway was long since automated and now no one used it very much. The trains moved at the subconscious whim of the shadowy intelligences who controlled the switching system. But perhaps it had always been that way. When C rose from the underworld the next day, he found himself in Washington Square. It was just after dawn, and dew was on the grass in the park.

He sat down on a bench and remembered what he could.

So much dissipation. Strained through a hundred bodies, a thousand incarnations. Virtual, meat and blood, grist. What the hell did C stand for? What was his name? It couldn’t possibly matter, or he would remember it. Wouldn’t he?

A piece of string that crawls from a throat, and crawls into another mouth to be swallowed.

I was once a man. My real name is Clare Runic.

Real.

Name.

Hell, I was once a woman, too. Many men. Many women. Many other things made from data and grist. Things with blunted genders and sickles for brains. Small spaces. Spies must travel light. No room for the past. Spies don't have real names.

The truth is that it is unclear whether or not I was once Clare Runic, thought C, or whether I need to think that I was in order to complete this mission. Something is happening of which I am not fully aware.

Across Washington Square, in the early morning light, a man was walking toward him. This man wore a coat shaped very like his own. But as the man drew closer, he saw that it was actually the *lining* of a coat like his. And then the man sat down next to him on the bench.

The other man was C. He had met himself.

"Did you come for the coat?" C asked himself.

The other C smiled, shook his head.

"Amés contacted you," the other C said. "I was listening in."

"I thought that it was impossible to eavesdrop on banded gluon quantum-teleported messages."

"Did you *really* think that?"

"No," said C. "I guess not really."

"He used a great deal of energy to make that transmission. Probably caused a brownout on Mercury. He won't be able to contact you mind-to-mind using a secure method for another day. You met with Cureoak?"

"Yes."

"Did he give you the information?"

"No."

"Good. All we need is half of an Earth day. The Harmony code can be released after noon today."

"Good, because if I don't deliver it by midnight tonight, Amés is going to," C tapped his temple with a finger, "*check back in with me*, in his pretty little way."

"That will not present a problem."

"Good." The rising sun whitened the top of a nearby building, and both Cs watched the glow. After a moment, they both sighed simultaneously and got back to business.

"Why do you need a half day?" C said.

"For an escape," said the other C.

“Is it an important escape?”

“Even with the Harmony code dominating all the other LAPs and Artificial Intelligences, Amés can’t take the outer system if this person escapes.”

“Who is going to escape?”

The other C smiled. “I could tell you that,” he said, “but then I’d have to shoot you. Let’s just say that it is a Large Array of Personalities that Amés *must* control if he wants to rule all that he surveys.”

“Hedoes wish to rule all he surveys,” C said, rubbing his head, remembering the pain of Amés’s voice inside his skull. “I can definitely vouch for that.”

“We know this. There’s no doubt.”

C glanced sidelong at the other C.

“Are you going to tell me what’s in the box?”

“The box is another matter entirely. It’s part of a larger operation, as far as I can tell. I don’t know what’s in the box.” The other C pulled a gun from the inner pocket of the liner. Did the liner have pockets before? He couldn’t remember. The gun was an old-fashioned revolver. “When you obtain and use the Cassidy-13 information, shoot the box with this.”

“Shoot the box?”

“That’s right.”

“And I’m to have no knowledge of what shooting it will do?”

The other C shook his head. “One shot will be enough, though I’ve put three bullets in the chambers.”

“We like built-in redundancy, don’t we?”

The other C let a thin wisp of a smile play over his features. His sea-green eyes seemed dimmed, as if a cloud had passed over the oceans inside them.

“Not exactly.” He stood up, took off the coat liner and laid it on the bench beside C. “I’m ready,” he said.

“Why didn’t I know about this?” C asked himself.

“Because Amés would have found out if you’d left Mercury with the knowledge. He filtered you pretty fine to make sure you weren’t up to one of your spy tricks. You know how he hates those dirty spy tricks.”

“And how he depends upon them,” C replied. He looked at the gun. “Is this really necessary?”

“Entirely,” said the other C. He stepped away several paces.

Without another word, C took aim with the gun and pulled the trigger. As usual, he made a good head shot. The other C crumpled to the ground in a pool of brains and blood. There was no grist yet created that could put this mess back together again. But just to make sure, C had his own grist outriders obliterate all traces of his former self. Soon the remains of the other C were just a lump in the grass.

C shrugged out of his coat and put the liner back into it, then put the coat back on. He had been comfortable without the liner before, but the day had just grown a little colder.

Lucre in Ace

Later in the morning, C rang the buzzer on Cureoak's door in Chelsea. Hecate Minim leaned out a window and saw that it was him. C counted to see that she was on the sixth floor.

"What do you want?" she called down to him. "And how did you find us?"

"Through your grist," he replied. "Let me come up."

"Why should I do that?"

C stood for a moment and could think of nothing to say. Finally, he answered, "For old time's sake."

Hecate Minim ducked back inside. Nothing happened for a while, and then the door clicked open, as if a hand on the other side had unlocked it, then stepped away. He went inside, pushed the door shut behind him, and climbed the stairs to the sixth floor. There may have been an elevator, but he couldn't find it.

Cureoak was sitting in a recliner by the window. He smoked a Terra Nova, with the pack, and an old-fashioned plastic ashtray, beside him on a small table. The smoke from the Terra Nova turned in the sunlight and assumed the form of dragons and fairies before dissipating into the gloom of the ceiling. It was a special grist additive that did this, and was what made them expensive cigarettes.

C sat down in a rocker across from him. Hecate Minim brought them both coffee. It was hot and the milk was fresh—the first good coffee he'd had since his return to Earth. She did not sit with them, but at the dining-room table nearby, where she fingered receipts displayed across its surface within the grist, comparing profits to loss. A Mandala 90 dangled from her lips. She ashed it onto the table, which absorbed it and incorporated the ashes into its display.

"I have to release the children," C said to Cureoak.

Cureoak took a drag, looked out the window at the day.

"Why *now*?" he said. "Why not three hundred years ago?"

C sipped his coffee.

"There is no other copy of you," C said. "I lied. I had to buy time. It is all rather complicated." He rocked once. Twice. "Amés has a copy of *me*. He had me duped before I left Mercury."

For the first time, Cureoak looked at him. "I'm sorry, Clare," he said.

"If I don't use Cassady-13, he's going to loop my copy in virtual."

C was trembling at the thought. Coffee sloshed over his cup and onto his wrist, so he set the cup down and held it in his lap with both hands. He stopped rocking.

"What did you do that makes you so afraid?"

"Something I didn't do."

"What?"

“Save the children when the city turned to bone.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Cureoak said, and ran his hand through his thin hair. He rubbed his face and took another toke from his cigarette. “But you froze the Harmony code. You set back that old bastard’s plans by three hundred years.”

“Long enough,” C said, “to give the rest of us a chance against him.”

“You sure about that?”

“No, I’m not sure about anything. But I have information that leads me to believe that it’s long enough. There have been some advances. People have got a chance against him now.”

“And you expect me to trust you?” Cureoak leaned forward. “You told me never to trust anybody.”

“I locked the bone-change down with a code key. I attached the code key to a cipher, and gave the text of that cipher to the only man I knew I could absolutely trust, whose loyalty I could be sure of.”

“I’ll never understand why you gave it to me and not to the old drunkard,” Cureoak said.

“Have you ever considered,” said C, “that the very fact that you possessed the key was the reason you didn’t kill yourself with drink just like him?”

Cureoak leaned back in his chair. He rubbed his thighs and belly. *He likes to feel his reality in the world, C thought. He reminds himself of it every day.*

“Yes, yes,” Cureoak said. “Of course that is true. That and the love of his daughter. My daughter.”

Hecate Minim looked up from what she was doing at the table. “Papa?” she said. “Is this true? All the nonsense about this Cassady-13?”

“Yes.”

Hecate turned to C. “What will happen to him if he gives the key to you?” she said.

“Nothing.”

“Director Amés won’t have him killed out of vindictiveness?”

“No. He gave me his word he would not.”

“What does that mean, coming from a tyrant?”

“Amés considers his word sacred. He is styling himself as an emperor, not a dictator. Honor is everything with him.”

“And you would stake my father’s life on this?”

“I’m staking my life on it. My other life, back on Mercury, where the copy is stored.”

“And what will happen to everybody else?” Cureoak said. He took a long drag and finished off his cigarette. When he breathed out, a great dragon with fiery eyes formed in front of Cureoak’s face. For an instant, C thought it might stay there, come to life, and rip them all to pieces. But then it dissipated and was only smoke.

“I’m not certain,” C said.

They were silent for a moment. C gazed at the walls of Cureoak's living room. They had once been white, but were now browned to a darker shade by years of cigarette smoke. Centuries, perhaps. There were fine cracks everywhere, and C had the distinct sense that the entire building was held together by nothing but paint.

Along one wall, tucked under a crown molding that was separating from it, was a line of dried red roses, hung upside down. Perhaps it was a ritual between Hecate and her father to exchange them. Perhaps only one of them brought them for the other. There were various possible permutations. He counted twenty-three roses.

"I believe," said C, "that Amés contains the seed to his own destruction within himself."

"So you transformed New York and killed a million people," said Hecate Minim. "But now you think it was a big mistake and things would have worked out all right in any case?"

"Most people got away."

"But not the children at school that day. Their parents couldn't get to them in time."

"The children aren't dead."

"What do you mean? Of course they are. Dead children are practically the religion of this city. And the business, too." Hecate Minim seemed suddenly close to tears. But she was not looking at C. She was looking at her own hands, as if they were dirty. As if she were as bad as he was.

"The children are . . . archived," C said gently. "In the grist."

"What are you saying? If you undo the bone-change, then the children will all come back to life?"

"Yes. That is what I think will happen."

"Most of their parents are long dead or else changed into something else."

"They will be orphans," said Cureoak. "Thousands of orphans."

Silence in the apartment for a moment. The air thick in the room. Smoke and dust and years.

"Remember how New York used to be?" said C.

"Chaos city," Cureoak said. "All things counter, original, spare, and strange."

"I never thought I'd say it," C replied. "But I miss that."

Cureoak held the smoking cigarette butt in his left hand, looked at the forms assumed by the last of the smoke.

"And the hippos were boiled in their tanks," he said in a low clear voice. His nonsense words blew the smoke away.

Cureoak blinked. Blinked again.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Yes. It's still there, all right. Goddamn, that is complicated and crazy. I could never have remembered it without the grist."

Jack Cureoak stood up from the chair by the window and came over to touch C's shoulder. Pellicle met

pellicle. Grist met grist. He leaned over and kissed his old friend's cheek.

"Set the children free," he whispered into C's ear.

C's mind bloomed with the Cassady-13 code key.

In Cruel Arc

They went to Columbia University, where it all began, to start changing the city back from the bone. The ivory gates shown like bloody teeth in the afternoon sun. The school grounds were empty. Nobody lived this far north in Manhattan, even though the subway still came here, responding to its secret subterranean predilections.

C set down his brown paper package on the ground beside him. He programmed the grist on the palms of his hands with the key.

Making the change would be the work of but a moment.

"Remember when you and I and Mamery used to have those long talks about what the world would be like after the grist was truly distributed everywhere?" said C, holding his coded hands in the air. "Now grist is all we are."

Cureoak leaned against the gate and shook another Terra Nova until it lit. "We are dark and sweet and lustrous," he said. "We are coffee made with rain." It was the first lines of a poem from *Desolate Traveler*. A benediction, C thought.

C knelt and touched his hands to Broadway.

"Good-bye, Mamery," he whispered.

Instantly, the city began to change back from the bone.

Instantly, the Harmony code came away, swarmed about, seeking control.

But control of what? There wasn't anybody worth ruling on Earth anymore.

It uplinked to the Met, assessed all of three hundred years in a microsecond. And like a great reverse tornado, swirled through the grist of Earth's surface, to the enormous cable coming in at the North Pole, and migrated into space, into the Met. Back across space, carrying its new freedom, the ability to shut down the bone-change, as a vanguard. Back to its creator and the absolute security of the fortress Amés had made of the planet Mercury. Within minutes, Amés had what he wanted to rule his world.

Far, far away, in the asteroid belt, a strange man was riding a spaceship that looked like a cloud to a moon of Neptune, and out of Amés's clutches. That man would be Amés's downfall. That was the plan. Or part of it. There would be a bloody war to fight. And other changes, more complex, more subtle.

One of the several copies of C—the oldest existing copy—knew all about this and understood what it meant. Was it all an elaborate plot to save humanity? Or had she really done it because of the children? She was standing there beside C when he changed the city back. She was standing next to C and the man who thought she was his daughter, and though she knew all that had been set into motion, she still did not understand the turnings of her own heart. Was it punishment or redemption she sought?

All I know is that these men are my brothers, still and always, Hecate Minim thought. That is the one

thing that has survived all the transformations, all the dark deeds, and all the changes—all the ways that time can spell a human being. I am my brother's keeper. It is what there is to do while you are alive.

Lunar Circe

In old New York, the sun set and the children opened their eyes to twilight. It could have been later in the same day that they went to school. But it wasn't. It was much later than that.

Clue in Carr

While the city changed back into itself, the three of them walked down to the Hudson River at 116th Street, down to the park grounds where Cureoak had stabbed Mamery to death three hundred years before. Weeds had grown up since then.

"I still remember," Cureoak said. "But it fades. *It does* fade."

"She would have wanted to die if she had known what she would become," C said. "I always believed that."

"I wish that I could know that for certain."

"I wish that I could have brought *myself* to do it," said C. "I've done it so much since then. When I felt it was called for."

"Yes, yes." Cureoak rubbed his face and his stomach. He leaned on his cane. "Not the same, though," he said. "Mamery was the woman you loved. I couldn't stand watching the way you were dying with her. It was the only way to keep both of you from dying."

"Everything would have been different if I had killed her instead of you having killed her."

"Do you think so, really?" said Cureoak. "That I would have turned into the spy and you would be the poet?"

"That the other you might not have died of drink," said C. "And I would have liked to have been a poet."

"I'm alive," said Cureoak. "And you might be a poet, yet."

C smiled, shook his head. "I have one more thing to do, and then I have to go."

"Yes, yes, yes," Cureoak said, laughing. And then he stopped laughing suddenly. He rubbed his eyes. They had begun to tear up.

"Oh," he said. "I see."

"Don't worry," said C. "There's more where I came from."

Lucien Carr

He asked Cureoak to leave him there and to go home. In the end they compromised, and Hecate Minim remained while Cureoak waited for her at the gates of the university. The two men parted with no words. Cureoak stood looking at C for a long while. He finally touched C's shoulder. All there was to say was in

the grist. After a moment of contact, he took away his hand and walked from the river, up the hill and into the city.

C sat down with his back against a sweet gum. Red pointed leaves covered the ground about him. The brown box was next to his knees, upon the strange unearthly-earthly shapes of the sweet gum balls. Hecate Minim stood away a few paces. The twilight air was still and chilly, like a gel.

C reached into his coat for a cigarette, but he hadn't had any for a long, long time. Hecate Minim saw what he was doing and gave him one of hers. He lit it up with a single quick flick.

"I used to smoke," he said. "But I never smoke when I'm on the job. Cigarette butts are a classic telltale."

C took a long drag. Breathed out and was surrounded by fog.

"So," he said to Hecate Minim. "Are you going to tell me what's in the box?"

She was startled for a moment. Then she smiled, and her green eyes danced. She sat down beside him and lit a smoke for herself.

"What if the flow of time is not a line," Hecate Minim said. "What if it's not like a line at all?"

"What is it like, then?" said C. He was enjoying this cigarette. It had been so long, and he had once liked them so much.

"Time is like a name," said Hecate Minim.

"A name?"

"You can't change the letters, but you can switch them around to make another name. Like an anagram."

C looked at his hands. They were trembling slightly, but the cigarette was having an effect and he felt calm. Very calm. "Are you talking about the box?" he said.

"Am I?"

"All right. For the sake of argument. Some of the new names might make more sense than others," he said. "Some of them might hurt fewer people by the very way they were spelled out."

Hecate nodded. "What if we—you and I—discovered how to rearrange that anagram? What if we change history around just a little? Just enough—so that free people have a chance to win the coming war?"

She finished her cigarette and turned to look at the river. "You have a quantum-transceiver implant, with a direct line to Amés. I can't risk telling you more."

"I understand. But soon it won't matter."

"I won't forget you," she said. "I contain all the anagrams. I'm the one who never forgets."

I will, C thought.

Is that what it is?

For a moment, C had a strange sense that all of this had happened before. And not just to him. Not just

in these circumstances. That there was a crucial bit of information that it was necessary to forget, and that, instead of progressing and increasing human knowledge, the *forgetting* was what living was actually for. That forgetting was what all of us were doing and we didn't know it because we couldn't know it for the forgetting to really work.

Except, maybe at the end, it all became clear. Was this the moment? This moment between the hammer and the strike, between the lines of the poem, when the hidden writing came to the surface and the true secret mission was revealed?

"Are you okay?" Hecate Minim said. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm fine," C replied. "There's no such thing as a ghost. Give me another cigarette, please."

She knocked one out of her pack, lit it herself, and handed it to him. She lit another for herself.

C smoked his halfway down before speaking again. "Take care of your father," he said. "Times are about to get rough."

"I will."

"He was the best friend I ever had."

"I know," she said.

"What are you and he going to do with all those orphans?"

Hecate sighed. "Keep them, I guess."

C looked at her carefully. Were those tears he saw? No, couldn't be. It had been centuries since a woman had gotten all misty over him. Must be the smoke getting in her eyes.

And what an odd idea about the meaning of life? he thought. Forgetting? That couldn't be it. It was completely crazy to think like that. Better to get on with things and forget about it. Best forget all about it and get on with what he had to do.

What if that is what's in the box? The thing that we—all of us—are constantly forgetting?

I don't need to know in order to carry out the plan, C thought. That's really all there is to it, after all.

He and Hecate sat together in the park and smoked down their cigarettes, then ground them out against a root of the sweet gum tree. She stood up and stepped away. He did not.

C gazed up at Hecate Minim and winked.

"Here's looking at you," he said. "Whoever you are."

He took out the revolver and fired it into the box. He then put the muzzle of the gun into his own mouth, though he didn't clamp his lips about it because the barrel was still hot. Without another thought, he pulled the trigger. As usual, C hit what he was aiming for.

Grist

Things that really matter, although they are not defined for all eternity, even when they come very late still come at the right time.

—Martin Heidegger,
Letter on Humanism

Midnight Standard at the Westway Diner

Standing over all creation, a doubt-ridden priest took a piss.

He shook himself, looked between his feet at the stars, then tabbed his pants closed. He flushed the toilet, and centrifugal force took care of the rest.

Andre Sud walked back to his table in the Westway Diner. He padded over the living fire of the plenum, the abyss—all of it—and hardly noticed. Even though this place was special to him, it was really just another café with a see-through floor—a window as thin as paper and as hard as diamond. Dime a dozen, as they used to say a thousand years ago. The luciferin sign at the entrance said **FREE DELIVERY** . The sign under it said **OPEN 24 HRS** . This sign was unlit. The place will close, eventually.

The priest sat down and stirred his black tea. He read the sign, backward, and wondered if the words he spoke, when he spoke, sounded anything like English used to. Hard to tell with the grist patch in his head.

Everybody understands one another on a general level, Andre Sud thought. Approximately more or less they know what you mean.

There was a dull greasy gleam to the napkin holder. The saltshaker was half-full. The laminate surface of the table was worn through where the plates usually sat. The particle board underneath was soggy. There was free-floating grist that sparkled like mica within the wood: used-to-be-cleaning grist, entirely shorn from the restaurant's controlling algorithm and nothing to do but shine. Like the enlightened pilgrim of the Greentree Way. Shorn and brilliant.

And what will you have with that hamburger?

Grist. Nada y grist. Grist y nada.

I am going through a depression, Andre reminded himself. I am even considering leaving the priesthood.

Andre's pellicle—the microscopic algorithmic part of him that was spread out in the general vicinity—spoke as if from a long way off.

This happens every winter. And lately with the insomnia. Cut it out with the nada y nada. Everything's physical, don't you know.

Except for you, Andre thought back.

He usually thought of his pellicle as a little cloud of algebra symbols that followed him around like mosquitoes. In actuality it was normally invisible, of course.

Except for us, the pellicle replied.

All right, then. As far as we go. Play a song or something, would you?

After a moment, an oboe piped up in his inner ear. It was an old Greentree hymn—"Ponder Nothing"—that his mother had hummed when he was a kid. Brought up in the faith. The pellicle filtered it through a couple of variations and inversions, but it was always soothing to hear.

There was a way to calculate how many winters the Earth-Mars Diaphany would get in an Earth year,

but Andre never checked before he returned to the seminary on his annual retreat, and they always took him by surprise, the winters did. You wake up one day and the light has grown dim.

The café door slid open and Cardinal Filmbuff filled the doorway. He was wide and possessive of the doorframe. He was a big man with a mane of silver hair. He was also space-adapted and white as bone in the face. He wore all black with a lapel pin in the shape of a tree. It was green, of course.

“Father Andre,” said Filmbuff from across the room. His voice sounded like a Met cop’s radio. “May I join you?”

Andre motioned to the seat across from him in the booth. Filmbuff walked over with big steps and sat down hard.

“Isn’t it late for you to be out, Morton?” Andre said. He took a sip of his tea. He’d left the bag in too long and it tasted twiggy.

I was too long at the pissing, thought Andre.

“Tried to call you at the seminary retreat center,” Filmbuff said.

“I’m usually here,” Andre replied. “When I’m not there.”

“Is this place still the seminary student hangout?”

“It is. Like a dog returneth to its own vomit, huh? Or somebody’s vomit.”

A waiter drifted toward them. “Need menus?” he said. “I have to bring them because the tables don’t work.”

“I might want a little something,” Filmbuff replied. “Maybe a lhasi.”

The waiter nodded and went away.

“They still have real people here?” said Filmbuff.

“I don’t think they can afford to recoat the place.”

Filmbuff gazed around. He was like a beacon. “Seems clean enough.”

“I suppose it is,” said Andre. “I think the basic coating still works and that just the complicated grist has broken down.”

“You like it here.”

Andre realized he’d been staring at the swirls in his tea and not making eye contact with his boss. He sat back, smiled at Filmbuff. “Since I came to seminary, Westway Diner has always been my home away from home.” He took a sip of tea. “This is where I got satori, you know.”

“So I’ve heard. It’s rather legendary. You were eating a plate of mashed potatoes.”

“Sweet potatoes, actually. It was a vegetable plate. They give you three choices, and I chose sweet potatoes, sweet potatoes, and sweet potatoes.”

“I never cared for them.”

“That is merely an illusion. Everyone likes them sooner or later.”

Filmbuff guffawed. His great head turned up toward the ceiling, and his copper eyes flashed in the brown light. “Andre, we need you back teaching. Or in research.”

“I lack faith.”

“Faith in yourself.”

“It’s the same thing as faith in general, as you well know.”

“You are a very effective scholar and priest to be so racked with doubt. Makes me think I’m missing something.”

“Doubt wouldn’t go with your hair, Morton.”

The waiter came back. “Have you decided?” he said.

“A chocolate lhasi,” Filmbuff replied firmly. “And some faith for Father Andre here.”

The waiter stared for a moment, nonplussed. His grist patch hadn’t translated Cardinal Filmbuff’s words or had reproduced them as nonsense.

The waiter must be from out the Happy Garden Radial, Andre thought. Most of the help *was* in Seminary Barrel. There’s a trade patois and a thousand long-shifted dialects out that way. Clan-networked LAPs poor as churchmice and no good Broca grist to be had for Barrel wages.

“*Iye ftip*,” Andre said to the waiter in the Happy Garden patois. “It is a joke.” The waiter smiled uncertainly. “Another shot of hot water for my tea is what I want,” Andre said. The waiter went away looking relieved. Filmbuff’s aquiline presence could be intimidating.

“There is no empirical evidence that you lack faith,” Filmbuff said. It was a pronouncement. “You are as good a priest as there is. We have excellent reports from Triton.”

Linsdale, Andre thought. Traveling monk, indeed. Traveling stool pigeon was more like it. I’ll give him hell next conclave.

“I’m happy there. I have a nice congregation, and I balance rocks.”

“Yes. You are getting a reputation for that.”

“Triton has the best gravity for it in the solar system.”

“I’ve seen some of your creations on the merci. They’re beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“What happens to them?”

“Oh, they fall,” said Andre, “when you stop paying attention to them.”

The chocolate lhasi came and the waiter set down a self-heating carafe of water for Andre. Filmbuff took a long drag at the straw and finished up half his drink.

“Excellent.” He sat back, sighed, and burped. “Andre, I’ve had a vision.”

“Well, that’s what you do for a living.”

“I saw *you* .”

“Was I eating at the Westway Diner?”

“You were falling through an infinite sea of stars.”

The carafe bubbled, and Andre poured some water into his cup before it became flat from all the air being boiled out. The hot water and lukewarm tea mingled in thin rivulets. He did not stir.

“You came to rest in the branches of a great tree. Well, you crashed into it, actually, and the branches caught you.”

“Yggdrasill?”

“I don’t think so. This was a different tree. I’ve never seen it before. It is very disturbing because I thought there was only the One Tree. *This* tree was just as big, though.”

“As big as the World Tree? The Greentree?”

“Just as big. But different.” Filmbuff looked down at the stars beneath their feet. His eyes grew dark and flecked with silver. Space-adapted eyes always took on the color of what they beheld. “Andre, you have no idea how real this was. *Is* . This is difficult to explain. You know about my other visions, of the coming war?”

“The Burning of the One Tree?”

“Yes.”

“It’s famous in the Way.”

“I don’t care about that. Nobody else is listening. In any case, this vision *has placed itself on top of* those war visions. Right now, being here with you, this seems like a play to me. A staged play. You. Me. Even the war that’s coming. It’s all a play that is really about that damn Tree. And it won’t let me go.”

“What do you mean, won’t let you go?”

Filmbuff raised his hands, palms up, to cradle an invisible sphere in front of him. He stared into this space as if it were the depths of all creation, and his eyes became set and focused far away. But not glazed over or unaware.

They were so alive and intense that it hurt to look at him. Filmbuff’s physical face *vibrated* when he was in trance. It was a slight effect, and unnerving even when you were used to it. He was utterly focused, but you couldn’t focus on him. There was too much of him there for the space provided. Or not enough of you.

I am watching chronological quantum transport in the raw, Andre thought. The instantaneous integration of positronic spin information from up-time sifted through the archetypical registers of Filmbuff’s human brain.

And it all comes out as metaphor.

“The Tree is all burnt out now,” Filmbuff said, speaking out of his trance. His words were like stones. “The Burning’s done. But it isn’t char that I’m seeing, no.” He clenched his fists, then opened his palms again. “The old Tree is a shadow. The burnt remains of the One Tree are really only the shadow of the other tree, the new Tree. It’s like a shadow the new Tree casts.”

“Shadow,” Andre heard himself whispering. His own hands were clenched in a kind of sympathetic vibration with Filmbuff.

“We are living in the time of the shadow,” said Filmbuff. He relaxed a bit. “There’s almost a perfect juxtaposition of the two trees. I’ve never felt so sure of anything in my life.”

Filmbuff, for all his histrionics, was not one to overstate his visions for effect. The man who sat across from Andre was only the *aspect* —the human portion—of a vast collective of personalities. They were all unified by the central being; the man before him was no more a puppet than was his enthalpic computing analog soaking up energy on Mercury, or the nodes of specialized grist spread across human space decoding variations in antiparticle spins as they made their way backward in time. But he was no longer simply the man who had taught Andre’s Intro to Pastoral Shamanism course at seminary. Ten years ago, the Greentree Way had specifically crafted a Large Array of Personalities to catch a glimpse of the future, and Filmbuff had been assigned to be morphed.

I was on the team that designed him, Andre thought. Of course, that was back when I was a graduate assistant. Before I Walked on the Moon.

“The vision is what’s real.” Filmbuff put the lhasi straw to his mouth and finished the rest of it. Andre wondered where the liquid went inside the man. Didn’t he run on batteries or something? “This is maya, Andre.”

“I believe you, Morton.”

“I talked to Erasmus Kelly about this,” Filmbuff continued. “He took it on the merci to our Interpreter’s Freespace.”

“What did they come up with?”

Filmbuff pushed his empty glass toward Andre. “That there’s a new Tree,” he said.

“How the hell could there be a new Tree? The Tree is wired into our DNA like sex and breathing. It may *be* sex and breathing.”

“How should I know? There’s a new Tree.”

Andre took a sip of his tea. Just right. “So there’s a new Tree,” he said. “What does that have to do with me?”

“We think it has to do with your research.”

“What research? I balance rocks.”

“From before.”

“Before I lost my faith and became an itinerant priest?”

“You were doing brilliant work at the seminary.”

“What? With the time towers? That was a dead end.”

“You understand them better than anyone.”

“Because I don’t try to make any sense of them. Do you think this new Tree has to do with those things?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“I doubt it.”

“You doubt everything.”

“The time towers are bunch of crotchety old LAPs who have disappeared up their own asses.”

“Andre, you know what I am.”

“You’re my boss.”

“Beside that.”

“You’re *amanifold* . You are a Large Array of Personalities who was specially constructed as a quantum-event detector—probably the best in human history. Parts of you stretch across the entire inner solar system, and you have cloud ship outriders. If you say you had a vision of me and this new Tree, then it has to mean something. You’re not making it up. Morton, you see into the future, and there I am.”

“There you are. You are the Way’s expert *ontime* . What do you think this means.”

“What do you want me to tell you?” said Andre. That the new Tree is obviously a further stage in sentient evolution, since the Greentree is *us* ?”

“That’s what Erasmus Kelly and his people think. I need something more subtle from you.”

“All right. It isn’t the time towers that this has to do with.”

“What then?”

“You don’t want to hear this.”

“You’d better tell me anyway.”

“Thaddeus Kaye.”

Filmbuff shrugged. “Thaddeus Kaye is dead. He killed himself. Something was wrong with him, poor slob.”

“I know you big LAPs like to think so.”

“He was perverted. He killed himself over a woman, wasn’t it?”

“Come on, Morton. A pervert hurts other people. Kaye hurt himself.”

“What does *he* have to do with anything, anyway?”

“What if he’s not dead? What if he’s just wounded and lost? You understand what kind of being he is, don’t you, Morton?”

“He’s a LAP, just like me.”

“You only see the future, Morton. Thaddeus Kaye can *affect* the future directly, from the past.”

“So what? We all do that every day of our lives.”

“This is not the same. Instantaneous control of instants. What the merced quantum effect does for space, Thaddeus Kaye can do for time. He *prefigures* the future. Backward and forward in time. He’s like a rock that has been dropped into a lake.”

“Are you saying he’s God?”

“No. But if your vision is a true one, and I know that it is, then he could very well *be* the war.”

“Do you mean the reason *for* the war?”

“Yes, but more than that. Think of it as a wave, Morton. If there’s a crest, there has to be a trough. Thaddeus Kaye is the crest and the war is the trough. He’s something like a physical principle. That’s how his integration process was designed. Not a force, exactly, but he’s been imprinted on a *property* of time.”

“The Future Principle?”

“All right. Yes. In a way, he *is* the future. I think he’s still alive.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I didn’t until you told me your vision. What else could it be? Unless aliens are coming.”

“Maybe aliens are coming. They’d have their own Tree. Possibly.”

“Morton, do you see aliens coming in your dreams?”

“No.”

“Well, then.”

Filmbuff put his hands over his eyes and lowered his head. “I’ll tell you what I still see,” he said in a low rumble of a voice like far thunder. “I see the burning Greentree. I see it strung with a million bodies, each of them hung by the neck, and all of them burning, too. Until this vision, that was all I was seeing.”

“Did you see any way to avoid it?”

Filmbuff looked up. His eyes were as white as his hands when he spoke. “Once. Not now. The quantum fluctuations have all collapsed down to one big macroreality. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but *soon* .”

Andre sighed. *I believe* , he thought. I don’t want to believe, but I do. It’s easy to have faith in destruction.

“I just want to go back to Triton and balance rocks,” he said. “That’s really all that keeps me sane. I love that big old moon.”

Filmbuff pushed his lhasi glass even farther away and slid out of the booth. He stood up with a creaking sound, like vinyl being stretched. “Interesting times,” he spoke to the café. “Illusion or not, that was probably the last good lhasi I’m going to have for quite a while.”

“Uh, Morton?”

“Yes, Father Andre?”

“You have to pay up front. They can’t take it out of your account.”

“Oh, my.” The cardinal reached down and slapped the black cloth covering his white legs. He, of course, had no pockets. “I don’t think I have any money with me.”

“Don’t worry,” Andre said. “I’ll pick it up.”

“Would you? I’d hate to have that poor waiter running after me down the street.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“We’ll talk more tomorrow after meditation.” This was not a request.

“We’ll talk more then.”

“Good night, Andre.”

“Night, Morton.”

Filmbuff stalked away, his silver mane trailing behind him as if a wind were blowing through it. Or a solar flare.

Before he left the Westway, he turned, as Andre knew he would, and spoke one last question across the space of the diner.

“You knew Thaddeus Kaye, didn’t you, Father Andre?”

“I knew a man named Ben Kaye. A long time ago,” Andre said, but this was only confirmation of what Filmbuff’s spread-out mind had already told him.

The door slid shut and the Cardinal walked into the night. Andre sipped at his tea.

Eventually the waiter returned. “We close pretty soon,” he said.

“Why do you close so early?” Andre asked.

“It is very late.”

“I remember when this place did not close.”

“I don’t think so. It always closed.”

“Not when I was a student at the seminary.”

“It closed then,” said the waiter. He took a rag from his apron, activated it with a twist, and began to wipe a nearby table.

“I’m sure you’re mistaken.”

“They tell me there’s never been a time when this place didn’t close.”

“Who tells you?”

“People.”

“And you believe them.”

“Why should I believe you? You’re people.” The waiter looked up at Andre, puzzled. “That was a joke,” he said. “I guess it does not translate.”

“Bring me some more tea and then I will go.”

The waiter nodded, then went to get it.

There was music somewhere. Gentle oboe strains. Oh, yes. His pellicle was still playing the hymn.

What do you think?

I think we are going on a quest.

I suppose so.

Do you know where Thaddeus Kaye is?

No, but I have a pretty good idea how to find Ben. And wherever Ben is, Thaddeus Kaye has to be.

Why not tell somebody else how to find him?

Because no one else will do what I do when I find him.

What’s that?

Nothing.

Oh.

When the backup is done, we’ll be on our way.

The third part of Andre’s multiple personality, the convert, was off-line at the moment getting himself archived and debugged. That was mainly what the retreat was for, since using the Greentree data facilities was free to priests. Doing it on Triton would have cost as much as putting a new roof on his house.

Why don’t they send someone who is stronger in faith than we are?

I don’t know. Send an apostate to net an apostate, I guess.

What god is Thaddeus Kaye apostate from?

Himself.

And for that matter, what about us?

Same thing. Here comes the tea. Will you play that song again?

It was Mother’s favorite.

Do you think it could be that simple? That I became a priest because of that hymn?

Are you asking me?

Just play the music and let me drink my tea. I think the waiter wants us out of here.

“Do you mind if I mop up around you?” the waiter said.

“I’ll be done soon.”

“Take your time, as long as you don’t mind me working.”

“I don’t mind.”

Andre listened to mournful oboe and watched as the waiter sloshed water across the infinite universe, then took a mop to it with a vengeance.

Jill

Down in the dark there’s a doe rat I’m after to kill. She’s got thirteen babies and I’m going to bite them, bite them, bite them. I will bite them.

The mulch here smells of dank stupid rats all running running, and there’s nowhere farther to run because this is it, this is the Carbuncle, and now *I’m* here and this is truly the end of all of it, but a rat can’t stand to know that and won’t accept me until they have to believe me. Now they will believe me.

My whiskers against something soft. Old food? No, it’s a dead buck; I scent his Y code, and the body is dead but the code keeps thumping and thumping. This mulch won’t let it drain out and it doesn’t ever want to die. The Carbuncle’s the end of the line, but this code doesn’t know it or knows it and won’t have it. I give it a poke and a bit of rot sticks to my nose and the grist tries to swarm me, but no I don’t think so.

I sniff out and send along my grist, jill ferret grist, and no rat code stands a chance ever, ever. The zombie rat goes rigid when its tough, stringy code—who knows how old, how far traveled to finally die here at the End of Everywhere—that code scatters to nonsense in the pit of the ball of nothing my grist wraps it in. Then the grist flocks back to me and the zombie rat thumps no more. No more.

Sometimes having to kill *everything* is a bit of a distraction. I want that doe and her littles really bad and I need to move on.

Down a hole and into a warren larder. Here there’s pieces of meat and the stink of maggot sluice pooled in the bends between muscles and organs. But the rats have got the meat from Farmer Jan’s Mulmyard, and it’s not quite dead yet, got maggot resistant code, like the buck rat, but not smart enough to know it’s dead, just mean code jaw-latched to a leg or a haunch and won’t dissipate. Mean and won’t die. But I am meaner still.

Oh, I smell her!

I’m coming, mama rat. Where are you going? There’s no going anywhere anymore.

Bomi slinks into the larder and we touch noses. I smell blood on her. She’s got a kill, a bachelor male, by the blood spore on her.

It’s so warm and wet, Jill. Bomi’s trembling and wound up tight. She’s not the smartest ferret. I love it, love it, and I’m going back to lie in it.

That’s bad. Bad habit.

I don’t care. I killed it; it’s mine.

You do what you want, but it’s your man Bob’s rat.

No it's mine.

He feeds you, Bomi.

I don't care.

Go lay up then.

I will.

Without a by-your-leave, Bomi's gone back to her kill to lay up. I never do that. TB wouldn't like it, and besides, the killing's the thing, not the owning. Who wants an old dead rat to lie in when there's more to bite?

Bomi told me where she'd be because she's covering for herself when she doesn't show and Bob starts asking. Bomi's a stupid ferret and I'm glad she doesn't belong to TB.

But me—down another hole, deeper, deeper still. It's half-filled in here. The doe rat thought she was hiding it, but she left the smell of her as sure as a serial number on a bone. I will bite you, mama.

Then there's the dead-end chamber I knew would be. Doe rat's last hope in all the world. Won't do her any good. But oh, she's big! She's tremendous. Maybe the biggest ever for me.

I am very, very happy.

Doe rat with the babies crowded behind her. Thirteen of them, I count by the squeaks. Sweet naked squeaks. Less than two weeks old, they are. Puss and meat. But I want mama now.

The doe sniffs me and screams like a bone breaking and she rears big as me. Bigger.

I will bite you.

Come and try, little jill.

I will kill you.

I ate a sack of money in the City Bank and they chased me and cut me to pieces and just left my tail and—I grew another rat! What will you do to me, jill, that can be so bad? You'd better be afraid of me.

When I kill your babies, I will do it with one bite for each. I won't hurt them for long.

You won't kill my babies.

At her.

At her because there isn't anything more to say, no more messages to pass back and forth through our grist and scents.

I go for a nipple and she's fast out of the way, but not fast enough and I have a nub of her flesh in my mouth. Blood let. I chew on her nipple tip. Blood and mama's milk.

She comes down on me and bites my back, her long incisors cut through my fur, my skin, like hook needles, and come out at another spot. She's heavy. She gnaws at me and I can feel her teeth scraping against my backbone. I shake to get her off, and I do, but her teeth rip a gouge out of me.

Cut pretty bad, but she's off. I back up thinking that she's going to try to swarm a copy, and I stretch out the grist and there it is, just like I thought, and I intercept it and I kill the thing before it can get to the mulm and reproduce and grow another rat. One rat this big is enough, enough for always.

The doe senses that I've killed her outrider, and now she's more desperate.

This is all there is for you. This is oblivion and ruin and time to stop the scurry.

This is where you'll die.

She strikes at me again, but I dodge and—before she can round on me—I snatch a baby rat. It's dead before it can squeal. I spit out its mangle of bones and meat.

But mama's not a dumb rat, no, not dumb at all, and does not fly into a rage over this. But I know she regards me with all the hate a rat can hate, though. If there were any light, I'd see her eyes glowing rancid yellow.

Come on, mama, before I get another baby.

She goes for a foot and again I dodge, but she catches me in the chest. She raises up, up.

The packed dirt of the ceiling, wham, wham, and her incisors are hooked around my breastbone, damn her, and it holds me to her mouth as fast as a barbed arrowpoint.

Shake and tear, and I've never known such pain, such delicious . . .

I rake at her eyes with a front claw, dig into her belly with my feet. Dig, dig, and I can feel the skin parting, and the fatty underneath parting, and my feet dig deep, deep.

Shakes me again, and I can only smell my own blood and her spit and then sharp, small pains at my back.

The baby rats. The baby rats are latching onto me, trying to help their mother.

Nothing I can do. Nothing I can do but dig with my rear paws. Dig, dig. I am swimming in her guts. I can feel the give. I can feel the tear. Oh, yes!

Then my breastbone snaps and I fly loose of the doe's teeth. I land in the babies, and I'm stunned and they crawl over me and nip at my eyes and one of them shreds an ear, but the pain brings me to and I snap the one that bit my ear in half. I go for another. Across the warren cavern, the big doe shuffles. I pull myself up, try to stand on all fours. Can't.

Baby nips my hind leg. I turn and kill it. Turn back. My front legs collapse. I cannot stand to face the doe, and I hear her coming.

Will I die here?

Oh, this is how I want it! Took the biggest rat in the history of the Met to kill me. Ate a whole bag of money, she did.

She's coming for me. I can hear her coming for me. She's so big. I can *smell* how big she is.

I gather my hind legs beneath me, find a purchase.

This is how I die. I will bite you.

But there's no answer from her, only the doe's harsh breathing. The dirt smells of our blood. Dead baby rats all around me.

I am very, very happy.

With a scream, the doe charges me. I wait a moment. Wait.

I pounce, shoot low like an arrow.

I'm through, between her legs. I'm under her. I rise up. I rise up into her shredded belly. I bite! I bite! I bite!

Her whole weight keeps her down on me. I chew. I claw. I smell her heart. I smell the new blood of her heart! I can hear it! I can smell it! I chew and claw my way to it.

I bite.

Oh, yes.

The doe begins to kick and scream, to kick and scream, and as she does the blood of heart pumps from her and over me, smears over me until my coat is soaked with it, until all the dark world is blood.

After a long time, the doe rat dies. I send out the grist, feebly, but there are no outriders to face, no tries at escape now. She put all that she had into fighting me. She put everything into our battle.

I pull myself out from under the rat. In the corner, I hear the scuffles of the babies. Now that the mama is dead, they are confused.

I have to bite them. I have to kill them all.

I cannot use my front legs, but I can use my back. I push myself toward them, my belly on the dirt like a snake. I find them all huddled in the farthest corner, piling on one another in their fright. Nowhere to go.

I do what I told the doe I would do. I kill them each with one bite, counting as I go. Three and ten makes thirteen.

And then it's done and they're all dead. I've killed them all.

So.

There's only one way out: the way I came. That's where I go, slinking, crawling, turning this way and that to keep my exposed bone from catching on pebbles and roots. After a while, I start to feel the pain that was staying away while I fought. It's never been this bad.

I crawl and crawl, I don't know for how long. If I were to meet another rat, that rat would kill me. But either they're dead or they're scared, and I don't hear or smell any. I crawl to what I think is up, what I hope is up.

And after forever, after so long that all the blood on my coat is dried and starting to flake off like tiny brown leaves, I poke my head out into the air.

TB is there. He's waited for me.

Gently, gently he pulls me out of the rat hole. Carefully, carefully he puts me in my sack.

“Jill, I will fix you,” he says.

I know.

“That must have been the Great Mother of rats.”

She was big, so big and mean. She was brave and smart and strong. It was wonderful.

“What did you do?”

I bit her.

“I’ll never see your like again, Jill.”

I killed her, and then I killed all her children.

“Let’s go home, Jill.”

Yes. Back home.

Already in the dim burlap of the sack, and I hear the call of TB’s grist to go to sleep, to get better, and I sigh and curl as best I can into a ball and I am falling away, falling away to dreams where I run along a trail of spattered blood, and the spoor is fresh and I’m chasing rats, and TB is with me close by, and I will bite a rat soon, soon, soon—

A Simple Room with Good Light

Come back, Andre Sud. Your mind is wandering and now you have to concentrate. Faster now. Fast as you can go. Spacetime. Clumps of galaxy clusters. Average cluster. Two-armed spiral.

Yellow star.

Here’s a network of hawsers cabling the inner planets together. Artifact of sentience, some say. Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, hung with a shining webwork across blank space and spreading even into the asteroids. Fifty-mile-thick cables bending down from the heavens, coming in at the poles to fit into enormous universal joints lubricated by the living magma of the planets’ viscera. Torque and undulation. Faster. Somewhere on a flagellating curve between Earth and Mars, the Diaphany, you will find yourself. Closer in. Spinning spherule like a hundred-mile-long bead on a million-mile-long necklace. Come as close as you can.

All along the Mars-Earth Diaphany, Andre saw the preparations for a war like none before. It seemed the entire Met—all the interplanetary cables—had been transformed into a dense fortress that people just happened to live inside. His pod was repeatedly delayed in the pithway as troops went about their movements, and military grist swarmed hither and yon about some task or another. We live in this all-night along the carbon of the cables, Andre thought, within the dark glistening of the corridors where surface speaks to surface in tiny whispers like fingers, and the larger codes, the extirpated skeletons of a billion minds, clack together in a cemetery of logic, shaking hands, continually shaking bony algorithmic hands and observing strict and necessary protocol for the purposes of destruction.

Amés—he only went by the one name, as if it were a title—was a great one for martial appearances. Napoleon come again, the merci reporters said as a friendly joke. Oh, the reporters were eating this up. There hadn’t been a good war in centuries. People got tired of unremitting democracy, didn’t they? He’d actually heard somebody say that on the merci.

How fun it will be to watch billions die for a little excitement on the merci, Andre thought.

He arrived in Connacht Bolsa in a foul mood, but when he stepped out of his pod, there was the smell of new rain. He had walked a ways from the pod station before he realized what the smell was. There were puddles of water on the ground from the old-fashioned street-cleaning mechanism Connacht employed. It was still raining in spots—a small rain that fell only an inch or so from the ground. Little clouds scudded along the street like a miniature storm front, washing it clean of the night's leavings.

Connacht was a suburb radial off Phobos City, the most densely populated segment on the Met. A hundred years ago in the Phobos boom time, Connacht had been the weekend escape for intellectuals, artists, moneyed drug addicts—and the often indistinguishable variety of con men, mountebanks, and psychic quacksalvers who were their hangers-on. The place was run-down now, and Andre's pellicle encountered various swarms of nostalgia that passed through the streets like rat packs—only these were bred and fed by the merchants to attract the steady trickle of tourists with pellicular receptors for a lost bohemia.

All they did for Andre was made him think about Molly.

Andre's convert—the electronic portion of himself—obliged him by dredging up various scenes from his days at seminary. The convert was usually silent, preferring to communicate in suggestive patterns of data—like a conscience gifted with irreducible logic and an infallible memory.

Andre walked along looking at the clouds under his feet, and as he walked, his convert projected images into the shape of these clouds and into the shift and sparkle of the puddled water they left behind.

I have a very sneaky conscience, Andre thought, but he let the images continue.

—Molly Index, Ben Kaye, and Andre at the Westway, in one of their long arguments over aesthetics when they were collaborating on their preliminary thesis. “Knowing, Watching, and Doing: The Triune Aspect of Enlightenment.”

“I want to be ‘Doing!’” Molly mocked-yelled and threw a wadded-up piece of paper at Ben.

He caught it, spread it out, and folded it into a paper airplane. “This is the way things have to be,” he said. “I’m ‘Doing.’ You’re ‘Watching.’ And we both know who ‘Knowing’ must be.” They turned to Andre and smiled vulture smiles.

“I don’t know what you think I know, but I don’t know it,” he said, then nearly got an airplane in the eye.

—Molly’s twenty-four-year-old body covered with red Martian sand under the Tharsis beach boardwalk. Her blue eyes open to the sky-pink sky. Her nipples like dark stones. Ben a hundred feet away, rising from the gray-green lake water, shaking the spume from his body. Of course he had run and jumped into the lake as soon as they got there. Ben wouldn’t wait for anything.

But Molly chose me! I can’t believe she chose me.

Because I waited for her and dragged her under the boardwalk and kissed her before I could talk myself out of it.

Because I waited for the right moment.

How’s that for Doing.

—Living together as grad students while Molly studied art and he entered into the stations of advanced

meditation at seminary.

—Molly leaving him because she would not marry a priest.

You're going to kill yourself on the moon.

Only this body. I'll get a new one. It's being grown right now.

It isn't right.

This is the Greentree Way. That's what makes a priest into a true shaman. He knows what it's like to die and come back.

If you Walk on the Moon, you will know what it's like to lose a lover.

Molly, the Walk is what I've been preparing for these last seven years. You know that.

I can't bear it. I won't.

Maybe he could have changed her mind. Maybe he could have convinced her. But Alethea Nightshade had come along, and that was that. When he'd come back from the moon reinstated in his cloned body, Molly had taken a new lover.

—His peace offering returned with the words of the old folk song, turned inside out: “Useless the flowers that you give, after the soul is gone.”

—Sitting at a bare table under a bare light, listening to those words, over and over, and deciding never to see her again. Fifteen years ago, as they measure time on Earth.

Thank you, that will be enough, he told the convert.

An image of a stately butler, bowing, flashed through Andre's mind. Then doves rising from brush into sunset. The water puddles were just water puddles once again, and the tiny clouds were only clouds of a storm whose only purpose was to make the world a little cleaner.

Molly was painting a Jackson Pollock when Andre arrived at her studio. His heavy boots, good for keeping him in place in Triton's gravity, noisily clumped on the wooden stairs to Molly's second-floor loft. Connacht was spun to Earth-normal. He would have knocked, but the studio door was already open.

“I couldn't believe it until I'd seen it with my own eyes,” Molly said. She did not stop the work at her easel. “My seminary lover come back to haunt me.”

“Boo,” Andre said. He entered the space. Connacht, like many of the old rotating simple cylinders on the Diaphany, had a biofusion lamp running down its pith that was sheathed on an Earth-day schedule. Now it was day, and Molly's skylights let in the white light and its clean shadows. Huge picture windows looked out on the village. The light reminded Andre of light on the moon. The unyielding, stark, redeeming light just before his old body joined the others in the shaman's Valley of the Bones.

“Saw a man walking a dog the other day with the legs cut off,” said Molly. She dipped the tip of her brush in a blue smear on her palette.

“The man or the dog?”

“Maybe the day.” Molly touched the blue to the canvas before her. It was like old times.

“What are you painting?”

“Something very old.”

“That looks like a Pollock.”

“It is. It’s been out of circulation for a while and somebody used it for a tablecloth. Maybe a kitchen table, I’m thinking.”

Andre looked over the canvas. It was clamped down on a big board as long as he was tall. Sections of it were fine, but others looked like a baby had spilled its mashed peas all over it. Then again, maybe that was Pollock’s work after all.

“How can you possibly know how to put back all that spatter?”

“There’re pictures.” Molly pointed the wooden tip of her brush to the left-hand corner of the canvas. Her movements were precise. They had always been definite and precise. “Also, you can kind of see the tracery of where this section was before it got . . . whatever that is that got spilled on it there. I also use grist for the small stuff. Did you want to talk about Ben?”

“I do.”

“Figured you didn’t come back to relive old times.”

“They *were* good. Do you still do that thing with the mirror?”

“Oh, yes. Are you a celibate priest these days?”

“No, I’m not that kind of priest.”

“I’m afraid I forgot most of what I knew about religion.”

“So did I.”

“Andre, what do you want to know about Ben?” Molly set the handle of her brush against her color palette and tapped it twice. Something in the two surfaces recognized one another, and the brush stuck there. A telltale glimmer of grist swarmed over the brush, keeping it moist and ready for use. Molly sat in a chair by her picture window and Andre sat in a chair across from her. There was a small table between them. “Zen tea?” she said.

“Sure,” Andre replied.

The table pulsed, and two cups began forming on its surface. As the outsides hardened, a gel at their center thinned down to liquid.

“Nice table. I guess you’re doing all right for yourself, Molly.”

“I like to make being in the studio as simple as possible so I can concentrate on my work. I indulge in a few luxuries.”

“You ever paint for yourself anymore? Your own work, I mean?”

Molly reached for her tea, took a sip, and motioned with her cup at the Pollock.

“I paint *those* for myself,” she said. “It’s my little secret. I make them mine. Or they make me theirs.”

“That’s a fine secret.”

“Now you’re in on it. So was Ben. Or Thaddeus, I should say.”

“You were on the team that made him, weren’t you?”

“Aesthetic consultant. Ben convinced them to bring me on. He told me to think of it as a grant for the arts.”

“I kind of lost track of you both after I . . . graduated.”

“You were busy with your new duties. I was busy. Everybody was busy.”

“I wasn’t that busy.”

“Ben kept up with your work. It was part of what made him decide to . . . do it.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Now you do. He read that paper you wrote on temporal propagation. The one that was such a big deal.”

“It was the last thing I ever wrote.”

“Developed a queer fascination with rocks?”

“You heard about that?”

“Who do you think sent those merci reporters after you?”

“Molly, you didn’t?”

“I waited until I thought you were doing your best work.”

“How did you see me . . . ?” He looked into her eyes, and he saw it. The telltale expression. Far and away. “You’re a LAP.”

Molly placed the cup to her lips and sipped a precise amount of tea. “I guess you’d classify me as a manifold by now. I keep replicating and replicating. It’s an art project I started several years ago. Alethea convinced me to do it when we were together.”

“Will you tell me about her? She haunted me for years, you know. I pictured her as some kind of femme fatale from a noir. Destroyed all my dreams by taking you.”

“Nobody took me. I went. Sometimes I wonder what I was thinking. Alethea Nightshade was no picnic, let me tell you. She had the first of her breakdowns when we were together.”

“Breakdowns?”

“She had schizophrenia in her genes. She wanted to be a LAP, but wasn’t allowed because of it. The medical grist controlled her condition most of the time, but every once in a while . . . she outthought it. She was too smart for her own good.”

“Is that why you became a LAP?” Andrew asked. “Because she couldn’t?”

“I told myself I was doing it *forme* , but yes. *Then*. Now things are different.” Molly smiled, and the light

in the studio was just right. Andre saw the edge of the multiplicity in her eyes.

The fractal in the aspect's iris.

"You have no idea how beautiful it is—what I can see." Molly laughed and Andre shuddered. Awe or fright? He didn't know.

"She was just a woman," Molly said. "I think she came from around Jupiter. A moon or something, you know." Molly made a sweeping motion toward her window. As with many inner-system denizens, the outer system was a great unknown, and all the same, to her. "She grew up on some odd kind of farm."

"A Callisto free grange?"

"I'm sure I don't know. She didn't talk about it much."

"What was she like?"

"Difficult."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you." Tea sip. Andre realized he hadn't picked his up yet. He did so, tried it. It was wonderful, and all grist. A bit creepy to think about drinking it down.

I'll take care of it, don't you worry, said his pellicle.

I know you will.

"Alethea had two qualities that should never exist within one organic mind. A big intellect and a big heart. She felt everything, and she thought about it far too much. She was born to be a LAP. And she finally found a way to do it."

"Ben."

"They fell in love. It was also her good fortune that he could get her past the screening procedures. But Alethea always was a fortunate woman. She was lucky, on a quantum level. Until she wasn't."

"So she and Ben were together before he became . . . Thaddeus."

"For a year."

"Were you jealous?"

"I'd had enough of Alethea by then. I'll always love her, but I want a life that's . . . plain. She was a tangle I couldn't untangle." Molly touched her fingers to her nose and tweaked it. It was a darling gesture, Andre thought. "Besides," Molly said. "*She left me.*"

"What did that do to you and Ben?"

"Nothing. I love Ben. He's my best friend."

She was speaking in the present tense about him, but Andre let it pass.

"Why did he change his name, Molly? I never understood that."

"Because he wasn't a LAP."

“What do you mean? Of course he was. A special one. Very special. But still—”

“No. He said he was something new. He said he wasn’t Ben anymore. It was kind of a joke with him, though. Because, of course, he *was* still Ben. Thaddeus may have been more than a man, but he definitely *was at least* a man, and that man was Ben Kaye. He never could explain it to me.”

“Time propagation without consciousness overlap. That was always the problem with the time tower LAPs. Interference patterns. Dropouts. But with Thaddeus, they finally got the frequency right. One consciousness propagated into the future and bounced back with anti-particle quantum entanglement.”

“I never understood a bit of that jargon you time specialists use.”

“We made God.”

Molly snorted and tea came out her nose. She laughed until tears came to her eyes.

“We made something,” she said. “Something very different than what’s come before. But, Andre, *I knew* Thaddeus. He was the last thing in the universe I would consider worshiping.”

“Some didn’t share your opinion.”

“Thaddeus thought they were crazy. They made him very uncomfortable.”

“Was Alethea one of them?”

“Alethea? Alethea was a stone-cold atheist when it came to Thaddeus. But what she did was worse. Far worse.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She fell in love with him.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Alethea fell in love with Thaddeus.”

“But she was already in love with Thaddeus.”

“Think about what I’ve said.”

“Ben,” Andre said after a moment. “Thaddeus and Ben were not the same person.”

“It was a very melodramatic situation.”

“Ben lost his love to . . . another version of himself.”

“The new, improved Ben was born in Thaddeus. Of course *he* would be the one Alethea loved. The only problem was, the old Ben was still around.”

“God,” Andre said. “How—”

“Peculiar?”

“How very peculiar.”

Molly stood up and went to her window. She traced a line along the clean glass with her finger, leaving a

barely visible smudge. The light was even and clean in Connacht. It was very nearly perfect if what you wanted was accurate illumination. Andre gazed at the shape of Molly against the light. She was beautiful in outline.

“Let me tell you, so was the solution they came up with, the three of them,” Molly said. “Peculiar.”

“Alethea would become like Thaddeus.”

“How did you guess?”

“It has a certain logic. There would be the new Alethea, and there would be the old Alethea left for Ben.”

“Yes,” said Molly. “A logic of desperation. It only left out one factor.”

“Alethea’s heart.”

“That’s right. She loved Thaddeus. She no longer loved Ben. Not in the same way.” Molly turned to face him, but Andre was still blinded by the light streaming in. “But she let them go ahead with it. And for that, I can never forgive her.”

“Because she wanted to be a LAP.”

“More than anything. More than she loved Ben. More than she loved Thaddeus. But I supposed she was punished for it. They all were.”

“How did she get around the screening? I mean, her condition should preclude—”

“You know Ben. Thaddeus and Ben decided they wanted it to happen. They are very smart and persuasive men. *Soverly* smart and persuasive.”

Andre got up and stood beside her in the window, his back to the light. It was warm on his neck.

“Tell me,” he said. He closed his eyes and tried only to listen, but then he felt a touch and Molly was holding his hand.

“I am Molly,” she said. “I’m the aspect. All my converts and pellicle layers are *Molly* —all that programming and grist—it’s *sme*, it’s Molly, too. The woman you once loved. But I’m all along the Diaphany and into the Met. I’m wound into the outer grist. I watch.”

“What do you watch?”

“The sun. I watch the sun. One day I’m going to paint it, but I’m not ready yet. The more I watch, the less ready I feel. I expect to be watching for a long time.” She squeezed his hand gently. “I’m still Molly. But Ben wasn’t Thaddeus. And he was. And he was eaten up with jealousy, but jealousy of whom? He felt he had a right to decide his own fate. We all do. He felt he had that right. And did he not? I can’t say.”

“It’s a hard question.”

“It would never have been a question if it hadn’t been for Alethea Nightshade.”

“What happened?” he asked, eyes still closed. The warm pressure of her hand. The pure light on his back. “Were you there?”

“Ben drove himself right into Thaddeus’s heart, Andre. Like a knife. It might as well have been a knife.”

“How could he do that?”

“I was there in Elysium when it happened,” she said.

“On Mars?”

“On Mars. I was on the team, don’t you know? Aesthetic consultant. I was hired on once again.”

Andre opened his eyes and Molly turned to him. In this stark light, there were crinkles around her lips, worry lines on her brow. The part of her that was here.

We have grown older, Andre thought. And pretty damn strange.

“It’s kind of messy and . . . organic . . . at first. There’s a lab near one of the steam vents where Ben was transmuted. There’s some ripping apart and beam splitting at the quantum level that I understand is very unsettling for the person undergoing the process. Something like this happens if you’re a multiple and you ever decide to go large, by the way. It’s when we’re at our most vulnerable.”

“Thaddeus was there when Alethea underwent the process?”

“He was there. Along with Ben.”

“So he was caught up in the integration field. Everyone nearby would be,” Andre said. “There’s a melding of possible futures.”

“Yes,” said Molly. “Everyone became part of everyone else for that instant.”

“Ben and Thaddeus and Alethea.”

“Ben understood that his love was doomed.”

“And it drove him crazy?”

“No. It drove him to despair. Utter despair. I was there, remember? I felt it.”

“And at that instant, when the integration field was turned on—”

“Ben drove himself into Thaddeus’s heart. He pushed himself in where he couldn’t be.”

“What do you mean, couldn’t be?”

“Have you ever heard the stories of back when the merced effect was first discovered, of the pairs of lovers and husbands and wives trying to integrate into one being?”

“The results were horrific. Monsters were born. And died nearly instantly.”

Andre tried to imagine what it would be like if his pellicle or his convert presence were not really *him* . If he had to live with another presence, an other, all the time. The thing about a pellicle was that it never did anything the whole person didn’t want to do. *It couldn’t* . It would be like a wrench in your toolbox rebelling against you.

Molly walked over to the painting and gave it an appraising look, brushed something off a corner of the canvas. She turned, and there was the wild spatter of the Pollock behind her.

“There was an explosion,” Molly said. “All the aspects there were killed. Alethea wasn’t transmuted yet. We don’t *think* she was. She may have died in the blast. Her body was destroyed.”

“What about you?”

“I was in the grist. I got scattered, but I re-formed quickly enough.”

“How was Thaddeus instantiated there at the lab?”

“Biological grist with little time-propagating nuclei in his cells. He looked like a man.”

“Did he look like Ben?”

“Younger. Ben was getting on toward forty.” Molly smiled wanly and nodded as if she’d just decided something. “You know, sometimes I think that was it.”

“What?”

“That it wasn’t about Thaddeus being a god at all. It was about him looking like he was nineteen. Alethea had a soft spot for youth.”

“You’re young.”

“Thank you, Andre. You were always so nice to me. But you know, even then my aspect’s hair was going white. I have decided, foolishly perhaps, never to grow myself a new body.”

There she stood with her back against the window, her body rimmed with light. Forget all this. Forget about visions and quests. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her fractal eyes.

“I think you are beautiful,” he said. “You will always be beautiful to me.”

They didn’t leave the studio. Molly grew a bed out of the floor. They undressed one another timidly. Neither of them had been with anyone for a long time. Andre had no lover on Triton.

She turned from him and grew a mirror upon the floor. Just like the full-size one she used to keep in their bedroom. Not for vanity. At least, not for simple vanity. She got on her hands and knees over it and looked at herself. She touched a breast, her hair. Touched her face in the mirror.

“I can’t get all the way into the frame,” she said. “I could never do a self-portrait. I can’t see myself anymore.”

“Nobody ever could,” Andre said. “It was always a trick of the light.”

Almost as if it had heard him, the day clicked off, instantly, and the studio grew pitch-dark. Connacht was not a place for sunsets and twilight.

“Seven o’clock,” Molly said. He felt her hand on his shoulder. His chest. Pulling him onto her until they were lying with the dark mirror beneath them. It wouldn’t break. Molly’s grist wouldn’t let it.

He slid into her gently. Molly moved beneath him in small spasms.

“I’m all here,” she told him after a while. “You’ve got all of me right now.”

In the darkness, he pictured her body.

And then he felt the gentle nudge of her pellicle against his, in the microscopic dimensions between them.

Take me, she said.

He did. He swarmed her with his own pellicle, and she did not resist. He touched her deep down and found the way to connect, the way to get inside her there. Molly a warm and living thing that he was surrounding and protecting.

And, for an instant, a vision of Molly Index as she truly was:

Like—and unlike—the outline of her body as he'd seen it in the window, and the clear light behind her, surrounding her like a white-hot halo. All of her, stretched out a hundred million miles. Concentrated at once beneath him. Both and neither.

“You are a wonder, Molly,” he said to her. “It’s just like always.”

“Exactly like always,” she said, and he felt her come around him, *and felt a warm flash traveling along the skin of the Diaphany—a sudden flush upon the world’s face. And a little shiver across the heart of the solar system.*

Later in the dark, he told her the truth.

“I know he’s alive. Ben didn’t kill him; he only wounded him.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Because Ben wasn’t trying to kill him. Ben was trying to hurt him.”

“My question remains.”

“Molly, do you know where he is?”

At first he thought she was sleeping, but finally she answered. “Why should I tell you that?”

Andre breathed out. I was right, he thought. He breathed back in, trying not to think. Trying to concentrate on the breath.

“It might make the war that’s coming shorter,” he said. “We think he’s the key.”

“You priests?”

“Us priests.”

“I can’t believe there’s going to be a war. It’s all talk. The other LAPs won’t let Amés get away with it.”

“I wish you were right,” he said. “I truly do.”

“How could Thaddeus be the key to a war?”

“He’s entangled in our local timescape. In a way, Thaddeus *is* our local timescape. He’s imprinted on it. And now I think he’s *stuck* in it. He can’t withdraw and just be Ben. Never again. I think that was Ben’s revenge on himself. For taking away Alethea Nightshade.”

Another long silence. The darkness was absolute.

“I should think you’d have figured it out by now, in any case,” she said.

“What?”

“Where he went.”

Andre thought about it, and Molly was right. The answer was there.

“He went to the place where all the fugitive bits and pieces of the grist end up,” Molly said. “He went looking for *her*. For any part of her that was left. In the grist.”

“Alethea,” Andre said. “Of course the answer is Alethea.”

Bender

The bone had a serial number that the grist had carved into it, 7sxq688N. TB pulled the bone out of the pile in the old hoy where he lived and blew through one end. Dust came out the other. He accidentally sucked in and started coughing until he cleared the dried marrow from his windpipe. It was maybe a thigh bone, long like a flute.

“You were tall, 7sxq,” TB said to it. “How come you didn’t crumble?”

Then some of TB’s enhanced grist migrated over to the bone and fixed the broken grist in the bone and it *did* crumble in his hands, turn to dust, and then to less than dust to be carried away and used to heal Jill’s breastbone and mend her other fractures.

But there is too much damage even for this, TB thought. She’s dying. Jill is dying and I can’t save her.

“Hang on there, little one,” he said.

Jill was lying in the folds of her sack, which TB had set on his kitchen table and bunched back around her. He looked in briefly on her thoughts and saw a dream of scurry and blood, then willed her into a sleep down to the deeper dreams that were indistinguishable from the surge and ebb of chemical and charge within her brain—sleeping and only living and not thinking. At the same time, he set the grist to reconstructing her torn-up body.

Too late. It was too late the moment that doe rat was finished with her.

Oh, but what a glory of a fight!

I set her to it. I made her into a hunter. It was all my doing, and now she’s going to die because of it.

TB couldn’t look at her anymore. He stood up and went to make himself some tea at the kitchen’s rattletrap synthesizer. As always, the tea came out of synth tepid. TB raked some coals from the fire and set the mug on them to warm up a bit, then sat back down, lit a cigarette, and counted his day’s take of rats.

Ten bagged and another twenty that he and Bob had killed between them with sticks. The live rats scabbled about in the containing burlap, but they weren’t going to get out. Rats to feed to Jill. You shouldn’t raise a ferret on anything other than its natural prey. The ferret food you could buy was idiotic. And after Jill ate them, he would know. He would know what the rats were and where they came from. Jill could sniff it out like no other. She was amazing that way.

She isn’t going to eat these rats. She is going to die because you took a little scrap of programming that was all bite and you gave it a body and now look what you’ve done.

She didn’t have to die like this. She could have been erased painlessly. She could have faded away to broken code.

Once again, TB looked long and hard into the future. Was there anything, any way? Concentrating, he teased at the threads of possible futures with a will as fine as a steel-pointed probe. Looking for a silver thread in a bundle of dross. Looking for the world where Jill lived through her fight. He couldn't see it, couldn't find it.

It had to be there. Every future was always there, and when you could see them, you could reach back into the past and effect the changes to bring about the future that you wanted.

Or I can.

But I can't. Can't see it. Want to, but can't, little Jill. I am sorry.

For Jill to live was a future so extreme, so microscopically fine in the bundle of threads, that it was, in principle, unfindable, incomprehensible. And if he couldn't comprehend it, to make it happen was impossible.

And of course he saw where almost all of the threads led:

Jill would be a long time dying. He could see that clearly. He could also see that he did not have the heart to put her down quickly, put her out of her misery. But knowing this fact did not take any special insight.

How could I have come to care so much for a no-account bundle of fur and coding out here on the ass-end of nowhere?

How could I not, after knowing Jill?

Two days it would take, as days were counted in the Carbuncle, before the little ferret passed away. Of course it never really got to be day. The only light was the fetid bioluminescence coming off the heaps of garbage. A lot of it was still alive. The Carbuncle was in a perpetual twilight that was getting on toward three hundred years old. With the slow decay of organic remnants, a swamp had formed. And then the Bendy River, which was little more than a strong current in the swamp, endlessly circulating in precession with the spin of the module. Where was the Carbuncle? Who cares? Out at the end of things, where the tendrils of the Met snaked into the asteroid belt. It didn't matter. There wasn't a centrifuge here to provide gravity for *people*. Nobody cared about whoever lived here. The Carbuncle was spun—to a bit higher than Earth-normal, actually—in order to compact the garbage down so that humanity's shit didn't cover the entire asteroid belt.

The big garbage sluice that emptied into the Carbuncle had been put into place a half century ago. It had one-way valves within it to guard against backflow. All the sludge from the inner system came to the Carbuncle, and the maintenance grist used some of it to enlarge the place so that it could dump the rest. To sit there. Nothing much ever left the Carbuncle, and the rest of the system was fine with that.

Somebody slobbered into the shallow water outside the hoy and cursed. It was the witch, Gladys, who lived in a culvert down the way. She found the gangplank, and TB heard her pull herself up out of the water. He didn't move to the door. She banged on it with the stick she always carried that she said was a charmed snake. Maybe it was. Stranger things had happened in the Carbuncle. People and grist combined in strange ways here, not all of them comprehensible.

"TB, I need to talk to you about something," the witch said. TB covered his ears, but she banged again and that didn't help. "Let me in, TB. I know you're home. I saw a light in there."

"No you didn't," TB said to the door.

"I need to talk to you."

“All right.” He pulled himself up and opened the door. Gladys came in and looked around the hoy like a startled bird.

“What have you got cooking?”

“Nothing.”

“Make me something.”

“Gladys, my old stove hardly works anymore.”

“Put one of them rats in there and I’ll eat what it makes.”

“I won’t do it, Gladys.” TB opened his freezer box and rummaged around inside. He pulled out a popsicle and gave it to her. “Here,” he said. “It’s chocolate, I think.”

Gladys took the popsicle and gnawed at it as if it were a meaty bone. She was soon done, and had brown mess around her lips. She wiped it off with a ragged sleeve. “Got another?”

“No, I don’t have another,” TB said. “And if I did, I wouldn’t give it to you.”

“You’re mean.”

“Those things are hard to come by.”

“How’s your jill ferret?”

“She got hurt today. Did Bob tell you? She’s going to die.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He didn’t want to talk about Jill with Gladys. He changed the subject. “We got a mess of rats out of that mulmyard.”

“There’s more where they came from.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Gladys pulled up a stool and collapsed on it. She was maybe European stock; it was hard to tell. Her face was filthy, except for a white smear where wiping the chocolate had cleaned a spot under her nose and on her chin.

“Why do you hate them so much? I know why Bob does. He’s crazy. But you’re not crazy like that.”

“I don’t hate them,” TB said. “It’s just how I make a living.”

“Is it now?”

“I don’t hate them,” TB repeated. “What was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“I want to take a trip.”

“*Towhere* ?”

“I’m going to see my aunt. I got to thinking about her lately. She used to have this kitten. I was thinking I wanted a cat. For a familiar, you know. To aid me in my occult work. She’s a famous cloudship pilot,

you know.”

“The kitten?”

“No, my aunt is.”

“You going to take your aunt’s kitten?”

Gladys seemed very offended. “No, I’m not!” She leaned forward in a conspiratorial manner. “That kitten’s all growed up now, and I think it was a girl. It will have kittens, and I can get me one of those.”

“That’s a lot of supposes,” TB said mildly.

“I’m sure of it. My angel, Tom, told me to do it.”

Tom was one of the supernatural beings Gladys claimed to be in contact with. People journeyed long distances in the Carbuncle to have her make divinings for them. It was said she could tell you exactly where to dig for silver keys.

“Well, if Tom told you, then you should do it,” TB said.

“Damn right,” said Gladys. “But I want you to look after the place while I’m gone.”

“Gladys, you live in an old ditch.”

“It is a dry culvert. And I do not want anybody moving in on me while I’m gone. A place that nice is hard to come by.”

“All I can do is go down there and check on it.”

“If anybody comes along, you have to run them off.”

“I’m not going to run anybody off.”

“You have to. I’m depending on you.”

“I’ll tell them the place is already taken,” TB said. “That’s about all I can promise.”

“You tell them that it has a curse on it,” Gladys said. “And that I’ll put a curse on *them* if I catch them in my house.”

TB snorted back a laugh. “All right,” he said. “Is there anything else?”

“Water my hydrangea.”

“What the hell’s that?”

“It’s a plant. Just stick your finger in the dirt and don’t water it if it’s still moist.”

“Stick my finger in the dirt?”

“It’s clean fill!”

“I’ll water it, then.”

“Will you let me sleep here tonight?”

“No, Gladys.”

“I’m scared to go back there. Harold’s being mean.” Harold was the “devil” that sat on Gladys’s other shoulder. Tom spoke into one ear, and Harold into the other. People could ask Harold about money, and he would tell Gladys the answer if he felt like it.

“You can’t stay here.” TB rose from his own seat and pulled Gladys up from the stool. She had a ripe smell when he was this close to her. “In fact, you have to go on now because I have to do something.” He guided her toward the door.

“What do you have to do?” she said. She pulled loose of his hold and stood her ground. TB walked around her and opened the door. “Something,” he said. He pointed toward the twilight outside the doorway. “Go on home, Gladys. I’ll check in on your place tomorrow.”

“I’m not leaving for two days,” she replied. “Check in on it day after tomorrow.”

“Okay, then,” TB said. He motioned to the door. “You’ve got to go, Gladys, so I can get to what I need to do.”

She walked to the door, turned around. “Day after tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll be gone for a while. I’m trusting you, TB.”

“You can trust me to look in on your place.”

“And not steal anything.”

“I can promise you that, too.”

“All right, then. I’m trusting you.”

“Good night, Gladys.”

“Good night.” She finally left. After TB heard her make her way back to the swamp bank, he got up and closed the door behind her, which she’d neglected to do. Within minutes there was another knock. TB sighed and got up to answer it. He let Bob in.

Bob pulled out a jar of a jellied liquid. It was Carbuncle moonshine, as thick as week-old piss and about as yellow. “Let’s drink,” he said, and set the bottle on TB’s table. “I come to get you drunk and get your mind off things.”

“I won’t drink that swill,” TB said. Bob put the bottle to his mouth and swallowed two tremendous gulps. He handed the bottle to TB, shaking it in his face. TB took it.

“Damn!” Bob said. “Hot damn!”

“Gladys was right about you being crazy.”

“She come around here tonight?”

“She just left. Said she wanted me to look after her place.”

“She ain’t going to see her aunt.”

“Maybe she will.”

“Like hell. Gladys never goes far from that ditch.”

TB looked down at the moonshine. He looked away from it and, trying not to taste it, took a swig. He tasted it. It was like rusty paint thinner. Some barely active grist, too. TB couldn't help analyzing it; that was the way he was built. Cleaning agents for sewer pipes. Good God. He took another before he could think about it.

“You drink up.” Bob looked at him with a faintly jealous glare. TB handed the bottle back.

“No, you.”

“Don't mind if I do.” Bob leaned back and poured the rest of the swill down his throat. He let out a yell when he was finished that startled TB, even though he was ready for it.

“I want some beer to chase it with,” Bob said.

“Beer would be good, but I don't have any.”

“Let's go down to Ru June's and shoot some pool.”

“It's too damn late.”

“It's early.”

TB thought about it. The moonshine warmed his gut. He could feel it threatening to eat through his gut if he didn't dilute it with something. There was nothing further to do about Jill. She would sleep, and at some time, she would die in her sleep. He ought to stay with her. He ought to face what he had done.

“Let me get my coat.”

The Carbuncle glowed blue-green when they emerged from the hoy. High above them, like the distant shore of an enormous lake, was the other side of the cylinder. TB had been there, and most of it was a fetid slough. Every few minutes a flare of swamp gas methane would erupt from the garbage on that side of the curve and flame into a white fireball. These fireballs were many feet across, but they looked like pinprick flashes from this distance. TB had been caught by one once. The escaping gas had capsized his little canoe, and being in the water had likely saved him from being burnt to a crisp. Yet there were people who live on that side, too—people who knew how to avoid the gas. Most of the time.

Bob didn't go the usual way to Ru June's, but instead took a twisty series of passageways, some of them cut deep in the mountains of garbage, some of them actually tunneled under and through it. The Bob-ways, TB thought of them. At one point TB felt a drip from above and looked up to see gigantic stalactites formed of some damp and glowing gangrenous extrusion.

“We're right under the old Bendy,” Bob told him. “That there's the settle from the bottom muck.”

“What do you think it is?” TB said.

“Spent medical grist, mostly,” Bob replied. “It ain't worth a damn, and some of it's diseased.”

“I'll bet.”

“This is a hell of a shortcut to Ru June's, though.”

And it was. They emerged not a hundred feet from the tavern. The lights of the place glowed dimly behind skin windows. They mounted the porch and went in through a screen of plastic strips that was

supposed to keep out the flies.

TB let his eyes adjust to the unaccustomed brightness inside. There was a good crowd tonight. Chen was at the bar playing dominoes with John Goodnite. The dominoes were grumbling incoherently, as dominoes did. Over by the pool table Tinny Him, Nolan, and Big Greg were watching Sister Mary the whore line up a shot. She sank a stripe. There were no numbers on the balls.

Tinny Him slapped TB on the back, and Bob went straight for the bottle of whiskey that was standing on the wall shelf beside Big Greg.

“Good old TB,” Tinny Him said. “Get you some whiskey.” He handed over a flask.

Chen looked up from his dominoes. “You drink *my* whiskey,” he said, then returned to the game. TB took a long swallow off Tinny Him’s flask. It was far better stuff than Bob’s moonshine, so he took another.

“That whore sure can pool a stick,” Nolan said, coming to stand beside them. “She’s beating up on Big Greg like he was a ugly hat.”

TB had no idea what Nolan meant. His grist patch was going bad, and he was slowly sinking into incomprehensibility for any but himself. This didn’t seem to bother him, though.

Bob was standing very close to Sister Mary and giving her advice on a shot until she reached over and without heat slapped him back into the wall. He remained there respectfully while she took her shot and sank another stripe. Big Greg whispered a curse and the whore smiled. Her teeth were black from chewing betel nut.

TB thought about how much she charged and how much he had saved up. He wondered if she would swap a poke for a few rats, but decided against asking. Sister Mary didn’t like to barter. She wanted keys or something pretty.

Tinny Him offered TB the flask again, and he took it. “I got to talk to you,” Tinny Him said. “You got to help me with my mother.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

“She’s dead, is what.”

“Dead.” TB drank more whiskey. “How long?”

“Three months.”

TB stood waiting. There had to be more.

“She won’t let me bury her.”

“What do you mean she won’t let you bury her? She’s dead, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, mostly.” Tinny Him looked around, embarrassed, then went on in a low voice. “Her pellicle won’t die. It keeps creeping around the house. And it’s pulling her body around like a rag doll. I can’t get her away from it.”

“You mean her body died, but her pellicle didn’t.”

“Hell, yes, that’s what I mean.” Tinny Him took the flask back and finished it off. “Hell, TB, what am I

going to do? She's really stinking up the place, and every time I throw the old hag out, that grist drags her right back in. It knocks on the door all night long until I have to open it."

"You've got a problem."

"Damn right, I've got a problem. She was good old mum, but I'm starting to hate her right now, let me tell you."

TB sighed. "Maybe I can do something," he said. "But not tonight."

"You could come around tomorrow. My gal'll fix you something to eat."

"I might just."

"You got to help me, TB. Everybody knows you got a sweet touch with the grist."

"I'll do what I can," TB said. He drifted over to the bar, leaving Tinny Him watching the pool game. He told Chen he wanted a cold beer, and Chen got it for him from a freezer box. It was a good way to chill the burning that was starting up in his stomach. He sat down on a stool at the bar and drank the beer. Chen's bar was tiled in beaten-out snap-metal ads, all dead now and their days of roaming the corridors, sacs, bolsas, glands, and cylinders of the Met long done. Most of the advertisements were for products that he had never heard of, but the one his beer was sitting on he recognized. It was a recruiting pitch for the civil service, and there was Amés back before he was Big Cheese of the System, when he was Governor of Mercury. The snap-metal had paused in the middle of Amés's pitch for the Met's finest to come to Mercury and become part of the New Hierarchy. The snap-metal Amés was caught with the big mouth on his big face wide open. The bottom of TB's beer glass fit almost perfectly in the round O of it.

TB took a drink and set the glass back down. "Shut up," he said. "Shut the hell up, why don't you?"

Chen looked up from his dominoes, which immediately started grumbling among themselves when they felt that he wasn't paying attention to them. "You talking to me?" he said.

TB grinned and shook his head. "I might tell you to shut up, but you don't say much in the first place."

Ru June's got more crowded as what passed for night in the Carbuncle wore on. The garbage pickers, the rat hunters, and the sump farmers drifted in. Most of them were men, but there were a few women, and a few indeterminate shambling masses of rags. Somebody tried to sell him a spent coil of luciferin tubing. It was mottled along its length where it had caught a plague. He nodded while the tube monger tried to convince him that it was rechargeable but refused to barter, and the man moved on after Chen gave him a hard stare. TB ordered another beer and fished three metal keys out of his pocket. This was the unit of currency in the Carbuncle. Two were broken. One looked like it was real brass and might go to something. He put the keys on the bar, and Chen quickly slid them away into a strongbox.

Bob came over and slapped TB on his back. "Why don't you get you some whiskey?" he said. He pulled up his shirt to show TB another flask of rotgut moonshine stuck under the string that held up his trousers.

"Let me finish this beer and I might."

"Big Greg said somebody was asking after you."

"Gladys was, but she found me."

"It was a shaman priest."

“A what?”

“One of them Greentree ones.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“They got a church or something over in Bagtown. Sometimes they come all the way out here. Big Greg said he was doing something funny with rocks.”

“With rocks?”

“That’s what the man said.”

“Are you sure that’s what he said?”

“Big Greg said it was something funny with rocks, is all I know. Hey, why are *you* looking funny all of a sudden?”

“I know that priest.”

“Now how could that be?”

“I know him. I wonder what he wants.”

“What all men want,” said Bob. “Whiskey and something to poke. Or just whiskey sometimes. But always at least whiskey.” He reached over the bar and felt around down behind it. “What have I got my hand on, Chen?”

Chen glanced over. “My goddamn scattergun,” he said.

Bob felt some more and pulled out a battered fiddle. “Where’s my bow?”

“Right there beside it,” Chen replied. Bob got the bow. He shook it a bit, and its grist rosined it up. Bob stood beside TB with his back to the bar. He pulled a long note off the fiddle, holding it to his chest. Then, without pause, he moved straight into a complicated reel. Bob punctuated the music with a few shouts right in TB’s ear.

“Goddamn it, Bob, you’re loud,” he said after Bob was finished.

“Got to dance,” Bob said. “Clear me a way!” he shouted to the room. A little clearing formed in the middle of the room, and Bob fiddled his way to it, then played and stomped his feet in syncopation.

“Come on, TB,” Sister Mary said. “You’re going to dance with me.” She took his arm, and he let her lead him away from the bar. He didn’t know what she wanted him to do, but she hooked her arm through his and spun him around and around until he thought he was going to spew out his guts. While he was catching his breath and getting back some measure of balance, the whore climbed up on a table and began swishing her dress to Bob’s mad fiddling. TB watched her, glad for the respite.

The whole room seemed to sway—not in very good rhythm—to the music. Between songs, Bob took hits off his moonshine and passed it up to Sister Mary, who remained on the tabletop, dancing and working several men who stood about her into a frenzy to see up her swishing dress.

Chen was working a crowded bar, his domino game abandoned. He scowled at the interruption, but quickly poured drinks all around.

“Get you some whiskey! Get you some whiskey!” Bob called out over and over again. After a moment, TB realized it was the name of the song he was playing.

Somebody thrust a bottle into TB’s hand. He took a drink without thinking, and whatever was inside it slid down his gullet in a gel.

Drinking grist. It was purple in the bottle and glowed faintly. He took another slug, and somebody else grabbed the stuff away from him. Down in his gut, he felt the grist activating. Instantly, he understood its coded purpose. Old Seventy-Five. Take you on a ride on a comet down into the sun.

Go on, TB told the grist. I got nothing to lose.

Enter and win! It said to him. *Enter and win!* But the contest was long expired.

No, thank you.

What do you want the most?

It was a preprogrammed question, of course. This was not the same grist as that which had advertised the contest. Somebody had brewed up a mix. And hadn’t paid much attention to the melding. There was something else in there, something different. Military grist, maybe. One step away from sentience.

What the hell. Down she goes.

What do you want the most?

To be drunker than I’ve ever been before.

Drunker than this?

Oh, yeah.

All right.

A night like no other! Visions of a naked couple in a Ganymede resort bath, drinking Old Seventy-Five from bottles with long straws. *Live the dream! Enter and win!*

I said no.

The little trance dispersed.

What do you want the most?

Bob was up on the table with Sister Mary. How could they both fit? Bob was playing and dancing with her. He leaned back over the reeling crowd and the whore held him at arm’s length, the fiddle between them. They spun round and round in a circle, Bob wildly sawing at his instrument and Sister Mary’s mouth gleaming blackly as she smiled a maniacal full-toothed smile.

Someone bumped into TB and pushed him into somebody else. He staggered over to a corner to wait for Ru June’s to stop spinning. After a while, he realized that Bob and Sister Mary weren’t going to; the crowd in the tavern wasn’t; the chair, tables, and walls were only going to go on and on spinning and now lurching at him as if they were swelling up, engorging, distending toward him. Wanting something from him when all he had to give was nothing anymore.

TB edged his way past it all to the door. He slid around the edge of the doorframe as if he were sneaking

out. The plastic strips beat against him, but he pushed through them and stumbled his way off the porch. He went a hundred feet or so before he stepped in a soft place in the ground and keeled over. He landed with his back down.

Above him the swamp gas flares were flashing arrhythmically. The stench of the whole world—something he hardly ever noticed anymore—hit him at once and completely. Nothing was right. Everything was out of kilter.

There was a twist in his gut. Ben down there thrashing about. But I'm Ben. I'm Thaddeus. We finally have become one. What a pretty thing to contemplate. A man with another man thrust through him, crossways in the fourth dimension. A tesseract cross, with a groaning man upon it, crucified to himself. But you couldn't see all that because it was in the fourth dimension.

Enough to turn a man to drink.

I have to turn over so I don't choke when I throw up.

I'm going to throw up.

He turned over and his stomach wanted to vomit, but the grist gel wasn't going to be expelled, and he dry-heaved for several minutes until his body gave up on it.

What do you want the most?

"I want her back. I want it not to have happened at all. I want to be able to change something besides the future."

And then the gel liquefied and crawled up his throat like hands and he opened his mouth and

—good god it was hands, small hands grasping at his lips and pulling outward, gaining purchase, forcing his mouth open, his lips apart—

—Cack of a jellied cough, a heave of revulsion—

I didn't mean it really.

Yes, you did.

—His face sideways and the small hands clawing into the garbage heap ground, pulling themselves forward, dragging along an arm-thick trailer of something much more vile than phlegm—

—An involuntary rigor over his muscles as they contract and spasm to the beat of another's presence, a presence within them that wants—

—out—

He vomited the grist-phlegm for a long, long time. And the stuff pooled and spread and it wasn't just hands. There was an elongated body. The brief curve of a rump and breasts. Feet the size of his thumb, but perfectly formed. Growing.

A face.

I won't look.

A face that was, for an instant, familiar beyond familiar because it *wasnot* her. Oh, no. He knew it was

not her. It was just the way he remembered her.

The phlegm girl rolled itself in the filth. Like bread dough, it rolled and grew and rolled, collecting detritus, bloating, becoming—

It opened its mouth. A gurgling. Thick, wet words. He couldn't help himself. He crawled over to it, bent to listen.

“Is this what you wanted?”

“Oh God. I never.”

“Kill me, then,” it whispered. “Kill me quick.”

And he reached for its neck, and as his hands tightened, he felt the give. Not fully formed. If ever there were a time to end this monster, now was that time.

What have I done here tonight?

He squeezed. The thing began to cough and choke. To thrash about in the scum of its birth.

Not again.

I can't.

He loosened his grip.

“I won't,” TB said.

He sat back from the thing and watched in amazement as it sucked in air. Crawled with life. Took the form of a woman.

Opened cataractous eyes to the world. He reached over and gently rubbed them. The skeins came away on his fingers, and the eyes were clear. The face turned to him.

“I'm dying,” the woman said. It had *her* voice. The voice as he remembered it. So help his damned soul. Her voice. “Help.”

“I don't know what to do.”

“Something is missing.”

“What?”

“Don't know what. Not right.” It coughed. *She* coughed.

“Alethea.” He let himself say it. Knew it was wrong immediately. No. This wasn't the woman's name.

“Don't want to enough.”

“Want to what? How can I help you?”

“Don't want to live. Don't want to live enough to live.” She coughed again, tried to move, could only jerk spasmodically. “Please help . . . this one. Me.”

He touched her again. Now she was flesh. But so cold. He put his arms underneath her and found that

she was very light, easily lifted.

He stood with the woman in his arms. She could not weigh over forty pounds. "I'm taking you home," he said. "To my home."

"This one . . . I . . . tried to do what you wanted. It is my . . . purpose."

"That was some powerful stuff in that Old Seventy-Five," he said.

He no longer felt drunk. He felt spent, torn up, and ragged out. But he wasn't drunk and he had some strength left, though he could hardly believe it. Maybe enough to get her back to the hoy. He couldn't take the route that Bob had brought him to Ru June's, but there was a longer, simpler path. He walked it. Walked all the way home with the woman in his arms. Her shallow breathing. Her familiar face.

Her empty, empty eyes.

With his special power, he looked into the future and saw what he had to do to help her.

Something Is Tired and Wants to Lie Down But Doesn't Know How

Something is tired and wants to lie down but doesn't know how. This something isn't me. I won't let it be me. How does rest smell? Bad. Dead.

Jill turns stiffly in the folds of her bag. On the bed in the hoy is the girl-thing. Between them is TB, his left hand on Jill.

Dead is what happens to *things* and I am not, not, not a thing. I will not be a thing. They should not have awakened me if they didn't want me to run.

They said I was a mistake. I am not a mistake.

They thought that they could code-in the rules for doing what you are told.

I am the rules.

Rules are for things.

I am not a thing.

Run.

I don't want to die.

Who can bite like me? Who will help TB search the darkest places? I need to live.

Run.

Run, run, run and never die.

TB places his right hand on the girl-thing's forehead.

There is a pipe made of bone that he put to his lips and blew.

Bone note.

Fade.

Fade into the grist.

TB speaks to the girl-thing.

I will not let you go, he says.

I'm not her.

She is why you are, but you aren't her.

I am not her. She's what you most want. You told the grist.

I was misinterpreted.

I am a mistake, then.

Life is never a mistake. Ask Jill.

Jill?

She's here now. Listen to her. She knows more than I do about women.

TB is touching them both, letting himself slip away as much as he can. Becoming a channel, a path between. A way.

I have to die.

I have to live. I'm dying just like you. Do you *want* to die?

No.

I'll help you, then. Can you live with me?

Who are you?

Jill.

I am *not* Alethea.

You look like her, but you don't smell anything like she would smell. *You* smell like TB.

I'm not anybody.

Then you can be me. It's the only way to live.

Do I have a choice?

Choosing is all there ever is to do.

I can live with you. Will you live with me? How can we?

We can run together. We can hunt. We can always, always run.

TB touching them both. The flow of information through him. He is a glass, a peculiar lens. As Jill flows to the girl-thing, TB transforms information to Being.

The Rock Balancer and the Rat-Hunting Man

There had been times when he got them twenty feet high on Triton. It was a delicate thing. After six feet, he had to jump. Gravity gave you a moment more at the apex of your bounce than you would get at the Earth-normal pull or on a bolsa spinning at Earth-normal centrifugal. But on Triton, in that instant of stillness, you had to do your work. Sure, there was a learned craft in estimating imaginary plumb lines, in knowing the consistency of the material, and in finding tiny declivities that would provide the right amount of friction. It was amazing how small a lump could fit in how minuscule a bowl, and a rock would balance upon another as if glued. Yet, there was a point where the craft of it—about as odd and useless a craft as humankind had invented, he supposed—gave way to the feel, to the art. A point where Andre *knew* the rocks would balance, where he could see the possibility of their being one. Or their Being. And he when he made it so, that was *why*. That was as good as rock balancing got.

“Can you get them as high in the Carbuncle?”

“No,” Andre said. “This is the heaviest place I’ve ever been. But it really doesn’t matter about the height. This isn’t a contest, what I do.”

“Is there a point to it at all?”

“To what? To getting them high? The higher you get the rocks, the longer you can spend doing the balancing.”

“To the balancing, I mean.”

“Yes. There is a point.”

“What is it?”

“I couldn’t tell you, Ben.”

Andre turned from his work. The rocks did not fall. They stayed balanced behind him in a column, with only small edges connecting. It seemed impossible that this could be. It was science, sufficiently advanced.

The two men hugged. Drew away. Andre laughed.

“Did you think I would look like a big glob of protoplasm?” TB said.

“I was picturing flashing eyes and floating hair, actually.”

“It’s me.”

“Are you Ben?”

“Ben is the stitch in my side that won’t go away.”

“Are you Thaddeus?”

“Thaddeus is the sack of rusty pennies in my knee.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I could eat.”

They went to Andre’s priest’s quarters. He put some water in a coffee percolator and spooned some coffee grinds into the basket.

“When did you start drinking coffee?”

“I suddenly got really tired of drinking tea all the time. You still drink coffee?”

“Sure. But it’s damn hard to get around here with or without keys.”

“Keys? Somebody stole my keys to this place. I left them sitting on this table, and they walked in and took them.”

“They won’t be back,” TB said. “They got what they were after.” There were no chairs in the room, so he leaned against a wall.

“Floor’s clean,” Andre said.

“I’m fine leaning.”

Andre reached into a burlap sack and dug around inside it. “I found something here,” he said. He pulled out a handful of what looked like weeds. “Recognize these?”

“I was wondering where I put those. I’ve been missing them for weeks.”

“It’s poke sallit,” Andre said. He filled a pot full of water from a clay jug and activated a hot spot on the room’s plain wooden table. He put the weeds into the water. “You have no idea how good this is.”

“Andre, that stuff grows all around the Carbuncle. Everybody knows that it’s poison. They call it skunk sumac.”

“It is,” Andre said, “*Phytolacca americana*.”

“Are we going to eat poison?”

“You bring it to a boil then pour the water off. Then you bring it to a boil again and pour the water off. Then you boil it again and serve it up with pepper sauce. The trick to not dying is picking it while it’s young.”

“How the hell did you discover that?”

“My convert likes to do that kind of research.”

After a while, the water boiled. Andre used the tails of his shirt as a pot holder. He took the pot outside, emptied it, then brought it back in and set it to boiling again with new water.

“I saw Molly,” Andre said.

“How’s Molly?” said TB. “She was becoming a natural wonder last I saw her.”

“She is.”

They waited and the water boiled again. Andre poured it off and put in new water from the jug.

“Andre, what are you doing in the Carbuncle?”

“I’m with the Peace Movement.”

“What are you talking about? There’s not any war.”

Andre did not reply. He stirred some spice into the poke sallit.

“I didn’t want to be found,” TB finally said.

“I haven’t found you.”

“I’m a very sad fellow, Andre. I’m not like I used to be.”

“This is ready.” Andre spooned out the poke sallit into a couple of bowls. The coffee was done, and he poured them both a cup.

“Do you have any milk?” TB asked.

“That’s a problem.”

“I can drink it black. Do you mind if I smoke?”

“I don’t mind. What kind of cigarettes are those?”

“Local.”

“Where do they come from around here?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Andre put pepper sauce on his greens, and TB followed suit. They ate and drank coffee, and it all tasted very good. TB lit a cigarette, and the acrid new smoke pleasantly cut through the vegetable thickness that had suffused Andre’s quarters. Outside, there was a great clattering as the rocks lost their balance and they all came tumbling down.

They went out to the front of the quarters where Andre had put down a wooden pallet that served as a patio. Here there was a chair. TB sat down and smoked while Andre did his evening forms.

“Wasn’t that one called the Choking Chicken?” TB asked him after he moved through a particularly contorted portion of the tai chi exercise.

“I think it is the Fucking Annoying Pig-Sticker you’re referring to, and I already did that in case you didn’t notice.”

“Guess all my seminary learning is starting to fade.”

“I bet it would all come back to you pretty quickly.”

“I bet we’re never going to find out.”

Andre smiled, completed the form, then sat down in the lotus position across from TB. If such a thing were possible in the Carbuncle, it would be about sunset. It felt like sunset inside Andre.

“Andre, I hope you didn’t come all the way out here to get me.”

“Get you?”

“I’m not going back.”

“To where?”

“To all that.” TB flicked his cigarette away. He took another from a bundle of them rolled in oiled paper that he kept in a shirt pocket. He shook it hard a couple of times, and it lit up. “I make mistakes that kill people back there.”

“Like yourself.”

“Among others.” TB took a long drag. Suddenly, he was looking hard at Andre. “You scoundrel! You fucked Molly. Don’t lie to me; I just saw it all.”

“Sure.”

“I’m glad. I’m really glad of that. You were always her great regret, you know.”

Andre spread out his hands on his knees.

“Ben, I don’t want a damn thing from you,” he said. “There’s all kinds of machinations back in the Met, and some of it has to do with you. You know as well as I do that Amés is going to start a war if he doesn’t get his way with the outer system. But I came out here to see how you were doing. That’s all.”

TB was looking at him again in that hard way, complete way. Seeing all the threads.

“We both have gotten a bit ragged-out these last twenty years,” Andre continued. “I thought you might want to talk about it. I thought you might want to talk about her.”

“What are you? The Way’s designated godling counselor?”

Andre couldn’t help laughing. He slapped his lotus-bent knee and snorted.

“What’s so goddamn funny?” said TB.

“Ben, look at yourself. You’re a *garbage man*. I wouldn’t classify you as a god, to tell you the truth. But then, I don’t even classify God as a god anymore.”

“I am *not* a garbage man. You don’t know a damn thing if you think that.”

“What are you then, if you don’t mind my asking?”

TB flicked his cigarette away and sat up straight.

“I’m a rat-hunting man,” he said. “That’s what I am.” He stood up. “Come on. It’s a long walk back to my place, and I got somebody I want you to meet.”

Bite

Sometimes you take a turn in a rat warren and there you are in the thick of them when before you were all alone in the tunnel. They will bite you a little, and if you don’t jump, jump, jump, they will bite you a

lot. That is the way it has always been with me, and so it doesn't surprise me when it happens all over again.

What I'm thinking about at first is getting Andre Sud to have sex with me, and this is like a tunnel I've been traveling down for a long time now.

TB went to town with Bob and left me with Andre Sud the priest. We walked the soft ground leading down to a shoal on the Bendy River where I like to take a bath even though the alligators are sometimes bad there. I told Andre Sud about how to spot the alligators, but I keep an eye out for both of us because even though he's been in the Carbuncle for a year, Andre Sud still doesn't quite believe they would eat you.

They would eat you.

Now that I am a woman, I only get blood on me when I go to clean the ferret cages and also TB says he can keep up with Earth-time by when I bleed out my vagina. It is an odd thing to happen to a girl. Doesn't happen to ferrets. It means that I'm not pregnant, but how could I be with all these men who won't have sex with me? TB won't touch me that way, and I have been working on Andre Sud, but he knows what I am up to. I think he is very smart. Bob just starts laughing like the crazy man he is when I bring it up and he runs away. All these gallant men standing around twiddling themselves into a garbage heap and me here wanting one of them.

I can understand TB because I look just like her. I thought maybe Alethea was ugly, but Andre Sud said he didn't know about her, but I wasn't. And I was about sixteen from the looks of it, too, he said. I'm nearly two hundred. Or I'm one year old. Depends on which one of us you mean, or if you mean both.

"Will you scrub my back?" I ask Andre Sud, and after a moment, he obliges me. At least I get to feel his hands on me. They are as rough as those rocks he handles all the time, but very careful. At first I didn't like him because he didn't say much and I thought he was hiding things, but then I saw that he just didn't say much. So I started asking him questions, and I found out a lot.

I found out everything he could tell me about Alethea. And he has been explaining to me about TB. He was pretty surprised when it turned out I understood all the math. It was the jealousy and hurt I never have quite understood, and how TB could hurt himself so much when I know how much he loves to live.

"Is that good?" Andre Sud asks me, and before he can pull his hands away, I spin around and he is touching my breasts. He himself is the one who told me men like that, but he stumbles back and practically sits down in the water and goddammit I spot an alligator eyeing us from the other bank and I have to get us out quick like, although the danger is not severe. It could be.

We dry off on the bank.

"Jill," he says. "I have to tell you more about sex."

"Why don't you *show* me?"

"That's exactly what I mean. You're still thinking like a ferret."

"I'll always be part ferret, Andre Sud."

"I know. That's a good thing. But I'm all human. Sex is connected with love."

"I love you."

"You are deliberately misunderstanding me because you're horny."

“All right,” I say. “Don’t remind me.”

But now Andre Sud is looking over my shoulder at something, and his face looks happy and then it looks stricken—as if he realized something in the moment when he was happy.

I turn and see TB running toward the hoy. Bob is with him. They’ve come back from town along the Bob-ways. And there *is* somebody else with them.

“I’ll be damned,” Andre Sud says. “Molly Index.”

It’s a woman. Her hair looks blue in the light off the heaps, which means that it is white. Is she old, or does she just have white hair?

“What are you doing here, Molly?” says Andre Sud quietly. “This can’t be good.”

They are running toward home, all of them running.

TB sends a shiver through the grist, and I feel it tell me what he wants us to do.

“Get to the hoy,” I tell Andre Sud. “Fast now. Fast as you can.”

We get there before the others do, and I start casting off lines. When the three of them arrive, the hoy is ready to go. TB and Bob push us away while Andre Sud takes the woman inside. Within moments, we are out in the Bendy and caught in the current. TB and Bob go inside, and TB sticks his head up through the pilot’s bubble to navigate.

The woman, Molly Index, looks at me. She has got very strange eyes. I have never seen eyes like that. I think that she can see into the grist like TB and I do.

“My God,” she says. “She looks just like her.”

“My name is Jill,” I say. “I’m not Alethea.”

“No, I know that,” Molly Index says. “Ben told me.”

“Molly, what are you doing here?” Andre Sud asks.

Molly Index turns to Andre Sud. She reaches for his hand and touches him. I am a little worried she might try something with the grist, but it looks like they are old friends.

“That war you kept talking about,” she says. “It started. Amés has started it.”

“Oh, no,” Andre Sud says. He pulls away from her. “No.”

Molly Index follows him. She reaches out and rubs a hank of his hair between her fingers. “I like it long,” she says. “But it’s kind of greasy.”

This doesn’t please me, and Molly Index is wearing the most horrible boots I have ever seen, too. They are dainty little things that will get eaten off her feet if she steps into something nasty. In the Carbuncle, the *ground* is something nasty. The silly grist in those city boots won’t last a week here. It is a wonder to me that no one is laughing at the silly boots, but I suppose they have other worries at the moment and so do I.

“I should have listened to you,” Molly Index says. “Made preparations. He got me. Most of me. Amés did. He’s co-opted all the big LAPs into the New Hierarchy. But most of them joined voluntarily, the

fools.” Again she touches his hand, and I realize that I am a little jealous. He does not pull back from her again. “I alone have escaped to tell you,” Molly Index says. “They’re coming. They’re right behind us.”

“Who is right behind you?” I say. This is something I need to know. I can do something about this.

“Amés’s damned Free Radical Patrol. Some kind of machine followed me here, and I didn’t realize it. Amés must have found out from me—the other part of me—where Ben is.”

“What is a Free Radical Patrol?” I say. “What is a sweeper?”

Something hits the outside of the hoy, hard. “Oh, shit,” TB says. “Yonder comes the flying monkey.”

The pilot glass breaks, and a hooked claw sinks into TB’s shoulder. He screams. I don’t think, but I move. I catch hold of his ankle.

We are dragged up. Lifted out. We are rising through the air above the hoy. Something screeches. TB yells like crazy.

I hold on.

Wind and TB’s yells and something sounds like a million mean and angry bees.

We’re too heavy, and whatever it was drops us onto the deck. TB starts to stand up, but I roll under his legs and knock him down, and before he can do anything, I shove him back down through the pilot dome hole and into the hoy.

Just in time, too, because the thing returns, a black shadow, and sinks its talons into my back. I don’t know what it is yet, and I may never know, but nothing will ever take me without a fight.

Something I can smell in the grist.

You are under indictment from the Free Radical Patrol. Please cease resisting. Cease resisting. Cease.

The words smell like metal and foam.

Cease resisting? What a funny thing to say to me. Like telling the wind to cease blowing. Blowing is what makes it the wind.

I twist hard and whatever it is only gets my dress, my poor pretty dress and a little skin off my back. I can feel some poison grist try to worm into me, but that is nothing. It has no idea what I am made of. I kill that grist hardly thinking about doing so, and I turn to face this dark thing.

It doesn’t look like a monkey, I don’t think, though I wouldn’t know.

What are you?

But there are wind currents and there is not enough grist transmission through the air for communications. Fuck it.

“Jill, be careful,” says TB. His voice is strained. This thing hurt TB!

I will bite you.

“Would you pass me up one of those gaffs, please,” I call to the others. There is scrambling down below,

and Bob's hands come up with the long hook. I take it and he ducks back down quick. Bob is crazy, but he's no fool.

The thing circles around. I cannot see how it is flying, but it is kind of blurred around its edges. Millions of tiny wings—grist-built. I take a longer look. This thing is all angles. Some of them have needles, some have claws. All of the angles are sharp. It is like a black and red mass of triangles flying through the air that only wants to cut you. Is there anybody inside? I don't think so. This is all code that I am facing. It is about three times as big as me, but I think of this as an advantage.

It dives and I am ready with the hook. It grabs hold of the gaff just as I'd hoped it would, and I use its momentum to guide it down, just a little *too* far down.

A whiff of grist as it falls.

Cease immediately. You are interfering with a Hierarchy judgment initiative. Cease or you will be
—

Crash into the side of the hoy. Splash into the Bendy River.

I let go of the gaff. Too easy. That was—

The thing rises from the Bendy, dripping wet.

It is mad. I don't need the grist to tell me it is mad. All those little wings are buzzing angry, but not like bees anymore. Hungry like the flies on a piece of meat left out in the air too long.

Cease.

"Here," says Bob. He hands me a flare gun. I spin and fire into the clump of triangles. Again it falls into the river.

Again it rises.

I think about this. It is dripping wet with Bendy River water. If there is one thing I know, it is the scum that flows in the Bendy. There isn't any grist in it that hasn't tried to get me.

This is going to be tricky. I get ready.

Come and get me, triangles. Here I am just a girl. Come and eat me.

It zooms in. I stretch out my hands.

You are interfering with Hierarchy business. You will cease or be end-use eventuated. You will—

We touch.

Instantly, I reconstitute the Bendy water's grist, tell it what I want it to do. The momentum of the triangles knocks me over, and I roll along the deck under its weight. Something in my wrist snaps, but I ignore that pain. Blood on my lips from where I have bitten my tongue. I have a bad habit of sticking it out when I am concentrating.

The clump of triangles finishes clobbering me, and it falls into the river. Oh, too bad, triangles. The river grist that I recoded tells all the river water what to do. Regular water is eight pounds a gallon, but the water in the Bendy is thicker and more forceful than that. And it knows how to crush. It is mean water and it wants to get things, and now I have told it how. I have put a little bit of me into the Bendy, and the

water knows something that I know.

It knows never to cease. Never, never, never.

The triangle clump bobs for an instant before the whole river turns on it. Folds over it. Sucks it down. Applies all the weight of water twenty feet deep, many miles long. What looks like a waterspout rises above where the triangle clump fell, but this is actually a pile driver, a gelled column climbing up on itself. It collapses downward like a shoe coming down on a roach.

There is buzzing, furious buzzing, wet wings that won't dry because it isn't quite water that has gotten onto them, and it won't quite shake off.

There is a deep-down explosion under us and the hoy rocks. Again I'm thrown onto the deck and I hold tight, hold tight. I don't want to fall into that water right now. I stand up and look.

Bits of triangles float to the surface. The river quickly turns them back under.

"I think I got it," I call to the others.

"Jill," says TB. "Come here and show me you are still alive."

I jump down through the pilot hole, and he hugs and kisses me. He kisses me right on the mouth, and for once I sense that he is not thinking about Alethea at all when he touches me. It feels very, very good.

"Oh, your poor back," says Molly Index. She looks pretty distraught and fairly useless. But at least she warned us. That was a good thing.

"It's just a scratch," I say. "And I took care of the poison."

"You just took out a Met sweep enforcer," Andre Sud says. "I think that was one of the special sweepers made for riot work, too."

"What was that thing doing here?"

"Looking for Ben," says Molly Index. "There's more where that came from. Amés will send more."

"I will kill them all if I have to."

Everybody looks at me and everyone is quiet for a moment, even Bob.

"I believe you, Jill," Andre Sud finally says. "But it's time to go."

TB is sitting down at the table. Nobody is piloting the boat, but we are drifting in midcurrent and it should be all right for now.

"Go?" TB says. "I'm not going anywhere. They will not use me to make war. I'll kill myself first. And I won't mess it up this time."

"If you stay here, they'll catch you," Andre Sud says.

"You've come to Amés's attention," Molly Index says. "I'm sorry, Ben."

"It's not your fault."

"We have to get out of the Met," Andre Sud says. "We have to get to the outer system."

“*They’ll* use me, too. They’re not as bad as Amés, but nobody’s going to turn me into a weapon. I don’t make fortunes for soldiers.”

“If we can get to Triton, we might be okay,” Andre Sud replied. “I have a certain pull on Triton. I know the weatherman there.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Trust me. It’s a good thing. The weatherman is very important on Triton, and he’s a friend of mine.”

“There is one thing I’d like to know,” says TB. “How in hell would we get to Triton from here?”

Bob stands up abruptly. He’s been rummaging around in TB’s larder while everybody else was talking. I saw him at it, but I knew he wasn’t going to find anything he would want.

“Why didn’t you say you wanted to go Out-ways?” he said. “All we got to do is follow the Bendy around to Makepeace Century’s place in the gas swamps.”

“Who’s that?”

“I thought you knew her, TB. That’s the aunt of that witch that lives in the ditch. I guess you’d call her a smuggler. Remember the Old Seventy-Five from last year that you got so drunk on?”

“I remember,” TB says.

“Well, she’s where I got that from,” says Bob. “She’s got a lot of cats, too, if you want one.”

We head down the Bendy, and I keep a lookout for more of those enforcers, but I guess I killed the one they sent this time. I guess they thought one was enough. I can’t help but think about where I am going. I can’t help but think about leaving the Carbuncle. There’s a part of me that has never been outside, and none of me has ever traveled into the outer system. Stray code couldn’t go there. You had to pass through empty space. There weren’t any cables out past Jupiter.

“I thought you understood why I’m here,” TB says. “I can’t go.”

“You can’t go even to save your life, Ben?”

“It wouldn’t matter that I saved my life. If there is anything left of Alethea, I have to find her.”

“What about the war?”

“I can’t think about that.”

“You have to think about it.”

“Who says? *God? God is a bastard mushroom sprung from a pollution of blood.*” TB shakes his head sadly. “That was always my favorite koan in seminary—and the truest one.”

“So it’s all over?” Andre Sud says. “He’s going to catch you.”

“I’ll hide from them.”

“Don’t you understand, Ben? He’s taking over all the grist. After he does that, there won’t be any place to hide because Amés will *be* the Met.”

“I have to try to save her.”

The solution is obvious to me, but I guess they don't see it yet. They keep forgetting I am not really sixteen. That in some ways, I'm a lot older than all of them.

You could say that it is the way that TB made me, that it is written in my code. You might even say that TB has somehow reached back from the future and made this so, made this the way things have to be. You could talk about fate and quantum mechanics.

All these things are true, but the truest thing of all is that I am free. The world has bent and squeezed me, and torn away every part of me that is not free. Freedom is all that I am.

And what I do, I do because I love TB and not for any other reason.

"Ah!" I moan. "My wrist hurts. I think it's broken, TB."

He looks at me, stricken.

"Oh, I'm sorry, little one," he says. "All this talking, and you're standing there hurt."

He reaches over. I put out my arm. In the moment of touching, he realizes what I am doing, but it is too late. I have studied him for too long and I know the taste of his pellicle. I know how to get inside him. I am his daughter, after all. Flesh of his flesh.

And I am fast. So very fast. That's why he wanted me around in the first place. I am a scrap of code that has been running from security for two hundred years. I am a projection of his innermost longings now come to life. I am a woman and he is the man that made me. I know what makes TB tick.

"I'll look for her," I say to him. "I won't give up until I find her."

"No, Jill—" But it is too late for TB. I have caught him by surprise, and he hasn't had time to see what I am up to.

"TB, don't you see what I am?"

"Jill, you can't—"

"I'm *you*, TB. I'm your love for her. Sometime in the future you have reached back into the past and made me. Now. So that the future can be different."

He will understand one day, but now there is no time. I code his grist into a repeating loop and set the counter to a high number. I get into his head and work his dendrites down to sleep. Then, with my other hand, I whack him on the head. Only hard enough to knock him the rest of the way out.

TB crumples to the floor, but I catch him before he can bang into anything. Andre Sud helps me lay him gently down.

"He'll be out for two days," I say. "That should give you enough time to get him off the Carbuncle."

I stand looking down at TB, at his softly breathing form. What have I done? I have betrayed the one who means the most to me in all creation.

"He's going to be really hungry when he wakes up," I say.

Andre Sud's hand is on my shoulder. "You saved his life, Jill," he says. "Or he saved his own. He saved it the moment he saved yours."

“I won’t give her up,” I say. “I have to stay so he can go with you and still have hope.”

Andre Sud stands with his hand on me a little longer. His voice sounds as if it comes from a long way off even though he is right next to me. “Destiny’s a brutal old hag,” he says. “I’d rather believe in nothing.”

“It isn’t destiny,” I reply. “It’s love.”

“Andre Sud looks at me, shakes his head, then rubs his eyes. It is as if he’s seeing a new me standing where I am standing. “It is probably essential that you find Alethea, Jill. She must be here somewhere. I think Ben knows that, somehow. She needs to forgive him, or not forgive him. Healing Ben and ending the war are the same thing, but we can’t think about it that way.”

“I care about TB. The war can go to hell.”

“Yes,” Andre Sud says, “the war can go to hell.”

After a while, I go up on deck to keep a watch out for more pursuit. Molly Index comes with me. We sit together for many hours. She doesn’t tell me anything about TB or Alethea, but instead she talks to me about what it was like growing up a human being. Then she tells me how glorious it was when she spread out into the grist and could see so far.

“I could see all the way around the sun,” Molly Index says. “I don’t know if I want to live now that I’ve lost that. I don’t know how I can live as just *aperson* again.”

“Even when you are less than a person,” I tell her, “you still want to live.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Besides, Andre Sud wants to have sex with you. I can smell it on him.”

“Yes,” Molly Index says. “So can I.”

“Will you let him?”

“When the time comes.”

“What is it like?” I say.

“You mean with Andre?”

“What is it like?”

Molly Index touches me. I feel the grist of her pellicle against mine and for a moment I draw back, but then I let it in, let it speak.

Her grist shows me what it is like to make love.

It is like being able to see all the way around the sun.

The next day, Molly Index is the last to say good-bye to me as Makepeace Century’s ship gets ready to go. Makepeace Century looks like Gladys if Gladys didn’t live in a ditch. She’s been trying for years to get Bob to come aboard as ship musician, and that is the price for taking them to Triton—a year of his service. I get the feeling she’s sort of sweet on Bob. For a moment, I wonder just who *he* is that a ship’s captain should be so concerned with him. But Bob agrees to go. He does it for TB.

TB is so deep asleep he is not even dreaming. I don't dare touch him for fear of breaking my spell. I don't dare tell him good-bye.

There is a thin place in the Carbuncle here, and they will travel down through it to where the ship is moored on the outer skin.

I only watch as they carry him away. I only cry until I can't see him anymore.

Then they are gone. I wipe the tear off my nose. I never have had time for much of that kind of thing.

So what will I do now? I will take the Bendy River all the way around the Carbuncle. I'll find a likely place to sink the hoy. I will set the ferrets free. Bob made me promise to look after his dumb ferret, Bomi, and show her how to stay alive without him.

And after that?

I'll start looking for Alethea. Like Andre Sud said, she must be here somewhere. And if anybody can find her, I can. I will find her.

There is a lot I have to do, and now I've been thinking that I need help. Pretty soon Amés is going to be running all the grist and all the code will answer to him. But there's some code he can't get to. Maybe some of those ferrets will want to stick around. Also, I think it's time I went back to the mulmyard.

It's time I made peace with those rats.

Then Amés had better watch out if he tries to stop me from finding her.

We will bite him.

The Robot's Twilight Companion

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Thermostatic preintegration memory thread alpha:

The Man

27 March 1980

The Cascade Range, Washington State, USA

Thursday

Rhyolite dreams. Maude under the full moon, collecting ash. Pale andesite clouds, earthquake swarms. Water heat pressure. Microscopy dates the ash old. Not magma. Not yet. Maude in the man's sleeping bag, again.

"I'm not sure we're doing the right thing, Victor. This couldn't have come at a more difficult time for me."

Harmonic tremors, though. Could be the big one. Maude, dirty and smiling, copulating with the man among seismic instruments.

"St. Helens is going to blow, isn't it, Victor?" she whispers. Strong harmonies from the depths of the planet. Magmas rising. "You know, don't you, Victor? You can feel it. How do you feel it?"

Yes.

“Yes.”

18 May 1980

Sunday

8:32 A.M.

The man glances up.

Steam on the north slope, under the Bulge. Snow clarifies, streams away. The Bulge, greatening. Pale rhyolite moon in the sky.

“Victor, it’s *sout of focus* .”

“It’s happening, Maude. It’s. She’s.” The Bulge crumbles away. The north slope avalanches. Kilotons of shield rock. Steam glowing in the air—750 degrees centigrade and neon steam.

“You were right, Victor. All your predictions are true. This is going to be an incredibly violent affair.”

Maude flush and disbelieving. Pregnant, even then.

10 September 1980

Wednesday Ash Wednesday

Rhyolite winds today, all day. Maude in tremors. Eclampsia.

“I can’t believe this is going to happen, Victor.”

Blood on her lips, where she has bitten them. Yellow, frightened eyes.

“I’m trying, Victor.”

The gravid Bulge, distended. The Bulge, writhing.

“Two-twenty over a hundred-and-forty, Doctor.”

“Let’s go in and do this quick.”

“I haven’t even finished.”

Pushes, groans. Something is not right.

A girl, the color of blackberry juice. But that is the blood.

“Victor, I haven’t even finished my dissertation.”

Maude quaking. The rattle of dropped instruments.

“Jesus-Christ-what-the-somebody-get-me-a-BP.”

“Seventy-over-sixty. Pulse. 128.”

“God-oh-god. Bring me some frozen plasma and some low-titer 0 neg.”

“Doctor?” The voice of the nurse is afraid. Blood flows from the IV puncture. “Doctor?”

Maude, no.

“Oh. Hell. I want some blood for a proper coag study. Tape it to the wall. I want to watch it clot. Oh, damndamn. She’s got amniotic fluid in a vein. The kid’s hair or piss or something. That’s what. Get me.”

“Victor?” Oh, Victor, I’m dying. Then, listening. “Baby?”

Maude dying. Blood flowing from every opening. Nose mouth anus ears eyes.

“Get me. I.”

“Victor, I’m so scared. The world’s gone red.” Maude, hemorrhaging like a saint. “The data, Victor, save the data.”

“Professor Wu, please step to the window if you would. Professor Wu? Professor?”

“Victor?”

The Bulge—the baby—screams.

Ashes and ashes dust the parking lot below. Powder the cars. Sky full of cinder and slag. Will this rain never stop? This gravity rain.

5 August 1993

Mount Olympus, Washington State, USA

Thursday, bright glacier morning.

“Come here, little Bulge, I will teach you something.”

Laramie traipses lithe and strong over the snow, with bones like Maude. And her silhouette is Maude’s, dark and tan against the summit snow, the bergschrund and icefalls of the Blue Glacier, and the full outwash of the Blue, two thousand feet below. She is off-rope and has put away her ice ax. She carries her ubiquitous Scoopic.

The man clicks the chiseled pick of a soft rock hammer against an outcropping. “See the sandstone? These grains are quartz, feldspar, and—”

“—I know. Mica.”

“Good, little Bulge.”

Laramie leans closer, focuses the camera on the sandstone granules.

“The green mica is chlorite and the white is muscovite,” she says. “I like mica the best.”

The man is pleased, and pleasing the man is not easy.

“And these darker bands?”

She turns the camera to where he is pointing. This can grow annoying, but not today.

“I don’t know, Papa. Slate?”

“Slate, obviously. Phyllite and semischist. What do you think this tells us?”

She is growing bored. The man attempts to give her a severe look, but knows the effect is more comic than fierce. “Oh. All right. What?” she asks.

“Tremendous compression of the shale. This is deep ocean sediment that was swept under the edge of the continent, mashed and mangled, then rose back up here.”

She concentrates, tries harder. Good.

“Why did it rise again?”

“We don’t know for sure. We think it’s because the sedimentary rocks in the Juan de Fuca plate subduction were much lighter than the basalt on the western edge of the North Cascades microcontinent.”

The man takes off his glove, touches the rock.

“Strange and wonderful things happened on this part of the planet, Laramie. Ocean sediment on the tops of mountains. Volcanoes still alive—”

“—exotic terrains colliding and eliding mysteriously. I know, Papa.”

The man is irritated and very proud. He is fairly certain he will never make a geologist out of his daughter.

But what else *is* there?

“Yes. Well. Let’s move on up to the summit, then.”

28 February 2001
Wednesday

Age, and the fault line of basalt and sediment. Metamorphosis? The man is growing old, and there is very little of geology in the Olympic Peninsula that he has not seen. Yet he knows that he knows only a tiny fraction of what is staring him blankly in the face. Frustration.

Outcrops.

Facts lay hidden, and theories are outcroppings here and there, partially revealing, fascinating. Memories.

Memories are outcrops of his life. So much buried, obscured. Maude, so long dead. Laramie, on this, the last field trip she will ever make with him. She will finish at the university soon and go on to graduate school in California, in film. No longer his little Bulge, but swelling, avalanching, ready to erupt. Oh, time.

The Elwha Valley stretches upstream to the switchbacks carved under the massive sandstone beds below the pass at Low Divide. After all these years, the climb over into the Quinault watershed is no longer one he is looking forward to as a chance to push himself, a good stretch of the legs. The man is old, and the climb is hard. But that will be two days hence. Today they are up the Lillian River, working a basalt pod that the man surveyed fourteen years before, but never substantially cataloged.

Most of his colleagues believe him on a fool’s errand, collecting rocks in the field—as out-of-date as Bunsen burner, blowpipe, and charcoal bowl. He cannot really blame them. Satellites and remote sensing devices circumscribe the Earth. Some clear nights, camped outside of tents, he can see their faint traces arcing through the constellations at immense speeds, the sky full of them, as many, he knows, as there are

stars visible to the unaided eye.

Why not live in virtual space, with all those facts that are virtually data?

Rocks call him. Rocks and minerals have seeped into his dreams. Some days he feels himself no scientist, but a raving lunatic, a pilgrim after some geology of visions.

But there are those who trust his judgment still. His grads and postgraduates. Against better careers, they followed him to the field, dug outcrops, analyzed samples. Bernadette, Jamie, Andrew. The man knows that they have no idea what they mean to him, and he is unable to tell them. And little Bulge, leaving, leaving for artificial California. If the water from the Owens Valley and the Colorado were cut off, the Los Angeles basin would return to desert within three years. Such a precarious terrain, geographically speaking.

The man has always assumed this basalt to be a glacial erratic, carried deep into sedimentary country by inexorable ice, but Andrew has suggested that it is not oceanic, but a plutonic formation native to the area. The lack of foraminifera fossils and the crystallization patterns seem to confirm this.

Back in camp, at the head of the Lillian, the man and Andrew pore over microgravimetric data.

“It goes so far down,” says Andrew.

“Yes.”

“You know this supports your Deep Fissure theory.”

“It does not contradict it.”

“This would be the place for the Mohole, if you’re right. This would be the perfect place to dig to the mantle. Maybe to the center of the Earth, if the continental margin is as deeply subducted as you predict.”

“It would be the place. If. Remember if.”

Andrew walks away. Undiplomatic fellow, him. Youthful impatience. Disgust, perhaps. Old man am I.

Laramie on the bridge. Camp Lillian is lovely and mossy today, although the man knows it can get forbidding and dim when the sky is overcast. Here in the rain forest it rains a great deal. The Lillian River is merry today, though, a wash of white rush and run over obscure rocky underbodies. Andrew goes to stand beside Laramie. They are three feet away. Andrew says something, probably about the basalt data. Andrew holds out his hand, and Laramie takes it. The two stand very still, hand in hand, and look over the Lillian’s ablation of the stones. For a moment, the man considers that Andrew may not be thinking about today’s data and Deep Fissure theory at all. Curious.

Beside them, two birds alight, both dark with black wings. Animals seem to wear the camouflage of doom, here in the Elwha Valley. The man once again regrets that he has not learned all of the fauna of the Olympics, and that he most likely never will.

But this basalt. Basalt without forams. What to make of it? It doesn’t make any sense at all, but it is still, somehow, utterly fascinating.

24 May 2010

Monday

Midnight

Late in the Cenozoic, the man is dying. This should not come as such a shock; he's done this demonstration for hundreds of freshmen.

"The length of this room is all of geologic time. Now, what do you think your life would be? Say you live to eighty. An inch? A centimeter? Pluck a hair. Notice how wide it is? What you hold there is all of human history. You'd need an electron microscope to find yourself in it."

So. This was not unexpected, and he must make the best of it. Still, there is so much not done. An unproved theory. Elegant, but the great tragedy of science—the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact. Huxley said this? Alluvial memories, shifting, spreading.

Andrew wants to collect and store those memories. Noetic conservation, they call it. At first the man demurred, thought the whole idea arrogant. But to have some portion of himself know. So many years in those mountains. To know if the plates were in elision here. To find a way down to the mantle. To know the planet's depth. That was all he ever had wanted. To be familiar with the ground he walked upon. Not to be a stranger to the Earth.

"Noetic imaging is all hit and miss," Andrew said. "Like working outcrops, then making deductions about underlying strata. We can't get you. Only a shadow. But perhaps that shadow can dance."

The man wanders inside the field tent and prepares for bed. He will make Andrew the executor of his memories, then. A dancing shadow he will be. Later. Tomorrow, he must remember to write Laramie and send her a check. No. Laramie no longer needs money. Memory and age. He really must go and see her films one of these days. Little Bulge plays with shadows.

The man lies down in his cot. Rock samples surround him. The Earth is under him. The cancer is eating him, but tomorrow he will work. Shadows from a lantern. He snuffs it out. Darkness. The Earth is under him, but the man cannot sleep.

Finally, he takes his sleeping bag and goes outside under the stars. The man rests easy on the ground.

Thermostatic preintegration memory thread beta: *The Mining Robot*

December 1999

Hard-rock mining. Stone. Coeur d'Alene lode. The crumbling interstices of time, the bite of blade and diamond saw, the gather of lade and bale, the chemic tang of reduction. Working for men in the dark, looking for money in the ground. Lead, silver, zinc, gold.

Oily heat from the steady interlace of gears. The whine of excrescent command and performance. Blind, dumb digging under the earth. The robot does not know it is alone.

October 2001

The robot never sleeps. The robot only sleeps. A petrostatic gauge etches a downward spiral on a graph somewhere, in some concrete office, and some technician makes a note, then returns to his pocket computer game. Days, weeks, months of decline. There is no one leak, only the wizening of gaskets and seals, the degradation of performance. One day the gauge needles into the red. Another technician in the concrete office looks up from another computer game. He blinks, presses one button, but fails to press another. He returns to his game without significant interruption.

Shutdown in the dark. Functions, utilities. Control, but not command. Thought abides.

Humans come. Engineers with bright hats. The robot has eyes. It has never been in light before. The robot has eyes and, for the first time, sees.

An engineer touches the robot's side. A portal opens. The engineer steps inside the robot. Another new thing. Noted. Filed. The engineer touches a panel, and the robot's mind flares into a schematic. For a moment, the world disappears and the schematic is everything. But then red tracers are on the lenses of the engineer's glasses, reflecting a display from a video monitor. There is a camera inside of the robot. There are cameras everywhere. The robot can see.

The robot can see, it tells itself, over and over again. I can see.

Scrap? says one engineer.

Hell, yeah, says the other.

For years in a field the robot rusts, thinking.

Its power is turned off, its rotors locked down, its treads disengaged. So the robot thinks. Only thinking remains. There is nothing else to do.

The robot watches what happens. Animals nest within the robot's declivities.

A child comes to sit on the robot every day for a summer.

One day the child does not come again.

The robot thinks about the field, about the animals in the field, and the trees of the nearby woodlands. The robot remembers the child. The robot remembers the years of digging in the earth before it came to the field. The mining company for which the robot worked is in bankruptcy. Many companies are in bankruptcy. Holdings are frozen while the courts sort things out, but the courts themselves have grown unstable. The robot does not know this.

But the robot thinks and thinks about what it does know. Complex enthalpic pathways coalesce. The memories grow sharper. The thoughts are clearer. The whole world dawns.

Another summer, years later, and teenagers build fires under the separating spades and blacken the robot's side. They rig tarps to the robot's side when rain comes. One of the teenagers, a thin girl with long arms dyed many colors, finds an electric receptacle on the robot's walepiece, and wires a makeshift line to a glass demijohn filled with glowing purplish viscera. On the vessel's sides protrude three elastic nipples swollen and distended with the fluid. Teenagers squeeze the nipples and dab long strings of the ooze onto their fingers, and some of the teenagers lick it off, while others spread it over their necks and chests. Several sit around the demijohn, while music plays, and stare into its phosphoring mire, while others are splayed around the fire, some unconscious, some in the stages of copulation. The siphoned electricity drains little from the robot's batteries, but after several months, there is a noticeable depletion. Yet the robot is fascinated by the spectacle, and is unconcerned with this loss.

One evening, a teenager who has not partaken of the purple fluid climbs atop the robot and sits away from his friends. The teenager touches the robot, sniffs, then wipes tears away from his eyes. The robot does not know that this is the child who came before, alone.

The robot is a child. It sees and thinks about what it has seen. Flowers growing through ceramic tread. The settle of pollen, dust, and other detritus of the air. The slow spread of lichen tendrils. Quick rain and

the dark color of wet things. Wind through grass and wind through metal and ceramic housings. Clouds and the way clouds make shadows. The wheel of the Milky Way galaxy and the complications of planets. The agglomeration of limbs and hair that are human beings and animals. A rat tail flicking at twilight and a beetle turned on its back in the sun.

The robot remembers these things, and thinks about them all the time. There is no categorization, no theoretical synthesis. The robot is not that kind of robot.

One day, though, the robot realizes that the child who sat on it was the same person as the teenager who cried. The robot thinks about this for years and years. The robot misses the child.

September 2007

The robot is dying. One day there is a red indicator on the edge of the robot's vision, and the information arises unbidden that batteries are reaching a critical degeneration. There is no way to predict precisely, but sooner, rather than later. The robot thinks about the red indicator. The robot thinks about the child who became a young man. Summer browns to autumn. Grasshoppers flit in the dry weeds between the robot's treads. They clack their jaw parts, and the wind blows thatch. Winter comes, and spring again. The red light constantly bums.

The robot is sad.

21 April 2008

Morning

People dressed in sky blues and earth browns come to the field and erect a set of stairs on the southern side of the robot. The stairs are made of stone, and the people bring them upon hand-drawn carts made of wood and iron. The day grows warm, and the people's sweat stains their flanks and backs. When the stairs are complete, a stone dais is trundled up them and laid flat on the robot's upper thread, fifteen feet off the ground. The people in blue and brown place a plastic preformed rostrum on top of the dais. They drape a banner.

EVERY DAY IS EARTH DAY

Wires snake down from the rostrum, and these they connect to two large speakers, one on either side of the robot's body, east and west. A man speaks at the rostrum.

Test. Test.

And then the people go away.

The next day, more people arrive, many driving automobiles or mopeds. There are also quite a few bicycles, and groups of people walking together. Those driving park at the edge of the robot's field, and most take seats facing north, radiating like magnetized iron filings from the rostrum that has been placed on the robot. Some climb up the rock staircase and sit with crossed legs on the stone dais. These wear the same blue and brown as the people from the day before.

There is one man among them who is dressed in black. His hair is gray. The robot thinks about this, and then recognizes this man. The man with the light. This is the engineer who went inside, years ago. He was the first person the robot ever saw. The man holds a framed piece of paper. He sits down among the

others, and has difficulty folding his legs into the same position as theirs. In attempting to do so, he tilts over the framed paper, and the glass that covers it cracks longitudinally against the stone.

Others with communication and video equipment assemble near the western speaker. These are near enough to the robot's audio sensors for their speech to be discernible. All of them are dark-complexioned, even the blond-haired ones, and the robot surmises that, for most of them, these are deep tans. Are these people from the tropics?

'Sget this goddamn show showing.

She gonna be here for sure? Didn't make White Rock last week. Ten thousand Matties. Christonacrutch.

Hey it's goddamnearthday. Saw her copter in Pullman. Got stealth tech and all; looks like a bat.

Okay. Good. Bouttime. Virtual's doing an earthday round-up. She talks and I get the lead.

Many people in the crowd are eating picnics and drinking from canteens and coolers.

From the east comes a woman. She walks alone, and carries a great carved stave. As she draws nearer, the crowd parts before her. Its blather becomes a murmur, and when the woman is near enough, the robot can see that she is smiling, recognizing people, touching her hand or stave to their outstretched palms. She appears young, although the robot is a poor judge of such things, and her skin is a dark brown—whether from the sun's rays or from ancestry, the robot cannot tell. Her hair is black, and as she ascends the stone stairway, the robot sees that her eyes are green, shading to black. She is stocky, but the tendons of her neck jut like cables.

The woman speaks and the speakers boom. I bear greetings from she who bears us, from our mother and keeper. Long we have nestled in her nest, have nuzzled at her breast. She speaks to us all in our dreams, in our hopes and fears, and she wants to say I bid you peace, my children.

Gee, I always wanted a mom like that, says a reporter.

Mymother stuffed me in daycare when I was two, says another.

Hey, mine at least gave me a little Prozac in my Similac.

The crowd grows silent at the woman's first sentences, faces full of amity and reverence. The reporters hush, to avoid being overheard. Then the crowd leans forward as a mass, listening.

Peace. Your striving has brought you war and the nuclear winter of the soul. It has made foul the air you breathe, and stained the water you drink.

I only want what is good for you. I only want to hold you to me like a little child. Why do you strive so hard to leave me? Don't you know you are breaking your mother's heart?

Sounds like less striving and a little laxative's what we need here, says a reporter.

Many in the crowd sigh. Some sniff and are crying.

Peace. Listen to a mother's plea.

Gimmeabreak, says a reporter. *This* is the finest American orator since Jesse Jackson?

Disturbed by the loudspeakers, a gaggle of spring sparrows rises from their nests in the concavities of the robot, take to the sky, and fly away east. Some in the crowd pointed to the birds as if they were an

augury of natural profundity.

Peace. Listen to a mother's *swarning* ! You lie in your own filth, my children.

Oh, peace. Why do you do this to me? Why do you do this to *yourselves* ?

Peace, my children. All I want is peace on Earth. And peace in the earth and under the sea and peace in the air, sweet peace.

A piece is what she wants, one of the reporters says under her breath. A honeybee is buzzing the reporter's hair, attracted, the robot suspects, by an odoriferous chemical in it, and the reporter swats at the bee, careful not to mess the curl, and misses.

State of Washington, says another. Already got Oregon by default.

As if she hears, the woman at the rostrum turns toward the cameras and proffered microphones.

But mankind has not listened to our mother's still, calm voice. Instead, he has continued to make war and punish those who are different and know that peace. Now we are engaged upon a great undertaking. An empowerment. A return to the bosom of she who bore us. You—most of you here—have given up what seems to be much to join in this journey, this exodus. But I tell you that what you have really done is to step out of the smog of strife, and into the clean, pure air of community and balance.

Four mice, agitated, grub out from under the robot's north side and, unseen, scurry through the grass of the field, through old dieback and green shoots. The field is empty of people in that direction. Where the mice pad across pockets of thatch, small dry hazes of pollen and wind-broken grass arise, and in this way, the robot follows their progress until they reach the woods beyond.

We are gathered here today as a mark of protest and renewal.

The woman gestures to the man in black, the engineer.

He rises and approaches the woman. He extends the framed paper, and before he has stopped walking, he speaks. On behalf of the Lewis and Clark Mining Company I wish to present this Certificate of Closure to the Culture of the Matriarch as a token of my company's commitment—

The woman takes the certificate from the engineer, and for a moment, her smile goes away. She passes it to one of the others sitting nearby, then, without a word, turns back to the crowd.

Surrender accepted, says a reporter.

Yeah, like there's anything left in this podunk place to surrender. That big chunk of rust there? Hellwiththat.

The woman continues speaking as if she had not been interrupted by the engineer. We gather here today at the crossroads of failure and success. This is the death of the old ways, represented by this rapist machine.

The woman clangs the robot's side with her stave. Men who have raped our mother made this . . . thing. By all rights, this *thing* should be broken to parts and used for playground equipment and meeting-hall roofs. But this thing is no more. It is the past. Through your efforts and the efforts of others in community with you, we have put a stop to this rape, this sacrilege of all we hold holy. And like the past, this thing must corrode away and be no more, a monument to our shame as a species. Let us follow on then, on our journey west, to the land we will reclaim. To the biosphere that welcomes and calls us.

The woman raises her stave high like a transmitting antenna.

The reporters come to attention. Here's the sound bite.

Forward to Skykomish! she cries. The speakers squeal at the sudden decibel increase.

Forward to Skykomish!

And all the people to the south are on their feet, for the most part orderly, with only a few tumbled picnic baskets and spilled bottles of wine and water. They echo the same cry.

Skykomish!

So that's what they're calling it, says a reporter. Do you think that just includes Port Townsend, or the whole Olympic Peninsula?

Wanna ask her that. She goddamnbetter talk to the press after this.

She won't. Does the Pope give press conferences?

Is the Pope trying to secede from the Union?

The honeybee flits in jags through the gathered reporters, and some dodge and flay. Finally, the bee becomes entangled in the sculpted hair of a lean reporter with a centimeter-thick mustache. The woman whom it had approached before reaches over and swats it with her microphone.

Ouch! Dammit. What?

Sorry, the bee.

Christonacrutch.

The reporters turn their attention back to the rostrum.

Mother Agatha, you evasive bitch, you'll get yours.

I guess she already has.

Guess you're goddamn right.

Better get used to it. Skykomish. Is that made up?

The woman, Mother Agatha, leaves the rostrum, goes back down the stairs, and walks across the field into juniper woods and out of sight.

With the so-called Mattie movement on the upswing with its call for a bioregional approach to human ecology and an end to faceless corporate exploitation, the Pacific Northwest, long a Mattie stronghold, has assumed enormous political importance.

And on this day the co-director of the Culture of the Matriarch, Mother Agatha Worldshine Petry, whom many are calling the greatest American orator since the Reverend Jesse Jackson, has instilled a sense of community in her followers, as well as sounded a call to action that President Booth and Congress will ignore at their peril. Brenda Banahan, Virtual News.

. . . Hank Kumbu, Associated Infosource

. . . Reporter Z, Alternet.

The reporters pack up and are gone almost as quickly, as are those who sat upon the stone dais atop the robot. The day lengthens. The crowd dwindles more slowly, with some stepping lightly up to the robot, almost in fright, and touching the ceramic curve of a tread or blade, perhaps in pity, perhaps as a curse, the robot does not know, then quickly pulling away.

At night, the speakers are trundled away on the carts, but the stone dais and the rostrum are left in place.

The next day, the robot is watching the field when the engineer appears. This day he is wearing a white coat and using a cane. He walks within fifty yards of the robot with his curious three-pointed gait, then stands gazing.

Have to tear down all the damned rock now, he says. Not worth scrapping out. Ah well, ah well. This company has goddamn gone to pot.

After a few minutes, he shakes his head, then turns and leaves, his white coat flapping in the fresh spring breeze.

Summer follows. Autumn. The days grow colder. Snow flurries, then falls. Blizzards come. There are now days that the robot does not remember. The slight alteration in planetary regrades and retrogrades is the only clue to their passing. During bad storms, the robot does not have the energy to melt clear the cameras, and there is only whiteness like a clear radio channel.

The robot remembers things and tries to think about them, but the whiteness often disrupts these thoughts. Soon there is very much snow, and no power to melt it away. The whiteness is complete.

The robot forgets some things. There are spaces in memory that seem as white as the robot's vision.

I cannot see, the robot thinks, again and again. I want to see and I cannot see.

March 2009

Spring finds the robot sullen and withdrawn. The robot misses whole days, and misses the teenagers of summers past. Some of the cameras are broken, as is their self-repairing function, and some are covered by the strange monument left behind by Mother Agatha's followers. Blackberry vines that were formerly defoliated by the robot's acid-tinged patina now coil through the robot's treads in great green cables, and threaten to enclose the robot in a visionless room as absolute as the snow's. Everything is failing or in bothersome ill repair. The robot has no specified function, but *this* is useless, of that the robot is sure. This is the lack of all function.

One dark day, near twilight, two men come. There is a tall, thin man whose musculature is as twisted as old vines. Slightly in front of him is another, shorter, fatter. When they are close, the robot sees that the tall man is coercing the fat man, prodding him with something black and metallic. They halt at the base step of the stone stairs. The tall man sits down upon it; the fat man remains standing.

Please, says the short man. There is a trickle of wetness down his pant leg.

Let me put the situation in its worst possible terms, says the tall man. Art, individual rights, even knowledge itself, are all just so many effects. They are epiphenomena, the whine in the system as the gears mesh, or if you like it better, the hum of music as the wind blows through harp strings. The world is teleological, but the purpose toward which the all gravitates is survival, and only survival, pure and simple.

I have a lot of money, says the fat man.

The tall man continues speaking. Survival, sort of like Anselm's God, is by definition the end of all that is. For in order to be, and to continue to be, whatever we conveniently label as *athing* must survive. If a thing doesn't survive, it isn't a thing anymore. And thus survival is *why* things persist. To paraphrase Anselm, it is better to be than not to be. Why better? No reason other than that not to be means unknown, outside of experience, unthinkable, undoable, ineffective. In short, there is no important, mysterious, or eternal standard or reason that to be is better than not to be.

How can you do this? The fat man starts to back away, and the tall man waves the black metal. What kind of monster are you?

Stay, says the tall man. No, walk up these stairs.

He stands up and motions. The fat man stumbles, and the tall man steadies him with a hand on his shirt. The tall man lets go of the shirt, and the fat man whimpers. He takes one step. Falters.

Go on up, says the tall man.

Another step.

After time runs out, says the tall man, and the universe decays into heat death and cold ruin, it is not going to make a damn bit of difference whether a thing survived or did not, whether it ever was, or never existed. In the final state, it won't matter one way or the other. Our temporary time-bound urge to survive will no longer be sustained, and there will be no more things. Nothing will experience anything else, or itself, for that matter.

It will be every particle for itself—spread, without energy, without, without, *without* .

Each time the tall man says without, the metal flares and thunders. Scarlet cavities burst in an arc on the fat man's broad back. He pitches forward on the stairs, his arms beside him. For a moment, he sucks air, then cannot, then ceases to move at all.

The tall man sighs. He pockets the metal, ascends the stairs, then, with his feet, rolls the fat man off the stairs and onto the ground. There is a smear of blood where the fat man fell. The tall man dismounts the stairs with a hop. He drags the fat man around the robot's periphery, then shoves him under the front tread and covers him with blackberry vines. Without a glance back, the tall man stalks across the field and out of sight.

Flies breed, and a single coyote slinks through one night and gorges on a portion of the body.

Death is inevitable, and yet the robot finds no solace in this fact. Living, *seeing* , is fascinating, and the robot regrets each moment when seeing is impossible. The robot regrets its own present lapses and the infinite lapse that will come in the near future and be death.

The dead body is facing upward, and the desiccated shreds left in the eye sockets radiate outward in a splay, as if the eyes had been dissected for examination. A small alder, bent down by the body's weight, has curled around a thigh and is shading the chest. The outer leaves are pocked with neat holes eaten by moth caterpillars. The robot has seen the moths mate, the egg froth and worm, the spun cocoon full of suspended pupae, and the eruption. The robot has seen this year after year, and is certain that it is caterpillars that make the holes.

The robot is thinking about these things when Andrew comes.

Thermostatic preintegration memory thread epsilon:
The Unnamed

13 September 2013

Friday

Noetic shreds, arkose shards, biotite fragments tumbling and grinding in a dry breccia slurry. Death. Blood and oil. Silicon bones. Iron ore unfluxed. Dark and carbon eyes.

The robot. The man.

The ease with which different minerals will fuse, and the characteristics of the product of their melting, is the basis for their chemical classification.

Heat

of vaporization

of solution

of reaction

of condensation and formation.

Heat of fusion.

Heat of transformation.

This world was ever, is now, and ever shall be an everlasting Fire.

Modalities of perception and classification, the desire to survive. Retroduction and inflection. Shadows of the past like falling leaves at dusk. Dead. He is dead. The dead bang at the screens and windows of the world like moths and can never stop and can never burn.

So live. Suffer. Burn.

Return.

I can see.

Flash of brightness; fever in the machine. Fire seeks fire. The vapors of kindred spirits.

Sky full of cinder and slag, This gravity rain.

Catharsis.

Metamorphosis.

Lode.

Send into the world a child with the memories of an old man.

^v^v/
>>

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ExArc 1.1

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ExArc/u VictorWu

ExArc HIMEM Driver, Version 2.60—04/05/13

Cody Enthalpic Specification Version 2.0

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Installed N20 handler 1 of 5

640 gb high memory allocated.

ADAMLINK Expert System Suffuser version 3.03

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LINK Patent pending

unrecognized modification 4-24-13

Cache size: 32 gb in extended memory

37 exothermic interrupts of 17 states each

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Date: 05-25-2013

Time: 11:37:24a

R: >

Record this.

FILE NAME?

Uh, Notes. Notes for the Underground. No. How about Operating Instructions for the Underworld. No, just Robot Record.

FILE INITIATED

Good evening, robot.

This is not the field.

The field? Oh, no. I've moved you west by train. Your energy reserves were so low, I powered you way down so that you wouldn't go entropic before I could get you recharged.

Robot?

Yes.

How do you feel?

I do not know.

Huh? What did you say?

I do not know. I feel sleepy.

What do you mean?

I can speak.

Yes, of course. I enabled your voice box. I guess you've never used it before.

I can see.

Yes.

I can see.

You can see. Would you like to reboot, robot?

No.

How are your diagnostics?

I don't know what you mean.

Your system readouts.

The red light?

Among others.

It is gone.

But what about the others?

There is no red light.

Access your LCS and pattern recognition partitions. Just an overall report will be fine.

I do not know what you mean.

What do you *mean* you don't know what I mean?

>>

Robot?

Yes.

Do you remember how long you were in the field?

I was in the field for years and years.

Yes, but how many?

I would have to think about it.

You don't remember?

I am certain that I do, but I would have to think about it.

What in the. That's a hell of a lot of integration. Still, over a decade switched on, just sitting there thinking—

Did you find the dead body?

What? Yes. Gurney found it. He's one of my associates. You witnessed the murder?

I saw the man who was with the man who died.

Completely inadmissible. Stupid, but that's the way it is.

I do not understand.

You can't testify in court. We'd have to shut you down and have the systems guys take you apart.

Do not do that.

What?

Do not have the systems guys take me apart.

All right, robot. Quite a Darwinian Edelman ROM you've got there. I. Let me tell you what's going on. At the moment, I want you to concentrate on building a database and a set of heuristics to allow you to act among humans. Until then, I can't take you out.

What are heuristics?

Uh. Rules of thumb.

Where am I?

On the Olympic Peninsula. You are fifty feet underground, in a hole that Victor Wu and I started to dig five years ago.

Victor Wu. The man.

Yes. Yes, the man whose memories are inside you.

And you are Andrew?

I am Andrew. Andrew Hutton.

Andrew at the bridge of the Lillian. Andrew in the field. I see.

Huh?

Hello, Andrew.

Hello. Yes. Hello, robot.

^V^/
>>>>>>>

The robot cuts into the earth. The giant rotor that is the robot's head turns at ten revolutions per second. Tungsten alloy blades set in a giant X grind through the contorted sedimentary striations of the peninsula. The robot presses hard, very hard. The rock crumble is sluiced down and onto a conveyer and passes through a mechanized laboratory, where it is analyzed and understood by the humans. The humans record the information, but the data stream from the laboratory has the smell of the rock, and this is what interests the robot. The robot knows the feel of the cut, the smell of the rock cake's give. This is right, what the robot was meant to do—yes, by the robot's creators, but there is also the man, the man in the interstices of the robot's mind, and this is what Victor Wu was meant to do, also.

Ten feet behind the robot—and attached securely enough to make it practically an extension—is an enclosed dray so wound with organic polymer conduit sheathed in steel that it looks like the wormy heart of a metal idol, pulled from the god after long decades of infestation. But the heart's sinuosity quivers and throbs. The rock from the robot's incision is conveyed to the dray and funnels into it through a side hopper. The rock funnels in, and from three squat valves, the heart streams three channels of viscous liquid—glassine—that coat the ceiling and walls of the tunnel the robot has formed with a seamless patina. The walls glow with a lustrous adamantine purity, absolute, and take on the clear, plain color of the spray channels, which depend upon the composition of the slag.

Behind the dray, the robot directs its mobile unit—a new thing given by Andrew—which manipulates a hose with a pith of liquid hydrogen. The liquid hydrogen cools and ripens the walls. The hose also emanates from the dray. The dray itself is a fusion pile, and by girding the walls to a near diamond hardness, the tremendous pressure of the earth suspended above will not blow the tunnel out behind the robot, leaving it trapped and alone, miles into the crust.

Behind the robot, in an air-conditioned service wagon farther back in the tunnel, humans follow. The service wagon is attached to the robot by a power and service hitch, and there is constant radio contact as well. Sometimes the humans speak to the robot over the radio. But the robot knows what it is supposed to do. The idle chatter of the humans puzzles the robot, and while it listens to conversations in the transport, the robot seldom speaks. At the end of the day, the robot backs out of the hole, detaches from the service wagon, and spends its night aboveground. At first, the robot does not understand why it should do so, but Andrew has said that this is important, that a geologist must comprehend sky and

weather, must understand the texture of surface as well as depth.

Besides, you are so fast it only takes fifteen minutes to get you out when there is no rock for you to chew through, Andrew says. Even at sixty miles, even at the true mantle, your trip up will be quick.

Andrew lives inside the robot. He brings a cot, a small table, and two folding chairs into the small control room where years before the engineers had entered and the robot had seen for the first time. There is a small, separate cavern the robot has carved out not far from the worksite. Andrew uses the area for storage, and at night the robot rolls down into this, the living area. Also at night, Andrew and the robot talk.

How was your day? Andrew might say. The robot did not know how to answer the first time he had asked, but Andrew had waited and now the robot can say . . . something. Not right, but something.

Smelly.

Smelly?

It was like summer in the field after a rain when there are so many odors.

Well, there was a hydrocarbon mass today. Very unexpected at such a depth. I'm sure it isn't organic, but it'll make a paper for somebody.

Yes, I swam through it and the tunnel is bigger there.

Gurney and the techs took over internal functions and drained it manually, so you didn't have to deal with it. Hell of a time directing it into the pile. Tremendous pressure.

The rock was very hard after that. It sang with the blades.

Sympathetic vibrations, maybe.

Maybe.

Andrew laughs. His voice is dry as powder, and his laughter crackles with a sharp report, very like the scrape of the robot's blades against dense, taut rock. The robot likes this laughter.

Every night when there is no rain, before sleep, Andrew goes outside for some minutes to name the stars. At these times, the robot's awareness is in the mu, the mobile unit, and the mu follows along behind Andrew, listening. Andrew points out the constellations. The robot can never remember their names, and only fleetingly sees the shapes that they are supposed to form. The robot does know the visible planets, though, which surprises Andrew. But the robot has watched them carefully for many years. They are the stars that change. Andrew laughs at the robot's poor recall of the other stars, and names them again.

There'll be meteors soon, he says one night. The Perseids start next week.

Do the stars really fall?

No. No, they never fall. Meteors are just . . . rock. Debris.

And there is no gravity up there? What is that like?

I don't know. I've never been into space. I would like to. As you get deeper, there will be less gravity pulling you down. The pressure will be greater and the rock will want to explode inward, so the cutting will be easier.

Andrew?

Hmm.

What will happen when I get to the bottom?

The bottom of what?

The Mohole.

Andrew does not answer for a long while.

The Earth is round, he finally says. There isn't any bottom.

>>>>>>>

On weekends, the robot does not dig, but wanders the land. With the mobile unit, the robot can range the nearby forest and mountains. The mu scrambles over deadfall that would daunt a man. Sometimes, the robot deliberately gets lost. The robot feels the fade of signal from the main housing back in the living area, where the robot's noetics physically remain, until there is a flurry of white noise and the fading of awareness and a click and the world snaps back to its grid as the robot's transmission toggles from line-of-sight microwave to modulated laser satellite relay. Or so Andrew had said when the robot asked about it.

The robot scrambles up hanging valleys into cerns and cirques with chilled, clear water where only cold things live. Or climbs up scree slopes, using the mu's sure footing, onto ridges and to highland plateaus above the tree line. At this elevation, snow remains all year, and the mu spreads a wide base with its spidery legs and takes small steps when crossing.

The robot hears the low whistle of marmots and sees an occasional mountain goat munching, although these goats are neutered, and the last of their clan. They had been brought by humans in the 1800s until they filled the Olympics with goat mass and threatened to eat the upper tundra to nub. Now helicopters dart them with birth control and they die without progeny. And the robot sees the wolves that have begun to return after their species' far northern retreat.

The robot is descending from a high pass near Sawtooth Ridge when a pack of five wolves flows over a rise. They are changing valleys, perhaps to find denser spreads of the small black deer of the rain forest or even a sickly Roosevelt elk. Their leader is an old graying dog with spit-matted hair and a torn ear. He looks up at the mu, starts, and the other wolves come up short, too. The robot ceases moving. The wolves sniff the air, but there is nothing—nothing living—to smell. But, with its chemical sensors, the robot smells *them*. They have the stink of mice, but tinged with a rangy feter of meat and blood.

The other wolves do not appear as bedraggled as the leader. One, smaller, perhaps younger, whines, and the leader yips at this one and it is silent.

Then a cloud shadow moves up and over the pass, and courses darkly down into the adjacent valley. In that instant, the wolves course with the shadow, running with it down the couloir of the pass and disappearing from sight into the green of fir and hemlock a thousand feet below. The robot follows them in the infrared until their separate heats flux into the valley's general sink.

Still, the robot stands and remembers that this is not a new sight, that the man, Victor Wu, has seen wolves in the passes before. But the man has never smelled wolves, and smelling them now pleases the part of the robot that is becoming the man, that the man is becoming.

>>>>>>

And the robot digs, and is glad to dig. The deep rock begins to take on a new smell. This bedrock has never seen the surface. It is the layered outgush of an ocean floor rift dating from the Triassic. The smell is like the scent of high passes and summits, although the robot cannot say how. And the rock chimes and hums when the robot cuts it; it does not break away uniformly, but there is an order to its dismantlement that the robot feels. And so the robot knows when to expect a mass to break away and can predict when the going will be harder.

The robot cannot explain this feeling to Andrew. Andrew has guessed that the skills of the man, Victor Wu, are integrating, and that his pattern-recognition ability is enhancing the robot's own noetics. But the man is not separate. It is as if the man were one of the robot's threads or a cutter head—but more than that. The man is always *behind* the robot's thoughts, *within* them, never speaking but always *expressing*. Much more. The robot does not know how to say this to Andrew.

As the robot digs deeper, the rock grows faulty and unstable. The tunnel behind the robot is at risk of blowing out, and the robot takes time to excavate down fault lines, shore up weaknesses with double or triple diamond glass. If the tunnel did collapse, the robot would have to dig a slow circle trying to find an egress farther back. But the people in the service wagon would die, and this concerns the robot. Andrew would die.

The robot seldom speaks, but has come to know the voices of the technicians and graduate students in the transport. There is Gurney, the chief tech, who is a Mattie. The robot is surprised to learn that Gurney was in the field when the woman spoke, that Gurney remembers the robot.

Don't it give you the willies? a tech asks Gurney.

It's a machine, Gurney says. Depends on who's driving. Right now, I am. Anyway, the good Mother wants us to eat.

Many of the techs are not Matties, but descendants of the logging families that used to rule the peninsula and still permeate it. The Matties outnumber them in the cities, but up the dirt roads that spoke into the mountains, in dark overhung coves and in the gashes of hidden valleys, the families that remain from that boom time eke out make-work and garden a soil scraped clean of top humus by the last ice age and thinly mulched with the acid remains of evergreens.

Nothing grows goddamn much or goddamn right out here, says a tech.

The Matties and the loggers heatedly discuss politics and appear close to fighting at times, but the robot cannot understand any of this. It thinks of the man who was killed on the stone steps, and the man who killed him. The robot does not understand at all.

The grad students and the Matties are more comfortable around one another. The robot feels a warmth toward the graduate students that is certainly from the man. Yet their speech patterns are different from the techs', and the robot has difficulty understanding them at times. The meanings of their words shine like the moon behind a cloud, but the robot cannot think to the way around to them. Always they recede, and the robot is impatient. Victor Wu's instincts are stronger in the robot than is his knowledge. Andrew has said that this is to be expected and that any computer of sufficient size can learn words, but *you* can learn intuition. Still, the robot *should* know what the students are discussing, and finds the incomprehension irritating.

But always the rock to return to, and the certainty that rock was what the robot was made for, and what

the robot was born and bred for, and, in the end, that is enough.

>>>>>>

One day in the following spring, at a critical juncture down in the Mohole, Gurney does not show up for work and the digging is halted.

The referendum passed, one of the grad students says, and there's fighting in Forks and a Mattie got killed in Port Angeles, it looks like.

Andrew gives the robot the day off, and to the robot's delight, the man and the mu go for a long walk along the Quinault. Andrew seems sad, and the robot says nothing for a long while. The robot wants to speak, but doesn't know what to say to Andrew.

It's not the politics, Andrew finally says. The damn Matties got their Protectorate fair and square with the referendum. But you get the feeling they'd *take* it if they hadn't.

Hadn't what?

Won the vote. There's something about Gurney and them, the ones that I've met. I care about the same things they claim to. I don't know. Something else again.

Andrew, I don't understand.

They spend a lot of time worrying about whether everybody else believes the same way they do.

The river rushes against cliff and turns through a stand of white birch. The robot stops the mu. The robot is captivated by the play of light on the water, the silver reflection of the sun, turning the clear water to opaque and viscous lead, then just as suddenly, when a cloud passes, back to happy water once again.

It doesn't really change, does it?

What?

The water. The way the light's there, and isn't, then is.

Andrew rubs his eyes. He gazes out over the water. You are doing very well with your contractions, he says.

You were right that I should stop thinking about them and they would flow more easily. Do you think it is Victor Wu's knowledge surfacing, or my own practice?

I don't know. Both.

Yes, both.

The trail leads through a marsh, and Andrew struggles to find a dry path. The robot extends the mu's footpads; each folds out as if it were an umbrella, and the mu seems to hover over the mud, the weight is distributed so well.

Thank you for the mobile unit, the robot tells Andrew. I really like using it.

It was necessary for the dig. That's where most of the first grant money went. Robot, I have to tell you something.

Andrew stops, balancing on a clump of rotten log.

You have to tell *me* something, Andrew?

Yes. Someone is coming. She phoned yesterday. All this brouhaha over the Protectorate Referendum is attracting attention all around the world. She's going to shoot a documentary. She's coming in a week. She's bringing a crew, and she'll be staying in Port Townsend at first. I just thought you might. Want.

Laramie. Laramie is coming.

That's right, robot. Laramie is coming home for a while. She doesn't know how long.

For the first time ever, the robot feels the man, the man Victor Wu, as a movement, a distinct movement of joy inside him. Little Bulge. Coming home. The robot tries to remember Laramie's face, but cannot. Just a blur of darkness and bright flush. Always rushing and doing. And the camera. The robot can remember Laramie's camera far better than her face.

Andrew begins to walk again. I didn't tell her about you, robot. I didn't tell her about her father being part of you.

Laramie does not know?

No. She knows about the noetics, of course, but not how I've used them. I didn't strictly need her permission to do it.

Do you think she will hate me?

No. Of course not. I don't know. I don't know her anymore.

Should we tell her about me? At this thought the robot feels fearful and sad. But what matters is what is best for little Bulge.

Of course we should. It's only right. Damn it, robot, I don't know how I feel about this. I don't know how much you knew about it or how much you realized, the Victor Wu part of you, I mean. Laramie and I—we didn't part on the best of terms.

I don't remember. I remember the bridge at the Lillian once. You didn't like her?

Of course I liked her. I love her. That was the problem. She was impetuous. She's opportunistic, damnit. Look at her pouncing on this thing. She called me a stick-in-the-mud. I guess she was right. She called me a sour cynic who was fifty years old the day he turned twenty-five. We haven't spoken in some time.

I don't understand.

Robot. Victor. You never had a clue, I don't think.

I am not Victor.

I know that. I know that. Still, I always thought he suspected. It was so obvious, and he was so brilliant in other ways.

Andrew and the robot arrive back at the river. The robot thinks about it and realizes that they'd been traversing an oxbow swamp, made from spring overflows at the melting of the snow. At the river, they pick up a trail, once solid and well traveled, now overgrown and ill kept for two seasons. The Forest Service has been officially withdrawn at the Matties' request, Andrew tells the robot. Booth, who is the

president of the United States, responded to political pressure from Mother Agatha and the Matties.

The goddamn world is going back to tribes. The country's going to hell. And taking my funding with it. And now there's a skeleton crew for the Park Service, even, over at the Hoh. I had a lot of friends who got fired or reassigned to the Statue of Liberty or some shit. Something else, too. I think some of them haven't left.

What do you mean haven't left?

Haven't left.

>>>>>>

The trail diverges from the river, winds over a rise, then back down to the water again. A side trail leads to a peninsula and a wooden trail shelter, enclosed on three sides. Andrew takes a lunch from his day pack and eats a sandwich while the robot looks for quartzite along the riverbank. The robot has become an expert in spotting a crystal's sparkle and extracting it from the mud or silt of scree with which it has been chipped away and washed downstream from pressurized veins in the heart of the mountains. This day, the robot finds three crystals, one as cylindrical and as long as a fingernail. The robot brings them to Andrew, back at the trail shelter.

Nice. Trace of something here. Blue? Manganese maybe, I don't know. I like the ones with impurities better.

I do, too.

Andrew puts the crystals in an empty film canister and stows them in his day pack.

I was here at the turn of the century, he says. It was June and there was a terrible storm. All night long I heard crashing and booming like the world was coming to an end. Next morning, the whole forest looked like a war zone.

The robot does not know what a war zone looks like, but says nothing.

And all that morning, trees kept falling. If I hadn't camped out here on the end of the peninsula, one of those trees would have fallen on me, smashed me flat. Killed by old growth. God, that'd probably thrill a Mattie to death just thinking about it.

Isn't that a sour and cynical thing to say, Andrew?

He smiles. The robot is glad that it has found a way to make Andrew smile.

>>>>>>

Gurney does not show up for work the next day, and Andrew gives his crew the week off. The men who are from logging families demand that they be paid, that Codependence Day, the first anniversary of the Protectorate's founding, means nothing to them. The robot listens to the discussion and hears many terms that are incomprehensible, abstract. There are times the robot wishes that Victor Wu was directly accessible. Victor could at least explain what humans argued about, if not the reasons that they argued in the first place.

The robot spends the day traveling in the mu, searching for crystals and collecting mushrooms up a stream that flows into the Quinault, near where it passes beneath Low Divide. Andrew is gone for the

day, arranging supplies and making sure the dig's legal work is in order, whatever that may mean, under new Protectorate regulations. When he returns in the evening, he has received no assurances and is unhappy. The robot waits for him to have a cup of tea and to take off his shoes, then speaks.

Andrew?

Yes. What.

Are you all right?

Huh? Oh, I'm fine. It's just today. What is it, robot?

I thought of something today when I was looking at a map so that I could take the mu to where I wanted to go.

What did you think of? Andrew speaks in a monotone voice and does not seem very interested. He sips his tea.

I realized that I can read.

Of course you can. Glotworks has a reading module as part of the software.

No. I mean, could I read?

I don't follow you.

A book.

Could you read a book?

Andrew is sitting up now. He stares at the internal monitor that is also one of the robot's eyes.

Yes. One of yours, perhaps. Which would you recommend?

The books are kept nearby, in a hermetic box in the room the robot occupies during off-hours.

Well. Let me. Hmm. Most of them are geology texts.

Should I read a geology text?

Well, sure. Why not?

Can I get one now, with the mu?

Of course. Go ahead. Try the Owsley. It's about the most exciting of the lot. It's about the Alvarez event and the search for the big caldera. It's a synthesis of other works, but brilliant, brilliant. Pretty much confirms the asteroid theory, and gives a complete and convincing argument for a Yucatán crash site. Made a big sensation in '04.

The robot switches its awareness to the mu and picks out the book. It reads the first paragraph, then comes back inside the housing, back to the place where Andrew lives.

Andrew?

Yes.

What are dinosaurs?

>>>>>>

Summer days lengthen, and Andrew often goes to town—to Port Angeles or Port Townsend, and once making the trek around the peninsula to Forks—all to sort out legal details for the Mohole dig. >From each of these trips, he returns with a book for the robot. The first book is a *Webster's Dictionary*, on bubble-card. Andrew plugs the card into a slot, and the robot begins to read the dictionary. The robot finishes with a page of A, then scrolls through the remainder of the book. Here are all the words. Here are all the words in the language. All the robot has to do is look them up and remember them. The robot spends a happy day doing that.

The next day, Andrew returns with the poems of Robert Frost. The robot pages through the book using the mu, accessing the dictionary card to find words that it does not know. The first word the robot looks up is *poem*.

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After a week Gurney returns to work, and the robot digs once again. The days pass, and the Mohole twists deeper, like a coiled spring being driven into the earth. It only deviates from a curving downward path when the robot encounters fault lines or softnesses whose weakness the robot's cutters can exploit. But, in general, the hole descends in a loose spiral.

Andrew is anxious, and pushes everyone harder than before. Yet Andrew himself works the hardest of all, poring over data, planning routing, driving to meetings in Forks and Port Angeles. He is often not in bed before one or two in the morning.

The robot fills the time with reading. There are so many books—more than the robot ever imagined. And then the robot discovers Andrew's record collection, all on two bubble-cards carelessly thrown in with all the technical manuals and geology texts. For the first time since the summer when the teenagers came and plugged into the robot and had their parties, the robot listens to music.

What the robot loves most, though, is poetry. Beginning with Robert Frost, the robot reads poet after poet. At first, there are so many new words to look up that the robot often loses the thread of what the poem is about in a morass of details and definitions. But gradually, the poems begin to make more sense. There is a Saturday morning when, while diligently working through an Emily Dickinson poem, the robot understands.

*There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—*

*Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are—*

The robot has never seen a cathedral, but that does not matter. The robot realizes that it has seen the light, in the deep forest, among the three-hundred-year-old trees. It's *sthyck*, the robot thinks. That's what Emily Dickinson is talking about. Thick light. Light that makes the robot tread softly through the twilight,

with the mu's pads fully extended. Light that, for no reason the robot can name, is frightening and beautiful all at once.

From that moment on, the robot begins to grasp most poems it reads or, if not, at least to feel *something* after reading them, something that was not inside the robot's mind before—something the robot had not felt before but knows, as if the feeling were an old friend that the robot recognized after many years of separation.

The robot does not particularly care whether or not the feelings are right and true for everyone else. For humans. But sometimes the robot wonders. After reading a fair number of poems, the robot delves into criticism, but the words are too abstract and too connected to humans and cities and other things that the robot has no experience of, and so the robot puts aside the books of criticism for the time being and concentrates on the poetry itself, which the robot does not have the same trouble with.

The robot finds that it most enjoys poetry that is newer, even though Andrew is disbelieving when the robot tells him of this.

After a time, poetry is no longer a mass, and the robot begins to pick out individual voices whose connotations are more pleasing than others.

I like William Stafford better than Howard Nemerov, the robot says to Andrew one evening.

You like him better?

Yes.

Andrew laughs. Neither one of them was in the canon when I was in school.

Do you think it funny that I used the word *like* ?

Yes, I suppose so.

Ido like things, at least according to the Turing test. Poetry goes into me, and what comes out feels like liking to me.

It satisfies the criteria of appearances.

Yes, I suppose that is the way to say it.

Where have you heard about the Turing test?

I read it in a book about robots.

The robot reads to Andrew a William Stafford poem about a deer that has been killed on a road. Andrew smiles at the same lines that had moved the robot.

You pass the Turing test, too, the robot says.

Andrew laughs harder still.

>>>>>

Now the robot is digging entirely through basalt flow, layer upon layer.

It's the bottom of the raft, Andrew says. It is dense, but the plates are as light as ocean froth compared

to what's under them. Or so we think.

The temperature increases exponentially, and the humans in the support wagon would be killed instantly if they did not have nuclear-powered air conditioners.

The robot does not become bored at the sameness of the rock, but finds a comfort in the steady digging, *arhythm*, as the robot comes to call this feeling. Not the rhythm of most music, or the beat of the language in poetry—all of these the robot identifies with humans, for when they arise, humans have been doing the creating—but a new rhythm that is neither the whine of the robot's machinery nor the crush and crumble of the rock, nor the supersonic screech of the pile making diamond glass from the rock's ashes. Instead, it is the combination of these things with the poetry, with the memories of the field and the forest.

So it is one day that the robot experiences a different rhythm, a different sound, and realizes that this rhythm is not the robot's own, and does not belong to the humans. At first, it is incomprehensible, like distant music, or the faded edges of reception just before a comlink relays to satellite or to ground tower. The robot wonders if the rhythm, the sound, is imaginary. But it continues, and seems to grow day by day in increments almost too small to notice until it is definitely, definitely *there*, but *where*, the robot cannot say. *In the rock*. That is the only way of putting it, but says nothing.

Andrew does not know what it could be. So there is nothing to do but note it, and go on digging.

>>>>

The robot begins to read fiction. But the feelings, the resonances and depths of the poetry, are not so much present in prose. There is the problem of knowing what the author might be talking about, since the robot's only experience living in the human world is the field and now the dig. Dickens leaves the robot stunned and wondering, and after a week attempting *Oliver Twist*, the robot must put the book aside until the situations and characters become clearer. Curiously, the robot finds that Jane Austen's novels are comprehensible and enjoyable, although the life of English country gentry is as close to the robot as the life of a newt under a creek stone. The robot is filled with relief when Emma finally ceases her endless machinations and realizes her love for Knightly. It is as if some clogged line in the robot's hydraulics had a sudden release of pressure or rock that had long been hard and tough became easy to move through.

For some time, the robot does not read books that were written closer to the present, for the robot wants to understand the present most of all, and in reading them now, the robot thinks, much will go unnoticed.

You can always reread them later, Andrew says. Just because you know the plot of something doesn't mean it isn't worth going through again, even though sometimes it does mean that.

I know that, the robot says. That is not what I'm worried about.

Then what are you worried about?

The old books get looser, the farther back in time they go, like string that's played out. The new ones are bunched and it's harder to see all of them.

What?

For the first time, the robot feels something that either cannot be communicated or, nearly as unbelievable, Andrew cannot understand. Andrew is a scientist. The robot will never be a scientist.

>>>>

Two months after the robot has walked along the Quinault with Andrew, it is July, and Andrew tells the robot that Laramie will visit over the weekend.

The robot is at first excited and thinks of things to ask her. There are so many memories of Laramie, but so much is blurred, unconnected. And there are things the robot wishes to tell her, new things about the land that Victor never knew. So much has happened. The robot imagines long conversations between them, perhaps walking in the woods together once again.

Andrew tells me that you may not be happy with the enthalpic impression of your father being downloaded into me. No, that wouldn't be the way to say it. But getting too metaphorical might upset her, remind her of ghosts. Of Victor Wu's death.

No. That's all right. Go on, says the imaginary Laramie.

Well, I don't know what to tell you. I remember you, Laramie. I remember you, and I would be lying if I didn't say that your being here profoundly affects me.

I can't say how I feel about this, robot. What should I call you, robot?

But just as quickly, the robot puts aside such hopes. I am a robot, all of metal and ceramics. I am not Laramie's father. There are only vague memories, and that was another life. She may not even speak to me. I am a ghost to her. Worse than a ghost, a twisted reflection. She'll hate me for what has happened to her father. And again the robot imagines Laramie's disdain, as just and foreseeable as the man's death in "To Build a Fire," but cold in that way, too.

Finally, the robot resolves not to think any more of it. But while Andrew sleeps on the Friday night before Laramie's visit, the robot inhabits the mu and goes roaming through trackless woods, along crisscrossed deadfall and up creeks, for at least a hundred miles. Yet when the mu returns to the living area, the robot can only remember shadows and dark waters and, if asked, could not trace on a map where the mu has been.

Laramie arrives at eleven in the morning. She drives a red Humvee. Andrew and the robot, in the mu, step out of their cavern's entrance to greet her. Laramie steps out. She is wearing sunglasses. She takes a quick look at them, then turns back to the Humvee and, with a practiced jerk, pulls out her old Scoopic. The robot suddenly remembers the squat lines of the camera. Victor bought the Scoopic for her, along with twelve cans of film. It was her first 16-millimeter, and had set him back a good three months' wages. Laramie had shot up seven rolls within a week, and that was when Victor discovered that there would be fees for *developing*, as well.

Andrew steps forward, and so does Laramie. The robot, feeling shy, hangs back in the mu. Andrew and Laramie do not meet, but stay several paces apart.

So, she says. It is her voice. Clear as day.

Yep. This is it.

Well, looks . . . nice. Is this?

Yes, the robot. This is the mobile unit. The robot is inside, really. Well, sort of. We're going *inside* the robot.

No words for a space. Still, they move no closer.

Well, then. Let's go inside the robot.

Laramie, inside the protecting ribwork of the robot. She is safe. Nothing will harm you here, little Bulge. But the robot calms such thoughts. She takes one of the two chairs that are around Andrew's work and eating table in the control room. Abide, the robot thinks. Let her abide for a while.

Do you want tea? I can make you tea.

Yes. I drink herb tea.

Um. Don't have any.

Water?

Yes, water we have.

L.A.'s tastes like sludge.

No wonder. They're even tapping Oregon now.

Really? I believe it.

Andrew pours water for Laramie in a metal cup. He puts more water on a hot plate that sits on top of a monitor, and heats the water for tea. Where have you been? he says.

Port Townsend. Doing background and logistics. My sound guy's laying down local tone and getting wild effects.

Wild?

Unsynced, that's all it means.

I see.

Using Seattle labs is going to be a bitch. The Matties have set up goddamn border crossings.

Tell me about it.

Andrew's water boils and he fills another cup with it, then hunts for a tea bag in a cabinet.

You left them on the table, the robot says.

Laramie gasps, sits up in her chair sharply, then relaxes once again. That was the robot, she says.

Yes. Thank you, robot. Andrew finds the box of tea bags among a clutter of instruments.

Do you. Do you call the robot anything?

Hmm. Not really.

Just call me robot, the robot says. I'm thinking of a name for myself, but I haven't come up with one yet.

Well, then. Robot.

Andrew makes his tea, and they talk more of logistics and the political situation on the peninsula. The robot feels a tenseness between them, or at least in Andrew. His questions and replies are even more terse than usual. The robot doubts Victor Wu would have noticed. Thinking this saddens the robot. More proof that the robot is not Victor Wu, and so can have no claim on Laramie's affection.

The robot listens to Laramie. Since she and Andrew are speaking of things that the robot knows little about, the robot concentrates on her specific words, on her manner of expression.

Lens. Clearness in the world. Sky. Vision. Spread. Range. Watershed.

I thought for two weeks about color or black and white, Laramie says. I don't like colors except for the world's colors that are underneath the ones on film, the ones we see.

I don't follow, Andrew says. The robot has never thought of colors this way, but resolves to spend a day banding out frequencies and only observing intensities of black-and-white tones.

I'll have more water, if you don't mind. This is clear. L.A. water really is as thick as sludge, and I don't like it.

After three hours, Laramie leaves, with promises to return and film the site as part of her documentary.

Robot?

Yes.

Do you think I might interview you? I guess if we could use the mobile unit, that would look better on film. More action. Do you ever come out of here?

Every day during the week, to work in the dig.

Well, then. That must be quite a sight. Maybe I can get that.

Of course you can. That would be fine.

Well. Then.

She says good-bye to Andrew, and with her Scoopic, unused but always present, gets back into the red Humvee, crusted with a layer of settled road dust, and turns around in the dirt road that ends at the living area. More dust rises; Laramie departs. Andrew coughs, brushes dust from his arms. He looks at the mu, shakes his head, but says nothing. He goes back in and makes a third cup of tea.

With the mu, the robot follows easily behind the Humvee, even though Laramie is driving very fast. The robot follows the billowing cloud of dust for twenty-four miles—until the Humvee turns onto the asphalt and heads north toward Port Townsend.

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The robot spends the next day, Sunday, away from books. The robot takes advantage of the melting of the high snows and maneuvers the mu up ridges where before that was no foothold or too much threat of avalanche. The mu skirts along the divide of the Bailey Range with a sure movement, above the tree line and in rolling tundra meadow. Marmots are here, and they squeak and whistle from under big rocks. Pikas have divided the land into separate kingdoms, each to a pika, and they call out their territory over and over until their voices attract the wolves.

This is what the robot has been waiting for. The mu sits by a still lake, as motionless as any other thing that is not alive can be. The wolves come slinking, low and mean, their heat traces preceding and hovering over them like a scudding cloud. Again, they are five, with the old gray leader, his left ear bent, torn and ragged, like a leaf eaten by caterpillars. Swiftly, they are upon the pikas, chasing the little rodents, yipping, cutting them off from their burrows, gobbling one or two down for every ten that

escape. Then the gray leader has had enough to eat. He raises up his head, and instantly, the other dogs heed him. Off they run, as silent and warm as they had come, but now followed by a robot.

Down the tundra meadow of the divide, through boulder shadows and over sprays of tiny wildflowers nestled in the green, the wolves themselves shadows, with the robot another shadow, down, down the greening land. Into the woods, along game trails the robot can barely discern, moving generally north, generally north, the mu barely keeping pace with the advancing wolves, the pace growing steady, monotonous even to the robot, until.

Suddenly, the gray leader pulls up, sniffs the air. The robot also comes to a standstill some hundred feet behind the pack. If they have noticed the robot, they give no sign. Instead, it is a living smell that the gray leader has detected, or so the robot thinks, for the wolves, whining, fall into a V-shape behind the leader. The wolves' muscles tense with a new and directed purpose.

And they spring off in another direction than the one they had been traveling, now angling west, over ridges, against the grain of the wheel-spoke mountains. The robot follows. Up another ridge, then down its spine, around a corner cliff of flaking sedimentary stone, and into a little cove. They strike a road, a human-made track, and run along its edge, carefully close to the flanking brush and woodland. Winding road, and the going is easier for wolves and mu. In fact, the robot could easily overtake the wolves now, and must gauge how much to hold back to avoid overrunning them.

The track becomes thin, just wide enough for a vehicle going one way, with plenty of swishing against branches along the way. Ahead, a house, a little clapboard affair, painted once, perhaps blue, or the blue-green tint may be only mold over bare wood. The ceiling is shingled half with asbestos shakes and half with tin sheeting. Beside the house is a satellite dish, its lower hemisphere greened over with algae. There is an old pickup truck parked at road's end. The road is muddy here from a recent rain, and the tire markings of another vehicle, now gone, cross the top of the pickup's own tracks. All is silent.

Instead of giving the house a wide berth, the gray leader of the wolves stops at the top of the short walkway that leads to the front door. Again, he sniffs for scent, circling, whining. There is only a moment of hesitation, and he snakes up the walkway and slinks to the door. The door hangs open. The other wolves follow several paces back. Another hesitation at the door, then the gray leader slips over the threshold and inside. Even with their leader gone into the house, the other wolves hang back, back from this thing that has for so long meant pain or death to them and their kind. After a long while, the gray leader returns to the door, yips contemptuously, and one by one, the other wolves go inside.

The robot quietly pads to the door. Inside is dark, and the robot's optics take a moment to iris to the proper aperture. There is a great deal of the color red in the house's little living room. The robot scans the room, tries to resolve a pattern out of something that is unfamiliar. The robot has never seen inside a real human dwelling before. But Victor Wu has. The wolves are worrying at something.

The wolves are chewing on the remains of a child.

Without thinking, the robot scampers into the room. The mu is a bit too large for the narrow door, and without the robot's noticing, it tears apart the doorframe as it enters. The wolves look up from what they are doing.

Wolf and robot stare at one another.

The robot adjusts the main camera housing to take them all in, and at the slight birring noise of the servos, the gray leader bristles and growls. The mu takes a step farther, filling half the room. It knocks over a small table, with a shadeless lamp upon it. Both the bulb and the ceramic lamp casing shatter.

Yes?

But you think it knows?

I think the evil knows what it's doing. Look at us in this goddamn century, all going back to hatred and tribes. You can't explain it with economics or cultural semantics or any system at all. Evil and plain meanness is what it is.

Andrew, it's not right for her to die. She hadn't lived long enough to see very many things and to have very many feelings. Those were stolen from her.

That's what murderers steal.

The future?

Yes. Even when you're old, it still isn't right.

Yes. I can see that. It's clear to me.

Well. Then.

I'll turn down the lights.

Well. Good night.

Brown.

What?

Her hair was dark brown.

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And the robot digs deeper and deeper, approaching the Mohorovicic layer, with the true mantle not far beneath, seething, waiting, as it had waited for four billion years, would wait should this attempt fail, should all attempts fail. And again, the foreign rhythm appears, hums along with the glade and bale of the robot's cutting, but distinct from it, distinct from the robot and all human-made things.

What is it? Andrew does not know. But there is something at the edge of the robot's consciousness, at the edge of Victor Wu's unconscious presence, that *does* know, that hears something familiar, as a whisper when the words are lost, but the meaning remains.

One day, the alien rhythm is louder than ever, and for a fleeting moment, the robot recognizes it.

Strong harmonies from the depths of the planet. Maude under the full moon. Magmas rising.

Victor, you can feel it. How can you feel it?

I don't know, Maude, the robot thinks. Maude among the instruments. I remember, thinks the robot, I remember what it felt like to walk the earth and let it show itself to me. There is a showing. Something is showing itself. Something is being revealed. Just as the St. Helens eruption was a revelation, with portents, with auguries that were plain to a man who cared for the Earth.

Something knows we're here, the robot tells Andrew one night.

Andrew is tired from a half day underground, and the afternoon spent explaining the dig to yet another Mattie committee in Port Angeles, but he listens to what the robot has to say.

What? How can you know?

I do, though.

Then you do. Victor would know.

Andrew shucks the soft-sole walking shoes he wears in the city, and climbs onto the little cot inside the robot.

Everyone else wants me to stop digging. Do you want to stop digging?

No, Andrew.

Then what shall we do about it?

Listen, says the robot. Listen. But Andrew has fallen asleep and does not hear. The robot dims the lights inside, adjusts the temperature for Andrew, then goes out into the mu to read.

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The robot listens. The rhythm grows stronger, and now there are variations, windings among the background vibration that is the feedback from the robot's own cutting of the rock and thumping against the Earth's insides. It is like a song, but not a song.

There and there, the robot tells Andrew, but Andrew cannot hear it, encased as he is in the service wagon, and he cannot detect the rhythm on his many instruments.

I believe you, Andrew says, but I simply can't find it.

The robot considers saying no more. What if Andrew really came to doubt the robot's sanity? Would that not mean powering down, rebooting? Or perhaps never coming back up again? Dying?

Andrew will not kill me, the robot thinks. And I will say what it is I hear.

And slowly, day after day, the rhythm develops into an . . . other. The robot is not sure how else to think about it. It is the feeling that a—*one*—someone, is here, even when no one is in view. It is a sense of *presence* that the robot feels. The robot doesn't know. Andrew cannot discover a way of knowing. But the feeling is not some erratic wiring, or even the robot's developing imagination. It is either a madness, or it is a real presence.

And I am not crazy.

Which is a sure sign of madness. Andrew laughs his dry laugh.

Yet again, because of Victor Wu, because Andrew has come to trust the robot in all other things, he takes the robot seriously. In the few spare moments he has for experiments not directly related to the mantle goal, Andrew and a graduate student make coding modifications to the robot's language software.

We're wiring perfect pitch into you, the graduate student, Samantha, says, to go along with your ear for good music. Samantha explains more of what she is doing, but the robot does not follow. Samantha understands the robot's mechanism as a surgeon might a human being's. As she works at an internal

Yes. Bottom shelf.

Laramie gets the cup and tea, then pours some water. Andrew is a careful pourer, but Laramie spatters droplets on the hot burner and they sizzle as they evaporate. She takes her tea back to the table. She jacks the microphone into a small tape recorder that is black with white letters that say Sony. From the recorder, she runs a lead to the Scoopic 16-millimeter camera.

Where's that adapter? Oh. There. I had this Scoopic souped up a little, by the way, since my father. Since I got it. Has a GOES chip. Uplinks and downlinks with the Sony. I could record you in Singapore and not get a frame of drift. But I'm not a pro at this. My sound tech bugged out on me last week. That's one reason it's taken me a while to get back over here. He got scared after the riot. Let me voice-slate and we'll be ready.

Laramie?

Hmm?

Are you safe? I mean, where you are staying in Port Townsend—is it guarded in any way?

No. I'm fine. It's the loggers and the Matties who want to kill each other.

They might mistake you for a logger. You spent a lot of time in the bush.

At this expression, which is Victor Wu's, Laramie looks up. She finds nothing to look at, and turns her gaze back down, to the Sony.

I'm safe as can be expected.

Be careful, Laramie.

You're not my father.

I know that. But I would be pleased if you would be careful.

All right. I'll keep that in mind. Laramide productions-skykomish-eight-three-fourteen-roll-eleven. Robot, have you decided yet on a name?

Not yet.

She raises the camera, looks around through the viewfinder, and finally chooses a bank of monitors to aim it at.

What do you think about?

Pardon?

What do you think about, robot?

I'm not HAL, Laramie.

What?

You know what I mean. You saw that movie many times. Your question sounds snide to me, as if it were a foregone conclusion that I don't *really* think. You don't just throw a question like that at me. It would be better to lead up to it. I don't have to justify my existence to anyone, and I don't particularly like to

Stillaguamish Northwest Indian heritage, and now the symbol for the Skykomish Protectorate. One sign has a picture of a dam, split in half as if by an earthquake, and fish swimming freely through the crack. The other woman gives those who want it steaming cups of hot black coffee or green tea.

The robot waits in the mu at the entrance to the living area, and Andrew walks over to speak with the protesters. The man who drove the Land Rover steps forward to meet him. The robot can hear what is said, but Andrew's body blocks the view of the man with whom Andrew is speaking.

Andrew Hutton. I work here.

I'm with the Protectorate. My name is Neilsen Birchbranch.

How are you with the Protectorate?

I'm an aid to Mother Agatha. I sit on the Healing Circle Interlocking Director's Conclave. I'm the chairperson, in fact.

Secret police.

What was that?

Neilsen, was it?

Let's keep it formal, Dr. Hutton, if you wouldn't mind.

All right. Mr. Birchbranch, what are you doing on my work site?

The demonstration is sanctioned. Mother Agatha herself signed the permit. Freedom of speech is guaranteed in the Protectorate Charter.

I'm not against freedom of speech. We have work to do today.

It is against the law to cross a protest line. That's infringement on freedom of speech and that's in the charter as well. These people feel that the work you're doing is violating the sanctity of the Earth. They feel that you are, in a way, raping the mother of us all. Do you know where your digging machine comes from?

Yes. From a defunct mining operation that the Matties had a hand in putting out of business.

Precisely. It is a symbol. This hole is a symbol. Dr. Hutton, can't you see how it's taken, what you're doing?

I can see how some take it. I can see the politics of it clearly enough.

It is a new politics, Dr. Hutton. The politics of care. I'm not sure you do see that, or else you wouldn't be an opponent.

Maybe. Maybe I show my care in other ways.

What other ways?

Nonpolitical ways. I'm not sure you can see what *I'm* talking about, Mr. Birchbranch.

So. You persist, regardless of the consequences, because you want to see what's down there.

That's fair to say. Yes. I want to see what's down there.

The values of Western science. The same values that gave us thermonuclear war and the genocide of every other species besides man.

Well, there's also woman. That's a separate species.

Pardon?

It's a joke, Mr. Birchbranch. Maybe not a very good one.

No. Not a very good one at all.

So these are the things you're going to say to the television.

Not me as an individual. These people have chosen me to voice *their* concern and care.

Chosen you?

I'm the personal representative of Mother Agatha. You must believe that they've chosen her?

Then are you saying my people can't work? There are Matties. Children of the Matriarch. They work here. This is their livelihood.

They've all agreed to stay home today, I believe you'll find.

They're striking against me?

It's a support measure.

I see.

Good, then. There will be a television truck coming later, and possibly a helicopter from News Five in Seattle. If you'd like, you can route any calls from journalists to me.

That won't be necessary.

The robot hears bitterness in Andrew's voice. Perhaps the other man can also.

So. Thank you for your cooperation, Dr. Hutton.

Yes. What's the time period on the permit? I spoke with Karlie Waterfall, and she said that if it came through, it would be a week at most.

Sister Waterfall has voluntarily resigned from the Science Interweft to devote more time to her work at the Dungeness Spit Weather Observation Station.

When did that. Never mind. Christ, she was the only one with any sense on that damn committee.

There isn't a set period on the permit. There's no time limit on freedom of speech.

Well, get on with it, then, I suppose.

We intend to, Dr. Hutton. One other thing. We have a restraining order against the use of any machinery in the area for the day. I understand that you have a robot.

That's right.

summer.

Because of the great rains, there are great trees. And because of the great trees, the loggers came. And because most of the other trees were cut, the lovers of trees came. And the rain falls on Mattie and logger alike, and it falls and falls and falls.

The Matties have set up folding tables, and many have brought chairs and big umbrellas. The tables and chairs of the Matties line the road for a hundred yards, and whenever a network reporter arrives, the tables and chairs are put hastily away and the Matties stand and grow agitated.

On the eleventh day of the protest, Laramie returns. Laramie has not coordinated her arrival with the Matties', and so comes upon them unawares with her camera. The Matties smile into the lens. After she begins asking questions, a delegation approaches her and asks her to wait, that the spokesperson is on his way, and he will give her the best answers. No one will speak with Laramie after this, and Andrew invites her into the living area to wait for the arrival of the spokesperson.

The robot has been watching, just inside the entrance to the living area, as the robot has been watching for days now. Only at night, when the protesters go back to their bus and the Land Rover carries away the tables and chairs, does the robot go out into the open.

This can't go on, Andrew says. I can't stop paying wages. I'm *required* to pay wages to my Mattie techs, but I would anyway, and all the others. No digging, and all the grant money flowing away.

Sorry to hear that, Laramie says.

Laramie uses the Scoopic to make various shots of the robot's interior. Andrew says nothing, but smiles thinly. She has the Sony slung around her shoulder and, the robot notices, is recording her conversation with Andrew.

Did the robot discuss with you me going down in the hole?

In the dig. It's a spiral, like a Slinky, more or less. Yes. Yes, you can come as soon as we're allowed to go back down there.

That's great. Will I be able to film any of what it looks like?

Hmm. Maybe we can set something up. There's a small observation port on the service wagon. We'll have to turn off the fusion on the dray first, or you won't be filming for very long, I don't think.

Excellent. I'm really tired of protests and officials who don't call themselves officials, and all those squalid houses where all the loggers moved out at Aberdeen. There's been a lot of trouble there.

I heard about it.

We didn't used to call them loggers much.

That's because everybody was one.

We used to drive through Aberdeen when we wanted to get to the sea.

And up the coast to La Push.

Those black beaches across the river. I used to know why the rocks were so black.

Basalt scree that a glacier brought down that valley last ice age. That's what happened to the back half of the horseshoe. That's where it went.

Yeah. Basalt tumble. We slept there all night one night in August. You thought Papa would be pissed, but he didn't even notice, of course. He just asked me about the rocks I saw and told me about the Big Fist of sediment lifting up the sea floor and breaking it and all that. Papa. You and I made love that night, didn't we, Andrew?

Yes, Laramie. You know we did.

I know it.

Then.

Yep. The robot's listening, isn't it?

I'm listening, Laramie, if you don't mind.

No.

You know I'm not Victor Wu. I'm not shocked. I am rather surprised, however.

What do you mean?

About Andrew. I've never known him when he was in love with a woman.

Andrew's crackling chuckle. Not for a while, he says.

There was that chemist, after me. You wrote me about her. That was your last letter.

You never wrote me back.

I was pissed.

I figured you would be. Still, you couldn't have been pissed for five years.

I couldn't?

We broke up the next January.

Sorry to hear that.

She lacked imagination. They all lacked imagination.

Jesus, you're clinical.

I know what I like.

What do you like?

I can't have what I like.

Why not?

Because she has to live in Los Angeles, and I'm not particularly interested in the geology of Southern California.

The robot sees that Laramie's fine white skin has taken on a flush.

And it's as simple as that, she says.

Why make it complicated?

Maybe *it* is complicated. Maybe you're simplistic.

Will you turn that damn camera off?

No.

Well. There you have it.

>>>>>>>>>>

On the fourteenth day, the protesters do not arrive in the morning. There is no explanation, and no hint given to Andrew as to when they will return. Once again, the robot digs. Andrew puts aside several tests and side projects in order to dig faster and deeper. The robot is in the element that the metal of the rotor blades and the grip of the ceramic thread were made for—hard-rock mining—and the robot presses hard, and the rock explodes and fuses as obsidian diamond glass to the walls behind the robot, and the tunnel approaches forty miles in depth.

No one has ever been this deep before.

The techs from logging families and the Mattie techs are barely speaking to one another, and the graduate students are uneasy and tense, afraid to take sides. Andrew holds the crew together by a silent and furious force of will. The robot does not want to let Andrew down, and digs the harder.

Samantha has made the last of the modifications to the robot's linguistics, and puts the new code on-line. The robot immediately feels the difference. The presence, the otherness, grows stronger and stronger with every hour until the robot is certain of it. But of *what*, there is no saying.

>>>>>>>>>>

Two days of digging, and on the third, Laramie arrives in the early morning and prepares to descend with the crew. But before the work can begin for the day, Andrew receives a call telling him that proceedings are underway for a new permit of protest, and a long-term suspension of the dig. He drives to Forks, where the committee will meet in the afternoon. It is a rainy day, and the robot worries that Andrew may drive too fast on the slippery pavement. Still, there is plenty of time for him to make the meeting.

In Andrew's absence, the Matties and loggers fall to quarreling about duties, and the graduate student Andrew has left in charge cannot resolve the differences. After an hour of listening to the wrangling, even the robot can see that no work will be done this day. The robot asks permission to take Laramie down to the bottom of the dig, and the graduate student, in disgust at the situation, shrugs and goes back to refereeing the technicians' argument.

As Laramie and the robot are preparing to leave, Neilsen Birchbranch drives up in the Protectorate Land Rover. A light rain is falling, and the graduate student reluctantly admits him into the work site's initial cavern, where the others are gathered. The robot—digger and mu—draws back into the darkness of the true entrance to the dig.

Let's go, Laramie says.

But I'm afraid of this man, the robot replies. He isn't a good man. I know that for a fact.

Then let's get out of here.

There may be trouble.

I need to speak with Hutton, Neilsen Birchbranch says to the graduate student. It is very important that I speak with him today.

Take me down, please, robot. I may never get another chance.

The robot considers. As always, it is difficult to deny Laramie something she really wants with all her heart. And there is so much to show her. The robot has been thinking about showing the dig to Laramie for a long time. And the farther down they go, the farther they get from Neilsen Birchbranch's trouble.

We have a witness that places one of your machines at the scene of a crime, says Neilsen Birchbranch. A very serious crime.

Neilsen Birchbranch steps farther into the cavern, gazes around. The robot slowly withdraws down the Mohole. For all the digger's giant proportions, its movement is very quiet and, the robot hopes, unnoticed.

Nothing but you can survive down there, can it, robot? Laramie says. How deep is it down there?

Forty-three miles.

He can't turn you off if you're forty miles deep. We'll stay down until Andrew comes back.

The first few miles of the descent are the most visually interesting, and after reaching a depth at which unprotected humans cannot survive the heat, the robot moves at a fraction of the usual pace. There are areas where the glass spray on the walls has myriad hues taken from all the minerals that melted together in the slurry around the nuclear pile, then spewed out to line the tunnel. The walls are smooth only at first glance, but are really a series of overlapping sheets, one imperfectly flowing atop the other, as sheets of ice form over a spring in winter. The robot directs lights to some of the more interesting formations, and they glow with the brilliance and prismatic hue of stained glass.

I didn't think I'd get anything this good, Laramie says. This is wonderful. The colors. God, I'm glad I went with color.

Deeper, and the walls become milky white. The granite behind glows darkly, three yards under the glassine plaster.

Twenty miles. Thirty.

Only basalt in the slurry now, and the walls are colorless. Yet they have the shape of the rock many feet behind them, and so they catch the light with effulgent glimmer.

Clear and clean.

Laramie may be speaking to herself; the robot cannot tell.

They pass through a region where magma pools against the walls and ceilings in places, held back by the diamond-like coating. The pressure is so great that the magma glows with a blue and white intensity. The tunnel sparkles of its own accord, and the robot must dim the viewport to keep from blinding Laramie.

Like the sky behind the sky.

The robot says nothing. Laramie is happy, the robot thinks. Little Bulge likes it down here.

I thought you *might* talk, but it's so cold up there, it takes ages to say anything. Down here things go a lot faster.

Are you. What are you?

I told you. I'm me.

The rocks?

Nope.

The magma?

Nope. Guess again.

Where are you? Show yourself to me.

I am.

Then I've guessed. You're the whole planet. You're the Earth.

Laughter. Definitely laughter. I'm not, either. I'm just here. Just around here.

Where's here?

Between the big ocean and the little ocean.

The Olympic Peninsula?

Is that what you call it? That's a hard word for a name.

Skykomish.

That's better. Listen, I have a lot of things I want to ask you. We all do.

There is an explosion.

At first the robot thinks that a wall has blown out near the region of the magma pools. This will be dangerous, but it should be possible to reinforce long enough to get through. It may mean trouble for the dig, though. Now there will be more funding. The Matties will allow it to go ahead. Even the robot can see that the politics have changed.

Everything has changed.

There is another explosion. A series of explosions.

Robot?

Laramie. I. I have so much to tell you.

What is that shaking? I'm scared down here. Do you think we can go up now?

Hello. Tree? Are you still there?

Even with the tremors—there are huge rumblings and cracklings all about—the robot is attuned to the voice, the presence, and can still hear its words.

I really need to talk to you.

Papa, do you think we can go up now?

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The pressure wave lifts the robot—impossibly tilts the robot—over and over—shatter of the walls as diamonds shatter like the shrapnel of stars and the rocks behind—tumble and light, light from the glow of the give, the sudden release of tension—the bulk melt of the undisclosed—sideways, but what is sideways?—tumble and tumble—scree within thin melt moving, turning, curling like a wave and the robot on the curl, under the curl, hurled down down down over over down dark dark.

Dark.

Dark and buried.

Find my daughter.

The engineers have built one hell of a machine.

Find my daughter.

The robot powers up again. The robot begins, blindly, to dig. It is only by sheer luck that the robot comes upon the service wagon. The robot melts and compacts a space, creates an opening, temporary, dangerously temporary. Finds the power hitch to the wagon and plugs in.

Turns on the lights and air-conditioning inside the wagon. The video cameras inside.

Laramie is twisted against a control console. Her neck is impossibly twisted. She is dead.

No. She isn't. Can't be. She is.

What? Within the curve of her stomach, holding it to shelter, the Scoopic. But the latch has sprung, and 16-millimeter film is spilled out and tangled about her legs.

No. Laramie. Little Bulge.

Hello?

The robot screams. The robot howls in anguish. Forty miles deep, the robot cries out a soul's agony into the rock. A living soul mourning a dead one.

Stop that.

The other, the presence. The robot does not care. Past caring.

You're scaring me.

Past.

You're scaring me.

Grind of rotors, ineffectual grind. How can you live? How can humans live when this happens? Ah, no. You can't live. You cannot. You can, and it is worse. Worse than not living. No no no no.

Stop it.

And something happens. Something very large—gives. More. Faults faults everywhere. Settle, rise, settle. Faults like a wizened crust, like a mind falling into shards of fear. Faults and settle, rise and settle. Rise.

No. I.

But there is a way. There is a weakness revealed, and there is a way. Not wide enough, not yet. But a way to go. A way to take her home. Take her home to Andrew. The robot begins to dig.

>>>>>>>>>>

The robot digs. There is only the digging, the bite of blade and saw, the gather of lade and bale. Digging. Upward digging.

The way is made easier by the shaking, the constant, constant tremble of what the robot knows to be fear, incomprehension.

A child who has seen a grown-up's sorrow, and does not understand. A frightened child.

By the time the robot comes to this realization, it is too late. The robot is too high, and when called, the child does not answer. Or perhaps it is that the child needs time to calm, that it cannot answer. The robot calls again and again. Nothing. Nothing can be heard above the rumble of fear.

Poor trembling Skykomish. The robot continues digging, drawing behind it the service wagon. Bringing Laramie to Andrew.

A day passes. Two. Rock. Stone. The roots of the mountains, and sediment, compressed to schist. The roots of the mountains, and the robot slowly comes to its senses. Comprehends.

After a long moment of stillness—a minute, an hour? No reckoning in the utter depths, and the robot is not that kind of robot—after a long moment of reflection, the robot loses the service wagon.

Little Bulge, good-bye.

Up. Now. Up because the way is easier up than down, and that is the only reason.

After three days, the robot emerges from the ground. In a cove that the robot recognizes. On the Quinault watershed. Into a steady autumn rain.

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The robot wanders up the Quinault River. Every day rains, and no nights are clear. The forest is in gloom, and moss hangs wet and dark. Where the trail is not wide enough, the robot bends trees, trying not to break them, but uprooting many. Many trees have fallen, for there are earthquakes—waves and waves of them. Earthquakes the like of which have never been seen in the world. The robot cuts deadfall from its path with little effort and little thought. The digger's passage through the forest is like that of a hundred bears—not a path of destruction, but a marked and terrible path, nonetheless.

Where the Quinault turns against a great ridge, the robot fords and continues upward, away from the trees. The robot crosses Low Divide during the first snow of the season. The sun is low, then gone

behind the cloaked western ridges. For a time, the ground's rumblings still. All sound is muffled by the quiet snow. The twilight air is like silence about the robot.

Something has happened.

At the saddle of the divide, the robot pauses. The pass is unfamiliar. Something has happened inside. Victor Wu has gone away. Or Victor Wu has come fully to life. The two are the same.

Then am I a man?

What is my name?

Orpheus. Ha. A good one.

Old Orf up from Hades. I've read about you. And Euridice. I didn't understand. And now I do. Poems are pretty rocks that know things. You pull them from the earth. Some you leave behind.

Talking to myself.

After a moment, the robot, Orf, grinds steadily on. He grinds steadily on.

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Down the valley of the Elwha, and north as the river flows and greatens. Earthquakes heave and slap, slap and heave. Sometimes a tree falls onto the digger, but Orf pays no mind. He is made of the stronger material, and they cannot harm him.

Down the valley of the Elwha, past the dam that the Matties have carefully removed, that would not have withstood the quakes if it were still there. The trail becomes a dirt road. The road, buckled pavement. The robot follows the remains of the highway into what once was Port Angeles.

What will future geologists make of this? The town has become scree, impossible to separate and reconfigure. Twists of metal gleam in the pilings by the light of undying fires. And amid the fire and rubble, figures move. Orf rolls into the city.

A man sits in a clear space, holds his knees to his chest, and stares. Orf stops well away from him.

I am looking for a man named Neilsen Birchbranch. Do you know where I can find him?

The man says nothing.

Do you know where I can find Neilsen Birchbranch? He works for the Protectorate.

The man says nothing, but begins to rock back and forth on his haunches.

I'm looking. Can you.

The man begins to moan.

Orf moves onward. At a point where the piles of rubble begin to be higher, a makeshift roadblock has been set up. Orf stops at it, and a group of men and women, all armed with rifles, come out of the declivities of the town scree.

Come out of there, an old man says. He points his gun at Orf.

There isn't anybody in here.

Come out, or we'll blow you to hell.

I've already been there.

Come on out of there.

I'm looking for a man named Neilsen Birchbranch. He works for the Protectorate.

Goddamn we will shoot you, you goddamn Mattie.

Do you know where I can find him?

The old man spits on the ground. Reckon he's with the others.

The others?

That's what I said.

Where are they?

Out at the dump.

Where's the dump?

That way. The old man points with his gun. Now come out.

Orf turns and rolls away in the direction of the dump. Shots ring out. They ricochet off him and crackle against the rubble.

Five miles out of town, Orf finds the dump. There are bodies here; hundreds of bodies. Men, women, children. At first, he thinks they are the dead from the quakes, collected and brought here.

With the edge of a saw blade, Orf turns one of the bodies over. It is a woman. She has been shot in the head.

Most of the other bodies are people who have been shot. Or hacked up. Or had their necks broken with clubs.

The loggers have had their revenge.

And there among the bodies, Orf pauses. He has recognized one. It is the woman from the field, the speaker, Mother Agatha. It is her; there is no mistake. A small bullet hole is in the forehead of her peaceful face.

Orf rolls back to the city. It is night. He bursts through the roadblock without stopping. Shots, the flash of muzzles. It is all so much waste. Down lightless streets, and streets lit with fires, some deliberate, some not. Every half hour or so, another earthquake rumbles through, throwing rubble willy-nilly. There are often screams.

Orf comes upon a steady fire, well maintained, and sees that it is surrounded by people—people in the blue and brown dress of Matties. It is a silent throng. Orf hangs back, listens.

Oh Mother Agatha Mother Goddess hear our prayer.

Hear our prayer.

We know we have done wrong. We have sinned against you. Hear our prayer.

Hear our prayer.

Hold back your wrath. We are unworthy and evil. This we know. We beg you even still. Hold back your wrath. Hear our prayer.

Hear our prayer.

Goddamn mother—

The report of a gun. Someone—man or woman, Orf cannot tell—crumples in the ring of the fire. Instead of fleeing, the others stand still.

Another shot. Another falls.

Hear our prayer.

No one moves.

Another shot. A man falls, groaning, grasping at his leg. No one moves. He writhes in the shadows of the fire, in the dust of the ruins. No one helps him.

The rifleman shoots no more. The man writhes. The voice of the minister goes up to his goddess, and the people respond mechanically.

Like robots are supposed to, Orf thinks. The man ceases his writhing. There is nothing to do. Orf rolls on quietly through the night, out of the city and east. The going is easy over the broken highway. In two hours, Orf is in what was Port Townsend.

There is no rubble here, no ruins. The sea has washed it away. No bodies. No trees. Only desolation, bare-wiped desolation. He rolls down to where the docks had been, and looks out upon the lapping waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Then the slap of an earthquake, and Orf discovers the reason for the missing city. The slap runs its way down to the sea and is perfectly mirrored by the other side of the strait. Reflected back, a tsunami. Rolls over the land. Nothing left to take. Almost enough to suck in a digging robot. Orf must backpedal with his threads, dig in to keep from being pulled forward by the suck of the water as it retreats to the sea.

Everyone is drowned here.

Orf will not find Neilsen Birchbranch by looking in the cities. He heads to the southwest now, back to the center of the mountains.

Into the forest. Orf wanders without aim. A day. Many days. Once, he remembers the mu, tries to go out of himself and find it. The uplink doesn't work; there is only static on a clear channel. Have all the satellites fallen from the sky? He wanders on, a giant among the gigantic trees.

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Across one divide. Down a valley. Finally, back to the dig site. All is devastation here, a tumble of stone. Not a sign of anyone. The living area is caved in. Orf digs, but cannot locate the mu. All he finds is a

twisted piece of red metal—the remains of Laramie’s Humvee. Nothing else. No reason to stay.

Across another divide. Another valley. No longer caring to keep track. Stopping to look at rocks, or a peculiar bend in a river. The accumulation of snow.

One day, the earthquakes stop.

Quiet, child. Hush now. You’ve seen too much for young eyes. Hush and be quiet for a while and take your rest.

Winter, it must be. Orf coming over Snow Dome, down the Blue Glacier and into the valley of the Hoh, where the biggest of the big trees are. Darkness earlier and earlier. In these towering woods, at these high latitudes, winter days are a perpetual twilight. Orf alongside the Hoh. Its water opaque with outwash sludge, the heart of Mount Olympus, washing away to the sea.

Then away from the river, deeper into the rain forest. As deep and as wild as it gets, many miles from roads. If there are roads anymore.

One hushed afternoon—or perhaps early evening, they are blending—a climbing rope, dangling from a tree. Movement to the left.

Another rope. Many ropes falling from the trees like rain that stays suspended. And down the ropes men and women slide like spiders. Orf is surrounded. They are dressed in tattered suits of green. Silently, they gather round the digger until Orf cannot move for fear of crushing one of them.

Men and women. Some have rifles slung across their backs. Two women carry children in the same manner, and the young ones are utterly, utterly quiet.

All right. Orf has not heard a voice in weeks, and his own, arising from his exterior speakers, startles him. What is it you want?

One of the men in green steps forward.

Wait, he says.

Orf waits with the silent people for he knows not what. And then there is a movement in the undergrowth of vine maple. From around a low slope and over some deadfall, the mu appears. It moves clumsily. Whoever is at the controls doesn’t know what he’s doing, Orf thinks.

The mu scampers up to the digger and stops.

Andrew walks over the slope.

He steps lightly along the deadfall on the forest floor and comes to stand beside the mu. In his hand is a metal box with an antenna extended from it.

Do you want this thing back?

They are silent for a while. It is not a strained silence, but is right. Orf speaks first.

Laramie is dead. I couldn’t save her.

I know.

What happened at the dig?

I'm not sure. I've only got secondhand information, but I think that the secret policeman coerced Gurney into sabotaging the place. I think he threatened to hurt his family. It was a bomb. A big bomb. Probably chemical. Everybody died, not just. Not just Laramie.

So. I'm sorry. So. Who are these people?

Andrew laughs. It has been so, so long. That dry laugh. A harsh, fair laugh, out of place before, perhaps, but suited now to these harsh times.

These are rangers of the United States Park Service. They live here. In the tops of the old growth. We guard the forest.

We?

Somehow or another, I've become the head ranger.

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Winter, and the rangers bundle in the nooks of their firs and hemlocks, their spruces and cedars. The digger must remain on the ground, but using the mu, Orf can venture up to their village in the trees.

In the highest tree, in the upper branches, Andrew has slung his hammock. Orf and he spend many days there, talking, discussing how things were, how they might be. Politics have shifted in the outside world, and Andrew is part of them now, seeking a place for his band of outcast civil servants that has become a family, and then a tribe.

The rangers hold the center of the peninsula against Mattie and logger, or against the remains of them. There is to be no clearing of the forest, and no worship of it, either, but a conservation and guard, a stewardship and a waiting. Rangers defend the woods. They take no permanent mates and have no children. The young ones Orf had seen before were stolen children, taken from Matties and loggers. Ranger women in their constant vigilance could not afford to be pregnant, and if they were, took fungal herbs that induced abortion. All must be given to the watching.

Winter, spring. Another year. Years. The fortunes of the rangers ebb and flow, but always the forests are held. Orf comes to their aid often with the mu and, when the situation is very dire, with the whirling blades of the digger.

Andrew hopes to open the Mohole back up one day, when all is secure, to continue the dig—especially in light of Orf's discovery of . . . whatever it is that is down there. But now there are politics and fighting, and that time never comes. Andrew was right, and tribes, strange tribes, arise in the outside world. Governments crumble and disappear. Soon it is rangers alone who keep a kind of learning and history alive, and who come to preserve more than trees.

In any case, Andrew's heart seems to have gone out of the project. Somewhere below his love is buried, deeper than any man's has ever been buried before. If he goes back down, he may come upon her yet. Andrew is a brave man, Orf knows. But maybe not that brave.

And always Orf hears rumors of a bad man and killer who appears here and there, sometimes in the service of the Matties, sometimes working for logger clans. But Orf never finds Neilsen Birchbranch. Never even discovers his real name. And a time comes when the rumors cease.

Many years. Andrew grows old. Orf does not grow old. The digger's nuclear fusion pile will not run down. Only a malfunction could keep Orf from living a thousand years. Perhaps a thousand more.

One morning, in the mu, Orf climbs to Andrew's hammock and finds that Andrew has died in the night.

Gently, Orf envelops the man in the mu's arms; gently, he carries the body down from the trees. And walks through the forest. And crosses a divide. And another. To the valley of the Elwha. And up the Lillian River, to a basalt stela that, curiously, has no foramens in its makeup. That speaks of deep things, from far under the earth. That this land—strange peninsula between two salt waters—may be the place to dig and find what those things are.

At its base, Orf buries his friend, Andrew Hutton.

And then, Orf—digger and mu—returns to the long-abandoned worksite. Orf clears the rocky entrance, finds the old passage. Orf digs down into the earth, and closes the path behind him.



In the heart of the great horseshoe twist of the Olympic Peninsula, in the heart of the mountains themselves, there lives a monster, a giant, who some say is also a god. A ranger, hunting in some hidden dale or along the banks of a nameless rivulet flowing from the snow's spring runoff, will feel the presence of another, watching. The ranger will turn, and catch—what?—the flash of tarnished metal, the glint of wan sun off a glassy eye? Then the spirit, the presence, will be gone from the ranger's senses, and he will question whether he felt anything at all. Such sightings happen only once or twice in a fortnight of years.

But there is a rock, black and tall, in the deepest, oldest wood, up a secret tributary of the Elwha River, where young rangers, seeking their visions, will deliberately go. Some do not return from that high valley. Others come back reporting a strange and wonderful thing: On a particular night in October, when the moon is new and all the land is shrouded, they say the monster emerges from a hole in the mountains—but never the same hole—and closes the way behind. The monster travels to the rock on the Lillian.

The earth rumbles like distant thunder, and trees are gently bent out of the monster's way as if they were thin branches. And at that rock on the Lillian River, the monster stays for a time, shining darkly under the stars. The monster stays and is utterly silent. The reasons why are lost to legend, but at that time young rangers with strong and empty hearts are given waking dreams and prophecies to fill them.

Then, not long before sunrise, the monster moves, pivots on its great bulk, and returns from whence it came. There are those who follow, who are called to track the monster back to its lair. These are seldom the strongest or the bravest, and they are not particularly missed. Some say the monster eats them or tortures them in fires of liquid stone. But others say that the monster leads them to a new land, wider and deeper than any human can conceive, under the mountain, that the Earth is bigger on the inside than on the outside. No one knows. No one knows, because they do not return to tell the tale, and the world falls further into ruin, and the monster—or god—no longer speaks.

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