

The Isle Is Full of Noises

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... and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.
—NIETZSCHE

IT IS AN island here, now.

At the clearest moments of the day—usually late in the morning, occasionally after noon, and at night when the lights come on—a distant coastline is sometimes discernible. This coast is the higher area of the city, that part which still remains intact above water.

The city was flooded a decade ago. The Sound possessed it. The facts had been predicted some while, and various things were done in readiness, mostly comprising a mass desertion.

They say the lower levels of those buildings which now form the island will begin to give way in five years. But they were saying that, too, five years back.

Also there are the sunsets. (Something stirred up in the atmosphere apparently, by the influx of water, some generation of heat or cold or vapour.) They start, or appear to do so, the sunsets, about three o'clock in the afternoon, and continue until the sun actually goes under the horizon, which in summer can be as late as seven forty-five.

For hours the roof terraces, towerettes, and glass lofts of the island catch a deepening blood-and-copper light, turning to new bronze, raw amber, cubes of hot pink ice.

Yse lives on West Ridge, in a glass loft. She has, like most of the island residents, only one level, but there's plenty of space. (Below, if anyone remembers, lies a great warehouse, with fish, even sometimes barracuda, gliding between the girders.)

Beyond her glass west wall, a freak tree has rooted in the terrace. Now nine years old, it towers up over the loft, and the surrounding towers and lofts, while its serpentine branches dip down into the water. Trees are unusual here. This tree, which Yse calls Snake (for the branches), seems unfazed by the salt content of the water. It may be a sort of willow, a willow crossed with a snake.

Sometimes Yse watches fish glimmering through the tree's long hair, that floats just under the surface. This appeals to her, as the whole notion of the island does. Then one morning she comes out and finds, caught in the coils of her snake-willow, a piano.

Best to describe Yse, at this point, which is not easy.

She might well have said herself (being a writer by trade but also by desire) that she doesn't want you to be disappointed, that you should hold on to the idea that what you get at first, here, may not be what is to be offered later.

Then again, there is a disparity between what Yse seems to be, or is, and what Yse *also seems* to be, or *is*.

Her name, however, as she has often had to explain, is pronounced to rhyme with "please"—more correctly, *pleezp*. Eeze. Is it French? Or some sport from Latin-Spanish? God knows.

Yse is in her middle years, not tall, rather heavy, dumpy. Her fair, greying hair is too fine, and so she cuts it very short. Yse is also slender, taller, and her long hair (still fair, still greying) hangs in thick silken hanks down her back. One constant, grey eyes.

She keeps only a single mirror, in the bathroom above the wash basin. Looking in it is always a surprise for Yse: Who on earth is that? But she never lingers, soon she is away from it and back to herself. And in this way, too, she deals with Per Laszd, the lover she has never had.

Yse had brought the coffeepot and some peaches onto the terrace. It is a fine morning, and she is considering walking along the bridgetway to the boat stop, and going over to the cafes on East Heights. There are always things on at the cafes, psychic fairs, art shows, theatre. And she needs some more lamp oil.

Having placed the coffee and fruit, Yse looks up and sees the piano.

"Oh," says Yse, aloud.

She is very, very startled, and there are good reasons for this, beyond the obvious oddity itself.

She goes to the edge of the terrace and leans over, where the tree leans over, and looks at the snake arms which hold the piano fast, tilted only slightly, and fringed by rippling leaves.

The piano is old, huge, a type of pianoforte, its two lids fast shut, concealing both the keys and its inner parts.

Water swirls round it idly. It is intensely black, scarcely marked by its swim.

And has it been swimming? Probably it was jettisoned from some apartment on the mainland (the upper city). Then, stretching out its three strong legs, it set off savagely for the island, determined not to go down.

Yse has reasons, too, for thinking in this way.

She reaches out, but cannot quite touch the piano.

There are tides about the island, variable, sometimes rough.

If she leaves the piano where it is, the evening tide may be a rough one, and lift it away, and she will lose it.

She *knows* it must have swum here.

Yse goes to the table and sits, drinking coffee, looking at the piano. As she does this a breeze comes in off the Sound, and stirs her phantom long heavy soft hair, so it brushes her face and neck and the sides of her arms. And the piano makes a faint twanging, she thinks perhaps it does, up through its shut lids that are like closed eyes and lips together.

"What makes a vampire seductive?" Yse asks Lucius, at the Cafe Blonde. "I mean, irresistible?"

"His beauty," says Lucius. He laughs, showing his teeth. "I knew a vampire once. No, make that twice. I met him twice."

"Yes?" asks Yse cautiously. Lucius has met them all, ghosts, demons, angels. She partly believes it to be so, yet knows he mixes lies with the truths; a kind of test, or trap, for the listener. "Well, what happened?"

"We walk, talk, drink, make love. He bites me. Here, see?" Lucius moves aside his long locks (luxurious, but greying, as are her own). On his coal-dark neck, no longer young, but strong as a column, an old scar.

"You told me once before," says Yse, "a shark did that."

"To reassure you. But it was a vampire."

"What did you do?"

"I say to him, Watch out, monsieur."

"And then?"

"He watched out. Next night, I met him again. He had yellow eyes, like a cat."

"He was undead?"

"The undeadeest thing I ever laid."

He laughs. Yse laughs, thoughtfully. "A piano's caught in my terrace tree."

"*Oh yeah,*" says Lucius, the perhaps arch liar.

"You don't believe me."

"What is your thing about vampires?"

"I'm writing about a vampire."

"Let me read your book."

"Someday. But Lucius—it isn't their charisma. Not their beauty that makes them irresistible—"

"No?"

"Think what they must be like__skin in rags, dead but walking. Stinking of the grave—"

"They use their hudja-magica to take all that away."

"It's how they make *us* feel."

"Yeah, Yse. You got it."

"What they can do to *us*"

"Dance all night," says Lucius, reminiscent. He watches a handsome youth across the cafe, juggling

mirrors that flash un-nervingly, his skin the colour of an island twilight

"Lucius, will you help me shift die piano into my loft?"

"Sure thing."

"Not tomorrow, or next month. I mean, could we do it today, before sunset starts?"

"I love you, Yse. Because of you, I shall go to heaven."

"Thanks."

"Shit piano," he says. "I could have slept in my boat. I could have paddled over to Venezule. I could have watched the thought of Venus rise through the grey brain of the sky. Piano huh, piano. Who shall I bring to help me? That boy, he looks strong, look at those minors go."

The beast had swum to shore, to the beach, through the pale, transparent urges of the waves, when die star Venus was in the brain-grey sky. But not here.

There.

In the dark before star rise and dawn, more than two centuries ago. First the rifts, the hits of the dark sea, and in them these mysterious thrusts and pushes, die limbs like those of some huge swimmer, part man and part lion and part crab— but also, a manta ray.

Then, the lid breaks for a second through the fans of water, under the dawn star's piercing steel. Wet as black mirror, the closed lid of the piano, as it strives, on three powerful beast legs, for me beach.

This Island is an island of sands, then of trees, the sombre sullen palms that sweep the shore. Inland, heights, vegetation, plantations, some of coffee and sugar and rubber, and *one* of imported kayar. An invented island, a composite.

Does it crawl onto the sand, the legs still moving, crouching low like a beast? Does it rest on the sand, under the sway of die palm trees, as a sun rises?

The Island has a name, like the house which is up there, unseen, on the inner heights. Bleumaneer.

(*Notes*: Gregers Vonderjan brought his wife to Bleumaneer in the last days of his wealth...)

The piano crouched stilly at the edge of the beach, the sea retreating from it, and the dark of night falling away...

It's sunset.

Lucius, in the bloody light, with two men from the Cafe Blonde (neither the juggler), juggle the black piano from the possessive tentacles of the snake-willow.

With a rattle, a shattering of sounds (like slung cutlery), it fetches up on the terrace. The men stand perplexed, looking at it. Yse watches from her glass wall.

"Broke the cock thing."

"No way to move it. Shoul da took a crane."

They prowl about the piano, while the red light blooms across its shade.

Lucius tries delicately to raise the lid from the keys. The lid does not move. The other two, they wrench at the other lid, the piano's top (pate, shell). This, too, is fastened stuck. (Yse had made half a move, as if to stop them. Then her arm fell lax.)

"Damn ol' thing. What she wan' this ol' thing for?"

They back away. One makes a kicking movement. Lucius shakes his head; his long locks jangle across the flaming sky.

"Do you want this, girl?" Lucius asks Yse by her glass.

"Yes." Shortly. "I said I did."

"'S all broke up. Won't play you none," sings the light-eyed man, Carr, who wants to kick the piano, even now his loose leg pawing in its jeans.

Trails of water slip away from the piano, over the terrace, like chains.

Yse opens her wide glass doors. The men carry the piano in and set it on her bare wooden floor.

Yse brings them, now docile as their maid, white rum, while Lucius shares out the bills.

"Hurt my back," whines Carr the kicker.

"Piano," says Lucius, drinking, "pian-o—O pain!"

He says to her at the doors (as the men scramble back into their boat), "That vampire I danced with. Where he bit me. Still feel him there, biting me, some nights. Like a piece of broken bottle in my neck. I followed him, did I say to you? I followed him and saw him climb in under his grave just before the sun came up. A marble marker up on top. It shifted easy as breath, settles back like a sigh. But he was beautiful, that boy with yellow eyes. Made me feel like a king, with him. Young as a lion, with him. *Old* as him, too. A thousand years in a skin of smoothest suede."

Yse nods.

She watches Lucius away into the sunset, of which three hours are still left.

Yse scatters two bags of porous litter-chips, which are used all over the Island, to absorb the spillages and seepages of the Sound, to mop up the wet that slowly showers from the piano. She does not touch it. Except with her right hand, for a second, flat on the top of it.

The wood feels ancient and hollow, and she thinks it hasn't, perhaps, a metal frame.

As the redness folds over deeper and deeper, Yse lights the oil lamp on her worktable, and sits there, looking forty feet across the loft, at the piano on the sunset. Under her right hand now, the pages she has already written, in her fast untidy scrawl.

Pian-o. O pain.

Shush, says the Sound tide, flooding the city, pulsing through the walls, struts, and girders below.

Yse thinks distinctly, suddenly—it is always this way—about Per Laszd. But then another man's memory taps at her mind.

Yse picks up her pen, almost absently. She writes:

"Like those hallucinations which sometimes come at the edge of sleep, so that you wake, thinking two or three words have been spoken close to your ear, or that a tall figure stands hi the corner... like this, the image now and then appears before him.

"Then he sees her, the woman, sitting on the rock, her white dress and her ivory-coloured hair, hard-gleaming in a post-storm sunlight. Impossible to tell her age. A desiccated young girl, or unlined old woman. And the transparent sea lapping in across the sand...

"But he has said, the Island is quite deserted now."

. Antoinelle's Courtship

Gregers Vonderjan brought his wife to Bleumaneer in the last days of his wealth.

In this way, she knew nothing about them, the grave losses to come, but then they had been married only a few months. She knew little enough about him, either.

Antoinelle was raised among staunch and secretive people. Until she was fourteen, she had thought herself ugly, and after that, beautiful. A sunset revelation had put her right, the westering glow pouring in sideways to paint the face in her mirror, on its slim, long throat. She found, too, she had shoulders, and cheekbones. Hands, whose tendons flexed in fans. With the knowledge of beauty, Antoinelle began to hope for something. Armed with her beauty she began to fall madly in love—with young officers in the army, with figures encountered in dreams.

One evening at a parochial ball, the two situations became confused.

The glamorous young man led Antoinelle out into a summer garden. It was a garden of Europe, with tall dense trees of twisted trunks, foliage massed on a lilac northern sky.

Antoinelle gave herself. That is, not only was she prepared to give of herself sexually, but to give herself *up* to this male person, of whom she knew no more than that he was beautiful.

Some scruple—solely for himself, the possible consequences—made him check at last.

"No—no—" she cried softly, as he forcibly released her and stood back, angrily panting.

The beautiful young man concluded (officially to himself) that Antoinelle was "loose," and therefore valueless. She was not rich enough to marry, and besides, he despised her family.

Presently he told his brother officers all about this girl, and her "looseness."

"She would have done anything," he said.

"She's a whore," said another, and smiled.

Fastidiously, Antoinelle's lover remarked, "No, worse than a whore. A whore does it honestly, for money. It's her work. This one simply does it."

Antoinelle's reputation was soon in tatters, which blew about that little town of trees and societal pillars, like the torn flag of a destroyed regiment.

She was sent in disgrace to her aunt's house in the country.

No one spoke to Antoinelle in that house. Literally, no one. The aunt would not, and she had instructed her servants, who were afraid of her. Even the maid who attended Antoinelle would not speak, in the

privacy of the evening chamber, preparing the girl for the silent evening supper below, or the lumpy three-mattressed bed.

The aunt's rather unpleasant lapdog, when Antoinelle had attempted, unwatched, to feed it a marzipan fruit, had only turned its ratlike head away. (At everyone else, save the aunt, it growled.)

Antoinelle, when alone, sobbed. At first in shame—her family had already seen to that, very ably, in the town. Next in frustrated rage. At last out of sheer despair.

She was like a lunatic in a cruel, cool asylum. They fed her, made her observe all the proper rituals. She had shelter and a place to sleep, and people to relieve some of her physical wants. There were even books in the library, and a garden to walk in on sunny days. But language—*sound*—they took away from her. And language is one of the six senses. It was as bad perhaps as blindfolding her. Additionally, they did not even speak to each other, beyond the absolute minimum, when she was by—coarse-aproned girls on the stair stifled their giggles, and passed with mask faces. And in much the same way, too, Antoinelle was not permitted to play the aunt's piano.

Three months of this, hard, polished months, like stone mirrors which reflected nothing.

Antoinelle grew thinner, more pale. Her young eyes had hollows under them. She was like a nun.

The name of the aunt who did all this was Clemence— which means, of course, clemency—mild, merciful. (And the name of the young man hi the town who had almost fucked Antoinelle, forced himself not to for his own sake, and then fucked instead her reputation, which was to say, her *life* ... his name was Justus.)

On a morning early in the fourth month, a new thing happened.

Antoinelle opened her eyes, and saw the aunt sailing into her room. And the aunt, glittering with rings like knives, *spoke* to Antoinelle.

"Very well, there's been enough of all this. Yes, yes. You may get up quickly and come down to breakfast, Patice will see to your dress and hair. Make sure you look your best."

Antoinelle lay there, on her back in the horrible bed, staring like the dead newly awakened.

"Come along," said Aunt Clemence, holding the awful .little dog untidily scrunched, "make haste now. What a child!" As if Antoinelle were the strange creature, the curiosity.

While, as the aunt swept out, the dog craned back and chattered its dirty teeth at Antoinelle.

And then, the third wonder, Patice was chattering, breaking like a happy stream at thaw, and shaking out a dress.

Antoinelle got up, and let Patice see to her, all the paraphernalia of the toilette, finishing with a light pollen of powder, even a fingertip of rouge for the matte pale lips, making them moist and rosy.

"Why?" asked Antoinelle at last, in a whisper.

"There is a visitor," chattered Patice, brimming with joy.

Antoinelle took two steps, then caught her breath and dropped as if dead on the carpet.

But Patice was also brisk; she brought Antoinelle round, crushing a vicious clove of lemon oil under her nostrils, slapping the young face lightly. Exactly as one would expect in this efficiently cruel lunatic asylum.

Presently Antoinelle drifted down the stairs, light-headed, rose-lipped and shadow-eyed. She had never looked more lovely or known it less.

The breakfast was a ghastly provincial show-off thing. There were dishes and dishes, hot and cold, of kidneys, eggs, of cheeses and hams, hot breads in napkins, brioches, and chocolate. (It was a wonder Antoinelle was not sick at once.) All this set on crisp linen with flashing silver, and the fine china normally kept in a cupboard.

The servants flurried round in their awful, stupid (secondhand) joy. The aunt sat in her chair and Antoinelle in hers, and the man in his, across the round table.

Antoinelle had been afraid it was going to be Justus. She did not know why he would be there—to castigate her again, to apologise—either way, such a boiling of fear—or something—had gone through Antoinelle that she had fainted.

But it was not Justus. This was someone she did not know.

He had stood up as she came into the room. The morning was clear and well lit, and Antoinelle had seen, with a dreary sagging of relief, that he was old. Quite old. She went on thinking this as he took her hand in his large one and shook it as if carelessly playing with something, very delicately. But his hand was manicured, the nails clean and white-edged. There was one ring, with a dull colourless stone in it.

Antoinelle still thought he was quite old, perhaps not so old as she *had* thought.

When they were seated, and the servants had doled out to them some food and drink, and gone away, Antoinelle came to herself rather more.

His hair was not grey but a mass of silvery blond. A lot of hair, very thick, shining, which fell, as was the fashion then, just to his shoulders. He was thickset, not slender, but seemed immensely strong. One saw this in ordinary, apparently unrelated things—for example, the niceness with which he helped himself now from the coffeepot. Indeed, the dangerous playfulness of his handshake with a woman; he could easily crush the hands of his fellow men.

Perhaps he was not an old man, really. In his forties (which would be the contemporary age of fifty-five or -six). He was losing his figure, as many human beings do at that age, becoming either too big or too thin. But if his middle had spread, he was yet a presence, sprawled there in his immaculately white ruffled shirt, the broad-cut coat, his feet in boots of Spanish leather propped under the table. And to his face, not much really had happened. The forehead was both wide and high, scarcely lined, the nose aquiline as a bird's beak, scarcely thickened, the chin undoubted and jutting, the mouth narrow and well shaped. His eyes, set in the slightest rouching of skin, were large, a cold, clear blue. He might actually be only just forty (that is, fifty). A fraction less.

Antoinelle was not to know, in his youth, the heads of women had turned for Gregers Vbnderjan like tulips before a gale. Or that, frankly, now and then they still did so.

The talk, what was that about all this while? Obsequious pleasantries from the aunt, odd anecdotes he gave, to do with ships, land, slaves, and money. Antoinelle had been so long without hearing the speech of others, she had become nearly word-deaf, so that most of what he said had no meaning for her, and what the aunt said even less.

Finally the aunt remembered an urgent errand, and left them.

They sat, with the sun blazing through the windows. Then Vonderjan looked right at her, at Antoinelle,

and suddenly her face, her whole body, was suffused by a savage burning blush.

"Did she tell you why I called here?" he asked, almost indifferently.

Antoinelle, her eyes lowered, murmured childishly, thoughtlessly, "No—she—she hasn't been speaking to me—"

"Hasn't she? Why not? Oh," he said, "that little business in the town."

Antoinelle, to her shock, began to cry. This should have horrified her—she had lost control—the worst sin, as her family had convinced her, they thought.

He knew, this man. He knew. She was ashamed, and yet unable to stop crying, or to get up and leave the room.

She heard his chair pushed back, and then he was standing over her. To her slightness, he seemed vast and overpowering. He was clean, and smelled of French soap, of tobacco, and some other nuance of masculinity, which Antoinelle at once intuitively liked. She had scented it before.

"Well, you won't mind leaving her, then," he said, and he lifted her up out of her chair, and there she was in his grip, her head drooping back, staring almost mindlessly into his large, handsome face. It was easy to let go. She did so. She had in fact learnt nothing, been taught nothing by the whips and stings of her wicked relations. "I called here to ask you," he said, "to be my wife."

"But..." faintly, "I don't know you."

"There's nothing to know. Here I am. Exactly what you see. Will that do?"

"But..." more faintly still, "why would you want me?"

"You're just what I want. And I thought you would be."

"But," nearly inaudible, "I was—disgraced."

"We'll see about that And the old she-cunt won't talk to you, you say?"

Antoinette, innocently, not even knowing this important word (which any way he referred to in a foreign argot), only shivered. "No. Not till today."

"Now she does because I've bid for you. You'd better come with me. Did the other one, the soldier-boy, have you? It doesn't matter, but tell me now."

Antoinelle threw herself on the stranger's chest—she had not been told, or heard his name. "No—no—" she cried, just as she had when Justus pushed her off.

"I must go slowly with you then," said this man. But nevertheless, he moved her about and, leaning over, kissed her.

Vonderjan was an expert lover. Besides, he had a peculiar quality, which had stood him, and stands those like him, in very good stead. With what he wanted in the sexual way, providing they were not unwilling to begin with, he could spontaneously communicate some telepathic echo of his needs, making them theirs. This Antoinelle felt at once, as his warm lips moved on hers, his hot tongue pierced her mouth, and the fingers of the hand which did not hold her tight, fire-feathered her breasts.

In seconds her ready flames burst up. Business-like, Vonderjan at once sat down, and holding her on his

lap, placed his hand, making nothing of her dress, to crush her centre in an inexorable rhythmic grasp, until she came in gasping spasms against him, wept, and wilted there in his arms, his property.

When the inclement aunt returned with a servant, having left, she felt, sufficient time for Vonderjan to ask, and Antoinelle sensibly to acquiesce, she found her niece tearstained and dead white in a chair, and Vonderjan drinking his coffee, and smoking a cigar, letting the ash fall as it wished onto the table linen.

"Well then," said the aunt, uncertainly.

Vonderjan cast her one look, as if amused by something about her.

"Am I to presume—may I—is everything—"

Vonderjan took another puff and a gout of charred stuff hit the cloth, before he mashed out the burning butt of the cigar on a china plate.

"Antoinelle," exclaimed the aunt, "what have you to say?"

Vonderjan spoke, not to the aunt, but to his betrothed. "Get up, Anna. You're going with me now." Then, looking at the servant (a look the woman said after was like that of a basilisk), "Out, you, and put some things together, all the lady will need for the drive. I'll supply the rest. Be quick."

Scarlet, the aunt shouted, "Now sir, this isn't how to go on."

Vonderjan drew Antoinelle up, by his hand on her elbow. *He* had control of her now, and she need bother with nothing. She turned her drooping head, like a tired flower, looking only at his boots.

The aunt was ranting. Vonderjan, with Antoinelle in one arm, went up to her. Though not a small woman, nor slight Uke her niece, he dwarfed her, made of her a pygmy.

"Sif—there is her father to be approached—you must have a care—"

Then she stopped speaking. She stopped because, Uke Antoinelle, she had been given no choice. Gregers Vonderjan had clapped his hand over her mouth, and rather more than that. He held her by the bones and flesh of her face, unable to pull away, beating at him with her hands, making noises but unable to do more, and soon breathing with difficulty.

While he kept her Uke this, he did not bother to look at her, his broad body only disturbed vaguely by her flailing, weak blows. He had turned again to Antoinelle, and asked her if there was anything she wished particularly to bring away from the house.

Antoinelle did not have the courage to glance at her struggling and apoplectic aunt. She shook her head against his shoulder, and after a little shake of his own (at the aunt's face) he let the woman go. He and the girl walked out of the room and out of the house, to his carriage, leaving the aunt to progress from her partial asphyxia to hysterics.

He had got them married in three days by pulling such strings as money generally will. The ceremony did not take place in the town, but all the town heard of it. Afterwards Vonderjan went back there, without his wife, to throw a lavish dinner party, limited to the male gender, which no person invited dared not attend, including the bride's father, who was trying to smile off, as does the death's-head, the state it has been put into.

At this dinner, too, was Justus. He sat with a number of his friends, all of them astonished to be there. But Uke the rest, they had not been able, or prepared, to evade the occasion.

Vonderjan treated them all alike, with courtesy. The food was of a high standard—a cook had been brought from the city—and there were extravagant wines, with all of which Gregers Vonderjan was evidently familiar. The men got drunk, that is, all the men but for Vonderjan, who was an established drinker, and consumed several bottles of wine, also brandy and schnapps, without much effect.

At last Vonderjan said he would be going. To the bowing and fawning of his wife's relatives he paid no attention. It was Justus he took aside, near the door, with two of his friends. The young men were all in full uniform, smart as polish, only their bright hair tousled, and faces flushed by liquor.

"You mustn't think my wife holds any rancour against you," Vonderjan announced, not loudly, but in a penetrating tone. Justus was too drunk to catch himself up, and only idiotically nodded. "She said, I should wish you a speedy end to your trouble."

"What trouble's that?" asked Justus, still idiotically.

"He has no troubles," added the first of his brother officers, "since you took that girl off his hands."

The other officer (the most sober, which was not saying much—or perhaps the most drunk, drunk enough to have gained the virtue of distance) said, "Shut your trap, you fool. Herr Vonderjan doesn't want to hear that silly kind of talk."

Vonderjan was grave. "It's nothing to me. But I'm sorry for your Justus, naturally. I shouldn't, as no man would, like to be in his shoes."

"What shoes are they?" Justus belatedly frowned.

"I can recommend to you," said Vonderjan, "an excellent doctor in the city. They say he is discreet."

"*What?*"

"What is he saying—"

"The disease, I believe they say, is often curable, in its earliest stages."

Justus drew himself up. He was almost the height of Vonderjan, but like a reed beside him. All that room, and waiters on the stair besides, were listening. "I am not—I have no— *disease*—"

Vonderjan shrugged. "That's your argument, I understand. You should leave it off, perhaps, and seek medical advice, certainly before you consider again any courtship. Not all women are as softhearted as my Anna."

"What—what?"

"Not plain enough? From what you showed her she knew you had it, and refused you. Of course, you had another story."

As Vonderjan walked through the door, the two brother officers were, one silent, and one bellowing. Vonderjan half turned, negligently. "If you don't think so, examine his prick for yourselves."

Vonderjan did not tell Antoinette any of this, but a week later, in the city, she did read in a paper that Justus had mysteriously been disgraced, and had then fled the town after a duel.

Perhaps she thought it curious.

But if so, only for a moment She had been absorbed almost entirely by the stranger, her strong husband.

On die first night, still calling her Anna, up against a great velvet bed, he had undone her clothes and next her body, taking her apart down to the clockwork of her desires. Her cry of pain at his entry turned almost at once into a wavering shriek of ecstasy. She was what he had wanted all along, and he what she had needed. By morning the bed was stained with her virginal blood, and by the blood from bites she had given him, not knowing she did so.

Even when, a few weeks after, Vonderjan's luck began to turn like a sail, he bore her with him on his broad wings. He said nothing of his luck. He was too occupied wringing from her again and again the music of her lusts, forcing her arching body to contortions, paroxysms, screams, torturing her to willing death in blind-red afternoons, in candlelit darkness, so that by daybreak she could scarcely move, would lie there in a stupor in the bed, unable to rise, awaiting him like an invalid or a corpse, and hungry always for more.

Lucius paddles his boat to the jetty, lets it idle there, looking up.

Another property of the flood vapour, the stars by night are vast, great liquid splashes of silver, ormolu.

The light in Yse's loft burns contrastingly low.

That sweet smell he noticed yesterday still comes wafting down, like thin veiling, on the breeze. Like night-blooming jasmine, perhaps a little sharper, almost like oleanders.

She must have put in some plant. But up on her terrace, only the snake tree is visible, hooping over into the water.

Lucius smokes half a roach slowly.

Far away the shoreline glimmers, where some of the stars have fallen off the sky.

"What you doing, Yse, Yse-do-as-she-please?"

Once he'd thought he saw her moving, a moth shadow crossing through the stunned light, but maybe she is asleep, or writing.

It would be simple enough to tie up and climb the short wet stair to the terrace, to knock on her glass doors. (How are you, Yse? Are you fine?) He had done that last night. The blinds were all down, the light low, as now. But through the side of the transparent loft he had beheld the other shadow standing there on her floor. The piano from the sea. No one answered.

That flower she's planted, it is sweet as candy. He'd never known her do a thing like that. Her plants always died, killed, she said, by the electrical vibrations of her psyche when she worked.

Somewhere out on the Sound a boat hoots mournfully.

Lucius unships his paddles, and wends his craft away along the alleys of water, towards the cafes and the bigger lights.

Whenever she writes about Per Laszd, which, over twenty-seven years, she has done a lot, the same feeling assails her: slight guilt. Only slight, of course, for he will never know. He is a man who never reads anything that has nothing to do with what he does. That was made clear in the beginning. She met him only twice, but has seen him, quite often, then and since, in newspapers, in news footage, and on network TV. She has been able therefore to watch him change, from an acidly, really too-beautiful young man, through his thirties and forties (when some of the silk of his beauty frayed, to reveal something leaner and more interesting, stronger and more attractive), to a latening middle age, where he has gained weight, but

lost none of his masculine grace, nor his mane of hair which—only perhaps due to artifice—has no grey in it.

She was in love with him, obviously, at the beginning. But it has changed, and become something else. He was never interested in her, even when she was young, slim, and appealing. She was not, she supposed, his "type."

In addition, she rather admired what he did, and how he did it, with an actor's panache and tricks.

People who caught her fancy she had always tended to put into her work. Inevitably Per Laszd was one of these. Sometimes he appeared as a remote figure, on the edge of the action of other lives. Sometimes he took the centre of the stage, acting out invented existences, with his perceived actor's skills.

Sh§ had, she found though, a tendency to punish him in these roles. He must endure hardships and misfortunes, and often, in her work, he was dead by the end, and rarely of old age.

Her guilt, naturally, had something to do with this—was she truly punishing him, not godlike, as with other characters, but from a petty personal annoyance that he had never noticed her, let alone had sex with her, or a single real conversation. (When she had met him, it had both times been in a crowd. He spoke generally, politely including her, no more than that. She was aware he had been arrogant enough, if he had wanted to, to have demandingly singled her out.)

But really she felt guilty at the liberties she took of necessity, with him, on paper. How else could she write about him? It was absurd to do otherwise. But describing his conjectured nakedness, both physical and intellectual, even spiritual (even supposedly "in character"), her own temerity occasionally dismayed Yse. How dare she? But then, how dare ever to write anything, even about a being wholly invented.

A mental shrug. *Alors* ... well, well. And yet...

Making him Gregers Vonderjan, she felt, was perhaps her worst infringement. Now she depicted him (honestly) burly with weight and on-drawing age, although always hastening to add the caveat of his handsomeness, his power. Per himself, as she had seen, was capable of being majestic, yet also mercurial. She tried to be fair, to be at her most fair, when examining him most microscopically, or when condemning him to the worst fates. (But, now and then, did the pen slip?)

Had he ever sensed those several dreadful falls, those calumnies, those *deaths*! Of course not. Well, well. There, there. And yet...

How wonderful that vine smells tonight, Yse thinks, sitting up in the lamp dusk. Some neighbour must have planted it. What a penetrating scent, so clean and fresh, yet sweet.

It was noticeable last night, too. Yse wonders what the flowers are that let out this aroma. And in the end, she stands up, leaving the pen to lie there, across Vonderjan and An-toinelle.

Near her glass doors, Yse thinks the vine must be directly facing her, over the narrow waterway under the terrace, for here its perfume is strongest.

But when she raises the blinds and opens the doors, the scent at once grows less. Somehow it has collected instead in the room. She gazes out at the other lofts, at a tower of shaped glass looking like ice in a tray. Are the hidden gardens there?

The stars are impressive tonight. And she can see the hem of the star-spangled upper city.

A faint sound comes.

Yse knows it's not outside, but in her loft, just like the scent.

She turns. Looks at the black piano.

Since yesterday (when it was brought in), she hasn't paid it that much attention. (Has she?) She had initially stared at it, tried three or four times to raise its lids—without success. She had thought of rubbing it down, once the litter-chips absorbed the leaking water. But then she had not done this. Had not touched it very much.

Coming to the doors, she has circled wide of the piano.

Did a note sound, just now, under the forward lid? How odd, the two forelegs braced there, and the final leg at its end, more as if it balanced on a tail of some sort.

Probably the keys and hammers and strings inside are set-ting after fie wet, to the warmth of her room.

She leaves one door open, which is not perhaps sensible. Rats have been known to climb the stair and gaze in at her under the night blinds, with their calm, clever eyes. Sometimes the criminal population of the island can be heard along the waterways, or out on the Sound, shouts and smashing bottles, cans thrown at brickwork or impervious, multiglazed windows.

But the night's still as the stars.

Yse goes by the piano, and through the perfume, and back to her desk, where Per Laszd lies helplessly awaiting her on the page.

. Bleiunaneer

Jeanjacques came to the Island in the stormy season. He was a mix of black and white, and found both peoples perplexing, as he found himself.

The slave trade was by then defused, as much, perhaps, as it would ever be. He knew there were no slaves left on the Island; that is, only freed slaves remained. (His black half lived with frenzied anger, as his white half clove to sloth. Between the two halves, he was a split soul.)

There had been sparks on the rigging of the ship, and all night a velour sky fraught with pink lightning. When they reached the bay next morning, it looked nearly colourless, the sombre palms were nearly grey, and the sky cindery, and the sea only transparent, the beaches white.

The haughty black master spoke in French.

"They call that place *Blue View*."

"Why's that?"

"Oh, it was for some vogue of wearing blue, before heads began to roll in Paris."

Jeanjacques said, "What's he like?"

"Vonderjan? A falling man."

"How do you mean?"

"Have you seen a man fall? The instants before he hits the ground, before he's hurt—the moment when he thinks he is still flying."

"He's lost his money, they were saying at Sugarbar."

"They say so."

"And his wife's a girl, almost a child."

"Two years he's been with her on his Island."

"What's she like?"

"White."

"What else?"

"To me, nothing. I can't tell them apart."

There had been a small port, but now little was there, except a rotted hulk, some huts, and the ruins of a customs house, thatched with palm, in which birds lived.

For a day he climbed with the escorting party up into the interior of the Island. Inside the forest it was grey-green-black, and the trees gave off sweat, pearling the banana leaves and plantains. Then they walked through the wild fields of cane, and the coffee trees. Dark figures still worked there, tending the kayar. But they did this for themselves. What had been owned had become the garden of those who remained, to do with as they wanted.

The black master had elaborated, telling Jeanjacques how Vonderjan had at first sent for niceties for his house, for china and Venetian glass, cases of books and wine. Even a piano had been ordered for his child-wife, although this, it seemed, had never arrived.

The Island was large and overgrown, but there was nothing, they said, very dangerous on it.

Bleumaneer, *Blue View*, the house for which the Island had come to be called, appeared on the next morning, down a dusty track hedged by rhododendrons of prehistoric girth.

It was white-walled, with several open courts, balconies. Orange trees grew along a columned gallery, and there was a Spanish fountain (dry) on the paved space before the steps. But it was a medley of all kinds of style.

"Make an itinerary and let me see it. We'll talk it over, what can be sold."

Jeanjacques thought that Vonderjan reminded him most of a lion, but a lion crossed with a golden bull. Then again, there was a wolflike element, cunning and lithe, which slipped through the grasslands of their talk.

Vonderjan did not treat Jeanjacques as what he was, a valuer's clerk. Nor was there any resentment or chagrin. Vonderjan seemed indifferent to the fix he was in. Did he even care that such and such would be sorted out and taken from him—that glowing canvas in the salon, for example, or the rose-mahogany cabinets, and all for a third of their value, or less, paid in banknotes that probably would not last out another year. Here was a man, surely, playing at life, at living. Convinced of it and of his fate, certainly, but only as the actor is, within his part.

Jeanjacques drank cloudy orjat, tasting its bitter orange-flowers. Vonderjan drank nothing, was sufficient, even in this, to himself.

"Well. What do you thinkr

"I'll work on, and work tonight, present you with a summary in the morning."

"Why waste the night?" said Vonderjan.

"I must be ready to leave in another week, sir, when the ship returns."

"Another few months," said Vonderjan consideringly, "and maybe no ship will come here. Suppose you missed your

He seemed to be watching Jeanjacques through a telescope, closely, yet far, far away. He might have been drunk, but there was no smell of alcohol to him. Some drug of the Island, perhaps?

Jeanjacques said, "I'd have to swim for it."

A man came up from the yard below. He was a white servant, shabby but respectable. He spoke to Vonderjan in some European gabble.

"My horse is sick," said Vonderjan to Jeanjacques. "I think I shall have to shoot it. I've lost most of them here. Some insect, which bites."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes." Then, lightheartedly, "But none of us escape, do we?"

Later, in the slow heat of the afternoon, Jeanjacques heard the shot crack out, and shuddered. It was more than the plight of the unfortunate horse. Something seemed to have hunted Vonderjan to his Island and now picked off from him all the scales of his world, his money, his horses, his possessions.

The clerk worked at his tally until the sun began to wester about four in the evening. Then he went up to wash and dress, because Vonderjan had said he should dine in the salon with his family. Jeanjacques had no idea what he would find. He was curious, a little, about the young wife — she must by now be seventeen or eighteen. Had there been any children? It was always likely, but then again, likely, too, they had not survived.

At five, the sky was like brass, the palms that lined the edges of all vistas like blackened brass columns, bent out of shape, with brazen leaves that rattled against each other when any breath blew up from the bay. From the roof of the house it was possible also to make out a cove, and the sea. But it looked much more than a day's journey off. Unless you jumped and the wind blew you.

Another storm mumbled over the Island as Jeanjacques entered the salon. The long windows stood wide, and the dying light flickered fitfully like the disturbed candles.

No one took much notice of the clerk, and Vonderjan behaved as if Jeanjacques had been there a year, some acquaintance with no particular purpose in the house, neither welcome nor un-

The "family," Jeanjacques saw, consisted of Vonderjan, his wife, a housekeeper, and a young black woman, apparently Vrouw Vonderjan's companion.

She was slender and fine, the black woman, and sat there as if a slave trade had never existed, either to crucify or enrage her. Her dress was of excellent muslin, ladyishly low cut for the evening, and she had ruby eardrops. (She spoke at least three languages that Jeanjacques heard, including the patois of the Island, or house, which she exchanged now and then with the old housekeeper.)

But Vonderjan's wife was another matter altogether.

The moment he looked at her, Jeanjacque's blood seemed to shift slightly, all along his bones. And at the base of his skull, where his hair was neatly tied back by a ribbon, the roots stretched themselves, prickling.

She was not at all pretty, but violently beautiful, in a way far too large for the long room, or for any room, whether spacious or enormous. So pale she was, she made her black attendant seem like a shadow cast by a flame. Satiny coils and trickles of hair fell all round her in a deluge of gilded rain. Thunder was the colour of her eyes, a dark that was not dark, some shade that could not be described visually but only in other ways. All of her was a little like that. To touch her limpid skin would be like tasting ice cream. To catch her fragrance like small bells heard inside the ears in fever.

When her dress brushed by him as she first crossed the room, Jeanjacques inadvertantly recoiled inside his skin. He was feeling, although he did not know it, exactly as Justus had felt in the northern garden. Though Justus had not known it, either. But what terrified these two men was the very thing which drew other men, especially such men as Gregers Vonderjan. So much was plain.

The dinner was over, and the women got up to withdraw. As she passed by his chair, Vonderjan, who had scarecely spoken to her throughout the meal (or to anyone), lightly took hold of his wife's hand. And she looked down at once into his eyes.

Such a look it was. Oh God, Jeanjacques experienced now all his muscles go to liquid, and sinking, and his belly sinking down into his bowels, which themselves turned over heavily as a seipent. But his penis rose very quickly, and pushed hard as a rod against his thigh.

For it was a look of such explicit sex, trembling so colos-sally it had grown still, and out of such an agony of suspense, that he was well aware these two lived in a constant of the condition, and would need only to press together the length of their bodies to ignite like matches in a galvanic convulsion.

He had seen once or twice similar looks, perhaps. Among couples kept strictly, on their marriage night But no, not even then.

They said nothing to each other. Needed nothing to say. It had been said.

The girl and her black companion passed from the room, and after them the housekeeper, carrying a branch of the candles, whose flames flattened as she went through the doors on to the terrace. (*Notes: This will happen again later.*)

Out there, the night was now very black. Everything beyond the house had vanished in it, but for the vague differential between the sky and the tops of the forest below. There were no stars to be seen, and thunder still moved restlessly. The life went from Jeanjacques's genitals as if it might never come back.

"Brandy," said Vonderjan, passing the decanter. "What do you think of her?"

"Of whom, sir?"

"My Anna." (Playful; who else?)

Jeanjacques visualized, in a sudden unexpected flash, certain objects used as amulets, and crossing himself in church.

"An exquisite lady, sir."

"Yes," said Vonderjan. He had drunk a lot during dinner, but in an easy way. It was evidently habit, not need. Now he said again, "Yes."

Jeanjacques wondered what would be next. But of course nothing was to be next. Vonderjan finished his cigar, and drank down his glass. He rose, and nodded to Jeanjacques. "*Bon nuit.*"

How could he even have forced himself to linger so long? Vonderjan demonstrably must be a human of vast self-control.

Jeanjacques imagined the blond man going up the stairs of the house to the wide upper storey. An open window, drifted with a gauze curtain, hot, airless night. Jeanjacques imagined Antoinelle, called Anna, lying on her back in the bed, its nets pushed careless away, for what bit Vonderjan's horses to death naturally could not essay his wife.

"No, I shan't have a good night," Jeanjacques said to Vonderjan in his head. He went to his room, and sharpened his pen for work.

In the darkness, he heard her. He was sure that he had. It was almost four in the morning by his pocket watch, and the sun would rise in less than an hour.

Waveringly she screamed, like an animal caught in a trap. Three times, the second time the loudest.

The whole of the inside of the house shook and throbbed and scorched from it.

Jeanjacques found he must get up, and standing by the window, handle himself roughly until, in less than thirteen seconds, his semen exploded onto the tiled floor.

Feeling then slightly nauseous, and dreary, he slunk to bed and slept gravely, like a stone.

Antoinelle sat at her toilette mirror, part of a fine set of silver-gilt her husband had given her. She was watching herself as Nanetta combed and brushed her hair.

It was late afternoon, the heat of the day lying down but not subsiding.

Antoinelle was in her chemise; soon she would dress for the evening dinner.

Nanetta stopped brushing. Her hands lay on the air like a black slender butterfly separated in two. She seemed to be listening.

"More," said Antoinelle.

"Yes."

The brush began again.

Antoinelle often did not rise until noon, frequently later. She would eat a little fruit, drink coffee, get up and wander about in flimsy undergarments. Now and then she would read a novel, or Nanetta would read one to her. Or they would play cards, sitting at the table on the balcony, among the pots of flowers.

Nanetta had never seen Antoinelle do very much, and had never seen her agitated or even irritable.

Sheüved for night.

He, on the other hand, still got up mostly at sunrise, and no later than the hour after. His man, Stronn, would shave him. Vonderjan would breakfast downstairs in the courtyard, eating meat and bread, drinking black tea. Afterwards he might go over the accounts with the secretary. Sometimes the whole of the big house heard him shouting (except for his wife, who was generally still asleep). He regularly rode (two horses survived) round parts of the Island, and was gone until late afternoon, talking to the men and

women in the fields, sitting to drink with them, rum and palm liquor, in the shade of plantains. He might return about the time Antoinelle was washing herself, powdering her arms and face, and putting on a dress for dinner.

A bird trilled in a cage, hopped a few steps, and flew up to its perch to trill again.

The scent of dust and sweating trees came from the long windows, stagnant yet energizing in the thickening yellow light.

Nanetta half turned her head. Again she had heard something far away. She did not know what it was.

"Shall I wear the emerald necklace tonight?" asked Antoinelle sleepily. "What do you think?"

Nanetta was used to this. To finding an answer.

"With the white dress? Yes, that would be effective."

"Put up my hair. Use the tortoiseshell combs."

Nanetta obeyed deftly.

The satiny bright hair was no pleasure to touch, too electric, stickily clinging to the fingers—full of each night's approaching storm. There would be no rain, not yet.

Antoinelle watched as the black woman transformed her. Antoinelle liked this, having only to be, letting someone else put her together in this way. She had forgotten by now, but never liked, independence. She wanted only enjoyment, to be made and remade, although in a manner that pleased her, and which, after all, demonstrated her power over others.

When she thought about Vonderjan, her husband, her loins clenched involuntarily, and a frisson ran through her, a shiver of heat. So she rationed her thoughts of him. During their meals together, she would hardly look at him, hardly speak, concentrating on the food, on the light of the candles reflecting in things, hypnotizing herself and prolonging, unendurably, her famine, until at last she was able to return to the bed, cool by then, with clean sheets on it, and wait, giving herself up to darkness and to fire.

How could she live in any other way?

Whatever had happened to her? Had the insensate cruelty of her relations pulped her down into a sponge that was ultimately receptive only to this? Or was this her true condition, which had always been trying to assert itself, and which, once connected to a suitable partner, did so, evolving also all the time, spreading itself higher and lower and in all directions, like some amoeba?

She must have heard stories of him, his previous wife, and of a black mistress or two he had had here. But Antoinelle was not remotely jealous. She had no interest in what he did when not with her, when not about to be, or actually in her bed with her. As if all other facets, both of his existence and her own, had now absolutely no meaning at all.

About the hour Antoinelle sat by the mirror, and Vonderjan, who had not gone out that day, was bathing, smoking one of the cigars as the steam curled round him, Jeanjacques stood among a wilderness of cane fields beyond the house.

That cane was a type of grass tended always to amaze him, these huge stripes of straddling stalks, rising five feet or more above his head. He felt himself to be a child lost in a luridly unnatural wood, and besides, when a black figure passed across the view, moving *from* one subaqueous tunnel to another,

they now supematurally only glanced at him, catlike, *from* the sides of their eyes.

Jeanjacques had gone out walking, having deposited his itinerary and notes with Vonderjan in a morning room. The clerk took narrow tracks across the Island, stood on high places from which (as from the roof) coves and hilets of the sea might be glimpsed.

The people of the Island had been faultlessly friendly and courteous, until he began to try to question them. Then they changed. He assumed at first they only hated his white skin, as had others he had met, who had refused to believe in his mixed blood. In that case, he could not blame them much for the hatred. Then he understood he had not assumed this at all. They were disturbed by something, afraid of something, and he knew it

Were they afraid of her—of the white girl in the house? Was it that? And why were they afraid? Why was he himself afraid—because afraid of her he was. Oh yes, he was terrified.

At midday he came to a group of hut houses, patchily colour-washed and with palm-leaf roofs, and people were sitting about there in the shade, drinking, and one man was splitting rosy gourds with a machete, so Jeanjacques thought of a guillotine a moment, the red juice spraying out and the *thunk* of the blade going through. (He had heard they had split imported melons in Marseilles, to test the machine. But he was a boy when he heard this tale, and perhaps it was not true.)

Jeanjacques stood there, looking on. Then a black woman got up, fat and not young, but comely, and brought him hah^o a gourd, for him to try the dripping flesh.

He took it, thanking her.

"How is it going, Mother?" he asked her, partly in French, but also with two words of the patois, which he had begun to recognize. To no particular effect.

"It goes how it go, monsieur."

"You still take a share of your crop to the big house?" She gave him the sidelong look. "But you're free people, now."

One of the men called to her sharply. He was a tall black leopard, young and gorgeous as a carving from chocolate. The woman went away at once, and Jeanjacques heard again that phrase he had heard twice before that day. It was muttered somewhere at his back. He turned quickly, and there they sat, blacker in shade, eating from the flesh of the gourds, and drinking from a bottle passed around. Not looking at him, not at all.

"What did you *say*?"

A man glanced up. "It's nothing, monsieur."

"Something came from the sea, you said?"

"No, monsieur. Only a storm coming."

"It's the stormy season. Wasn't there something else?"

They shook their heads. They looked helpful, and sorry they could not assist, and their eyes were painted glass.

Something has come from the sea.

They had said it, too, at the other place, farther down, when a child had brought him nun in a tin mug.

What could come from the sea? Only weather, or men. Or the woman. She had come from there.

They were afraid, and even if he had doubted his ears or his judgement, the way they would not say it straight out, that was enough to tell him he had not imagined this.

Just then a breeze passed through the forest below, and then across the broad leaves above, shaking them. And the light changed a second, then back, like the bunking of the eye of God.

They stirred, the people. It was as if they saw the wind, and the shape it had was fearful to them, yet known. Respected.

As he was walking back by another of the tracks, he found a dead chicken laid on a banana leaf at the margin of a field. A propitiary offering? Nothing else had touched it, even a line of ants detoured out onto the track, to give it room.

Jeanjacques walked into the cane fields and went on there for a while. And now and then other human things moved through, looking sidelong at him.

Then, when he paused among the tall stalks, he heard them whispering, whispering, the stalks of cane, or else the voices of the people. Had they followed him? Were they aggressive? They had every right to be, of course, even with his kind. Even so, he did not want to be beaten, or to die. He had invested such an amount of his life and wits in avoiding such things.

But no one approached. The whispers came and went.

Now he was here, and he had made out, from the edge of this field, Vonderjan's house with its fringe of palms and rhododendrons (Blue View) above him on the hill, only about a half hour away.

In a full hour, the sun would dip. He would go to his room and there would be water for washing, and his other clothes laid out for the dinner.

The whispering began again, suddenly, very close, so Jean-jacques spun about, horrified.

But no one was there, nothing was there.

Only the breeze, that the black people could see, moved round among the stalks of the cane, that was itself like an Egyptian temple, its columns meant to be a forest of green papyrus.

"It's black," the voices whispered. "Black."

"Litte a black man," Jeanjacques said hoarsely.

"Black like black."

Again, God bunked his eyelid of sky. A figure seemed to be standing between the shafts of green cane. It said, "Not black like men. So black we filled with terror of it. Black like black of night is black."

"Black like black."

"Something from the sea."

Jeanjacques felt himself dropping, and then he was on his knees, and his forehead was pressed to the powdery plant-drained soil.

He had not hurt himself. When he looked up, no one was in the field that he could see.

He got to his feet slowly. He trembled, and then the trembling, like the whispers, went away.

The storm rumbled over the Island. It sounded tonight like dogs barking, then baying in the distance. Every so often, for no apparent reason, the flames of the candles flattened, as if a hand had been laid on them.

There was a main dish of pork, stewed with spices. Someone had mentioned there were pigs on the Island, although the clerk had seen none, perhaps no longer wild, or introduced and never wild.

The black girl, who was called Nanetta, had put up her hair elaborately, and so had the white one, Vonderjan's wife. Round her slim pillar of throat were five large green stars in a necklace like a golden cake-decoration.

Vonderjan had told Jeanjacques that no jewelry was to be valued. But here at least was something that might have seen him straight for a while. Until his ship came in. But perhaps it never would again. Gregers Vonderjan had been lucky always, until the past couple of years.

A gust of wind, which seemed to do nothing else outside, abruptly blew wide the doors to the terrace.

Vonderjan himself got up, went by his servants, and shut both doors. That was, started to shut them. Instead he was standing there now, gazing out across the Island.

In the sky, the dogs bayed.

His heavy bulky frame seemed vast enough to withstand any night. His magnificent mane of hair, without any evident grey, gleamed like gold in the candlelight. Vonderjan was so strong, so nonchalant.

But he stood there a long while, as if something had attracted his attention.

It was Nanetta who asked, "Monsieur—what is the matter?"

Vonderjan half turned and looked at her, almost mockingly, his brows raised.

"Matter? Nothing."

She has it too, Jeanjacques thought. He said, "The blacks were saying, something has come from the sea."

Then he glanced at Nanetta. For a moment he saw two rings of white stand clear around the pupil and iris of her eyes. But she looked down, and nothing else gave her away.

Vonderjan shut the doors. He swaggered back to the table. (He did not look at his wife, nor she at him. They kept themselves intact, Jeanjacques thought, during proximity, only by such a method. The clerk wondered, if he were to find An-toinelle alone, and stand over her, murmuring Vonderjan's name, over and over, whether she would fall back, unable to resist, and come, without further provocation and in front of him. And at the thought, the hard rod tapped again impatiently on his thigh.)

"From the sea, you say. What?"

"I don't know, sir. But they were whispering it. Perhaps Mademoiselle knows?" He indicated Nanetta graciously, as if giving her a wanted opening.

She was silent.

"I don't think," said Vonderjan, "that she does."

"No, monsieur," she said. She seemed cool. Her eyes were kept down.

Oddly—Jeanjacques thought—it was Antoinette who suddenly sprang up, pushing back her chair, so it scraped on the tiles.

"It's so hot," she said.

And then she stood there, as if incapable of doing anything else, of refining any desire or solution from her own words.

Vonderjan did not look at her, but he went slowly back and undid the doors. "Walk with me on the terrace, Anna."

And he extended his arm.

The white woman glided across the salon as if on runners. She seemed weightless—*blown*. And the white snake of her little narrow hand crawled round his arm and out on to the sleeve, to rest there. Husband and wife stepped out into the rumbling night.

Jeanjacques sat back and stared across the table at Nanetta.

"They're most devoted," he said. "One doesn't often see it, after the first months. Especially where the ages are so different. What is he, thirty, thirty-two years her senior?"

Nanetta raised her eyes and now gazed at him impenetrably, with the tiniest, most fleeting smile.

He would get nothing out of her. She was a lady's maid, and he a jumped-up clerk, but both of them had remained slaves. They were calcined, ruined, defensive, and armoured.

Along the terrace he could see that Vonderjan and the woman were pressed close by the house, where a lush flowering vine only partly might hide them. Her skirts were already pushed askew, her head thrown sideways, mouth open, and eyes shut. He was taking her against the wall, thrusting and heaving into her.

Jeanjacques looked quickly away, and began to whistle, afraid of hearing her cries of climax.

But now the black girl exclaimed, "Don't whistle, don't do that, monsieur!"

"Why? Why not?"

She only shook her head, but again her eyes—the black centres were silver-ringed. So Jeanjacques got up and walked out of the salon into Vonderjan's library across the passage, where now the mundane papers, concerning things to be sold, lay on a table.

But it has come, it has come through the sea, before star rise and dawn, through the rifts and fans of the transparent water, sliding and swimming like a crab.

It has crawled onto the sand, crouching low, like a beast, and perhaps mistaken for some animal.

A moon (is it a different moon each night? Who would know?) sinking, and Venus in the east.

Crawling into the tangle of the trees, with the palms and parrot trees reflecting in the dulled mirror of its lid, its carapace. Dragging the hind limb like a tail, pulling itself by the front legs, like a wounded boar.

Through the forest, with only the crystal of Venus to shatter through the heavy leaves of sweating bronze.

Bleumaner, La Vue Bleu, Blue Fashion, Blue View, seeing through a blue eye to a black shape, which moves from shadow to shadow, place to place. But always nearer.

Something is in the forest.

Nothing dangerous. How can it hurt you?

Yse is buying food in the open-air market at Bley. Lucius had seen her, and now stands watching her, not going over.

She has filled her first bag with vegetables and fruit, and in the second she puts a fish and some cheese, olive oil and bread.

Lucius crosses through the crowd, by the place where the black girl called Rosalba is cooking red snapper on her skillet, and the old poet paints his words in coloured sand.

As Yse walks into a liquor store, Lucius follows.

"You're looking good, Yse."

She turns, gazing at him—not startled, more as if she doesn't remember him. Then she does. "Thank you. I feel good today."

"And strong. But not *this* strong. Give me the vegetables to carry, Yse."

"Okay. That's kind."

"What have you done to your hair?"

Yse thinks about this one. "Oh. Someone put in some extra hair for me. You know how they do, they hot-wax the strands on to your own."

"It looks fine."

She buys a box of wine bottles.

"You're having a party?" Lucius says.

"No, Lucius. I don't throw parties. You know that"

"I know that."

"Just getting in my stores. I'm working. Then I needn't go out again for a while, just stay put and write."

"You've lost some weight," Lucius says, "looks like about twenty-five pounds."

Now she laughs. "*No*. I wish. But you know I do sometimes, when I work. Adrenaline."

He, totes the wine and the vegetables, and they stroll over to the bar on the quay, to which fresh fish are being brought in from the Sound. (The bar is at the top of what was, once, the Aquatic Museum. There are still old cases of bullet-and-robber-proof glass, with fossils in them, little ancient dragons of the deeps, only three feet long, and coelacantns with needle teeth.)

Lucius orders coffee and rum, but Yse only wants a mineral water. Is she dieting? He has never known

her to do this. She has said dieting became useless after her forty-third year.

Her hair hangs long, to her waist, blonde, with whiter blonde and silver in it. He can't see any of the wax-ends of the extensions, or any grey either. Slimmer, her face, hands, and shoulders have fined right down. Her skin is excellent, luminous and pale. Her eyes are crystalline, and outlined by soft black pencil he has never seen her use before.

She says sharply, "For a man who likes men, you surely know how to look a woman over, Lucius."

"None better."

"Well, don't."

"I'm admiring you, Yse."

"Well, still don't. You're embarrassing me. I'm not used to it any more. If I ever was."

There is, he saw an hour ago—all across the market—a small white surgical dressing on the left side of her neck. Now she absently touches it, and pulls her finger away like her own mother would do. They say you can always tell a woman's age from her hands. Yse's hands look today like those of a woman of thirty-five.

"Something bite you, Yse?"

"An insect. It itches."

"I came by in the boat," he says, drinking his coffee, leaving the rum to stand in the glass. "I heard you playing that piano."

"You must have heard someone else somewhere. I can't play. I used to improvise, years ago. But then I had to sell my piano back then. This one... I haven't been able to get the damn lid up. I'm frightened to force it in case everything breaks."

"Do you want me to try?"

"Thanks—but maybe not. You know, I don't think the keys can be intact. How can they be? And there might be rats in it."

"Does it smell of rats?"

"Oddly, it smells of flowers. Jasmine, or something. Mostly at night, really. A wonderful smell. Perhaps something's growing inside it."

"In the dark."

"Night-blooming Passia," Yse says, as if quoting.

"And you write about that piano," says Lucius.

"Did I tell you? Good guess then. But it's not about a piano. Not really. About an Island."

"Where is this island?"

"Here." Yse sets her finger on a large notebook that she has already put on the table. (Often she will carry her work about with her, like a talisman. This isn't new.)

But Lucius examines the blank cover of the book as if scanning a map. "Where else?" he says.

Now Yse taps her forehead. (*In my mind.*) But somehow he has the impression she has also tapped her left ear, directly above the bite—as if the island was in there, too. *Heard* inside her ear. Or else, heard, felt—inside the *bite*.

"Let me read it," he says, *not* opening the notebook.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"My awful handwriting. No one can, until I type it through the machine and there's a disc."

"You write so bad to hide it," he says.

"Probably."

"What's your story really about?"

"I told you. An Island. And a vampire."

"And it bit you in the neck."

Again, she laughs. "*You're* the one a vampire bit, Lucius. Or has it gone back to being a shark that bit you?"

"All kinds have bit me. I bite them, too."

She's finished her water. The exciting odour of cooking spiced fish drifts into the bar, and Lucius is hungry. But Yse is getting up.

"I'll carry your bag to the boat stop."

"Thanks, Lucius."

"I can bring them to your loft."

"No, that's fine."

"What did you say about a vampire," he asks her as they wait **bove* the sparkling water for the water bus, "not what they are, what they *do* to you—what they make you feel?"

"I've known you over five years, Lucius—"

"Six and a half years."

"Six and a half then. I've never known you to be very interested in my books."

The breeze blows off the Sound, flattening Yse's shirt to her body. Her waist is about five inches smaller, her breasts formed, and her whole shape has changed from that of a small barrel to a curvy egg timer. Woman-shape. Young woman-shape.

He thinks, uneasily, will she begin to menstruate again, the hormones flowing back like the flood of the Sound tides through the towers and lofts of the island? Can he scent, through her cleanly showered, soap and shampoo smell, the hint of fresh blood?

"Not interested, Yse. Just being nosy."

"All right. The book is about, among others, a girl, who is called Antoinette. She's empty, or been made empty, because what she wants is refused her—so she's like a soft, flaccid, open bag, and she wants and wants. And the soft wanting emptiness pulls him—the man—inside. She drains him of volition, and of his good luck. But he doesn't care. He also wants this. Went out looking for it. He explains that in the next section, I think..."

"So she's your vampire."

"No. But she makes a vampire possible. She's like a blueprint—like compost, for the plant to grow in. And the heat there, and the decline, that lovely word *desuetude*. And empty spaces that need to be continually *filled*. Nature abhors a vacuum. Darkness abhors it, too, and rushes in. Why else do you think it gets dark when the sun goes down?"

"Night," he says flatly.

"Of course not," she smiles, "nothing so ordinary. It's the black of outer space rushing to fill the empty gap the daylight filled. Why else do they call it *space*?"

She's clever. Playing with her words, with quotations and vocal things like that.

Lucius can see the tired old rusty boat chugging across the water.

(Yse starts to talk about the planet Vulcan, which was discovered once, twice, a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago, and both times found to be a hoax.)

The bus boat is at the quay. Lucius helps Yse get her food and wine into the boat. He watches as it goes off around this drowned isle we have here, but she forgets to wave.

In fact, Yse has been distracted by another thought. She had found a seashell lying on her terrace yesterday. This will sometimes happen, if an especially high tide has flowed in.

She's thinking about the seashell, and the idea has come to her that, if she put it to her left ear, instead of hearing the sound of the sea (which is the rhythm of her own blood, moving), she might hear a piano playing.

Which is how she might put this into the story.

By the time the bus boat reaches West Ridge, sunset is approaching. When she has hauled the bags and wine to the doors of her loft, she stands a moment, looking. The snake-willow seems carved from vitreous. The alley of water is molten. But that's by now commonplace.

Even out here, before she opens her doors, she can catch the faint overture of perfume from the plant which may—must—be growing in the piano.

She dreamed last night she followed Per Laszd for miles, trudging till her feet ached, through endless lanes of shopping mall, on the mainland. He would not stop, or turn, and periodically he disappeared. For some hours, too, she saw him in conversation with a slender, dark-haired woman. When he vanished yet again, Yse approached her. "Is he your lover?"

"No," chuckled the incredulous woman. "*Mine? No.*" In the end Yse had gone on again, seen him ahead of her, and at last given up, turned her back, walked away briskly, not wanting him to know she had pursued him such a distance. Then only did she feel his hands thrill lightly on her shoulders—

At the shiver of memory, Yse shakes herself.

She's pleased to have lost weight, but not so surprised. She hasn't been eating much, and change is always feasible. The extensions cost a lot of money. Washing her hair is now a nuisance, and probably she will have them taken out before too long.

However, seeing her face in the mirror above the wash basin, she paused this morning, recognizing herself, if only for a moment.

A red gauze cloud drifts from the mainland.

Yse undoes her glass doors, and in the shadow, there that other shadow stands on its three legs. It might be anything but what it is, as might we all.

. Her Piano

On the terrace below the gallery of orange trees, above the dry fountain, Gregers Vonderjan stood checking his gun.

Jeanjacques halted. He felt for a moment irrationally afraid—as opposed to the other fears he had felt here.

But the gun, plainly, was not for him.

It was just after six in the morning. Dawn had happened not long ago, the light was transparent as a windowpane.

"Another," said Vonderjan enigmatically. (Jeanjacques had noticed before, the powerful and self-absorbed were often obscure, thinking everyone must already know their business, which of course shook the world.)

"... Your horses."

"My horses. Only two now, and one on its last legs. Come with me if you like, if you're not squeamish."

/ am, extremely, Jeanjacques thought, but he went with Vonderjan nevertheless, slavishly.

Vonderjan strode down steps, around corners, through a grove of trees. They reached the stables. It was vacant, no one about but for a single man, some groom.

Inside the stall, two horses were together, one lying down. The other, strangely uninvolved, stood aloof. This upright one was white as some strange pearly fish animal, its eyes almost blue, Jeanjacques thought, but perhaps that was a trick of the pure light. The other horse, the prone one, half lifted its head, heavily.

Vonderjan went to this horse. The groom did not speak. Vonderjan kneeled down.

"Ah, poor soldier—" then he spoke in another tongue, his birth-language, probably. As he murmured, he stroked the streaked mane away from the horse's eyes, tenderly, like a father, caressed it till the weary eyes shut, then shot it, quickly through the skull. The legs kicked once, strengthlessly, a reflex. It had been almost gone already.

Jeanjacques went out and leaned on the mounting block. He expected he would vomit, but did not.

Vonderjan presently also came out, wiping his hands, like Pilate.

"Damn this thing, death," he said. The anger was wholesome, *whole*. For a moment a real man, a human being, stood solidly by Jeanjacques, and Jeanjacques wanted to turn and fling his arms about this creature, to keep it with him. But then it vanished, as before.

The strong handsome face was bland—or was it *blind*?

"None of us escape death."

That cliché once more, masking the *horror*—but what *was* the horror? And was the use of the cliché, only acceptance of the harsh world, precisely what Vonderjan must have set himself to learn?

"Come to the house. Have a brandy," said Vonderjan.

They went back, not the way they had come, but using another flight of stairs. Behind them the groom was clearing the beautiful dead horse like debris or garbage. Jeanjacques refused to look over his shoulder.

Vonderjan's study had no light until great storm shutters were undone. It must face, like the terrace, towards the sea.

The brandy was hot.

"All my life," said Vonderjan, sitting down on his own writing table, suddenly unsolid, his eyes wide and unseeing, "I've had to deal with fucking death. You get sick of it. Sick to death of it."

"Yes."

"I know you saw some things in France."

"I did."

"How do we live with it, eh? Oh, you're a young man. But when you get past forty, Christ, you feel it, breathing on the back of your neck. Every death you've seen. And I've seen plenty. My mother, and my wife. I mean, my first wife, Uteka. A beautiful woman, when I met her. Big, if you know what I mean. White skin and raven hair, red-gold eyes. A Viking woman."

Jeanjacques was mesmerized, despite everything. He had never heard Vonderjan expatiate like this, not even in imagination.

They drank more brandy.

Vonderjan said, "She died in my arms."

"I'm sorry—"

"Yes. I wish I could have shot her, like the horses, to stop her suffering. But it was in Copenhagen, one summer. Her people everywhere. One thing, she hated sex."

Jeanjacques was shocked despite himself.

"I found other women for that," said Vonderjan, as if, indifferently, to explain.

The bottle was nearly empty. Vonderjan opened a cupboard and took out another bottle, and a slab of dry, apparently stale bread on a plate. He ripped off pieces of the bread and ate them.

It was like a curious Communion, bread and wine, flesh, blood. (He offered none of the bread to Jeanjacques.)

"I wanted," Vonderjan said, perhaps two hours later, as they sat in the hard stuffed chairs, the light no longer windowpane pure, "a woman who'd take that, from me. Who'd want me pushed and poured into her, like the sea, like they say a mermaid wants that A woman who'd take. I heard of one. I went straight to her. It was true."

"Don't all women—" Jeanjacques faltered, drunk and heart racing, "take—?"

"No. They give. Give, give, give. They give too bloody much."

Vonderjan was not drunk, and they had consumed two bottles of brandy, and Vonderjan most of it.

"But she's—she's taken—she's had your *luck*—" Jean-Jacques blurted.

"Luck. I never wanted my luck."

"But you—"

"Wake up. I had it, but who else did? Not Uteka, my wife. Not my wretched mother. I hate cruelty," Vonderjan said quietly, "And we note, this world's very cruel. We should punish the world if we could. We should punish God if we could. Put Him on a cross? Yes. Be damned to this fucking God."

The clerk found he was on the ship, coming to the Island, but he knew he did not want to be on the Island. Yet, of course, it was now too late to turn back. Something followed through the water. It was black and shining. A shark, maybe.

When Jeanjacques came to, the day was nearly gone and evening was coming. His head banged and his heart galloped. The dead horse had possessed it. He wandered out of the study (now empty but for himself) and heard the terrible sound of a woman, sick-moaning in her death throes: Uteka's ghost. But then a sharp cry came; it was the other one, Vonderjan's second wife, dying in his arms.

As she put up her hair, Nanetta was thinking of whispers. She heard them in the room, echoes of all the other whispers in the house below.

Black—it's black—not black like a man is black... black as black is black...

Beyond the fringe of palms, the edge of the forest trees stirred, as if something quite large were prowling about there. Nothing else moved.

She drove a gold hairpin through her coiffure.

He was with her, along the corridor. It had sometimes happened he would walk up here, in the afternoons. Not for a year, however.

A bird began to shriek its strange stupid warning at the forest's edge, the notes of which sounded like "*J'ai des lits! J'ai des lits!*"

Nanetta had dreamed this afternoon, falling asleep in that chair near the window, that she was walking in the forest, barefoot, as she had done when a child. Through the trees behind her something crept, shadowing her. It was noiseless, and the forest also became utterly still with tension and fear. She had not dared look back, but sometimes, from the rim of her eye, she glimpsed a dark, pencil-straight shape, that might only have been the ebony trunk of a young tree.

Then, pushing through the leaves and ropes of a wild fig, she saw it, in front of her not at her back, and woke, flinging herself forward with a choking gasp, so that she almost fell out of the chair.

It was black, smooth. Perhaps, in the form of a man. Or was it a beast? Were there eyes? Or a mouth?

In the house, a voice whispered, "Something is in the forest."

A shutter banged without wind.

And outside, the bird screamed, *I have beds! I have beds!*

The saton: it was sunset and thin wine light was on the rich man's china, and the Venice glass, what was left of it.

Vonderjan considered the table, idly, smoking, for the meal had been served and consumed early. He had slept off his brandy in twenty minutes on Anna's bed, then woken and had her a third time, before they separated.

She had lain there on the sheet, her pale arms firm and damask with the soft nap of youth.

"I can't get up. I can't stand up."

"Don't get up. Stay where you are," he said. "They can bring you something on a tray."

"Bread," she said, "I want soft warm bread, and some soup. And a glass of wine."

"Stay there," he agreed again. "I'll soon be back."

"Come back quickly," she said. And she held out the slender, strong white arms, all the rest of her flung there and limp as a broken snake.

So he went back and slid his hand gently into her, teasing her, and she writhed on the point of his fingers, the way a doll would, should you put your hand up its skirt.

"Is that so nice? Are you sure you like it?"

"Don't stop."

Vonderjan had thought he meant only to tantalize, perhaps to fulfill, but in the end he unbuttoned himself, the buttons he had only just done up, and put himself into her again, finishing both of them with swift hard thrusts.

So, she had not been in to dine. And he sat here, ready for her again, quite ready. But he was used to that. He had, after all, stored all that, during his years with Uteka, who, so womanly in other ways, had loved to be held and petted like a child, and nothing more. Vonderjan had partly unavoidably felt that the disease, which invaded her body, had somehow been given entrance to it because of this omitting vacancy, which she had not been able to allow him to fill—as night rushed to engulf the sky once vacated by a sun.

This evening the clerk looked very sallow, and had not eaten much. (Vonderjan had forgotten the effect brandy could have.) The black woman was definitely frightened. There was a type of magic going on, some ancient fear-ritual that unknown forces had stirred up among the people on the Island. It did not interest Vonderjan very much, nothing much did, now.

He spoke to the clerk, congratulating him on the efficiency of his lists and his evaluation, and the

arrangements that had been postulated, when next the ship came to the Island.

Jeanjacques rallied. He said, "The one thing I couldn't locate, sir, was a piano."

"Piano?" Puzzled, Vonderjan looked at him.

"I had understood you to say your wife—that she had a piano—"

"Oh, I ordered one for her years ago. It never arrived. It was stolen, I suppose, or lost overboard, and they never admitted to it. Yes, I recall it now, a pianoforte. But the heat here would soon have ruined it, anyway."

The candles abruptly flickered, for no reason. The light was going, night rushing in.

Suddenly something, a huge impenetrable shadow, ran by the window.

The woman, Nanetta, screamed. The housekeeper sat with her eyes almost starting out of her head. Jeanjacques cursed. "*What was that?*"

As it had run by, fleet, leaping, a mouth gaped a hundred teeth—like the mouth of a shark breaking from the ocean. Or had they mistaken that?

Did it have eyes, the great black animal which had run by the window?

Surely it had eyes—

Vonderjan had stood up, and now he pulled a stick from a vase against the wall—as another man might pick up an umbrella, or a poker—and he was opening wide the doors, so the women shrank together and away.

The light of day was gone. The sky was blushing to black. Nothing was there.

Vonderjan called peremptorily into the darkness. To Jean-jacques the call sounded meaningless, gibberish, something like *Hooh! Hoouah!* Vonderjan was not afraid, possibly not even disconcerted or intrigued.

Nothing moved. Then, below, lights broke out on the open space, a servant shouted shrilly in the patois.

Vonderjan shouted down, saying it was nothing. "Go back inside." He turned and looked at the two women and the man in the salon. "Some animal." He banged the doors shut.

"It—looked like a lion," Jeanjacques stammered. But no. It had been like a shark, a fish, which bounded on two or three legs, and stooping low.

The servants must have seen it, too. Alarmed and alerted, they were still disturbed, and generally calling out now. Another woman screamed, and then there was the crash of glass.

"Fools," said Vonderjan, without any expression or contempt. He nodded at the housekeeper. "Go and tell them I say it's all right."

The woman dithered, then scurried away—by the house door, avoiding the terrace. Nanetta, too, had stood up, and her eyes had their silver rings. They, more even than the thing which ran across the window, terrified Jeanjacques.

"What was it? Was it a wild pig?" asked the clerk, aware he sounded like a scared child.

"A pig. What pig? No. Where could it go?"

"Has it climbed up the wall?" Jeanjacques rasped.

The black woman began to speak the patois in a singsong, and the hair crawled on Jeanjacques's scalp.

"Tell her to stop it, can't you?"

"Be quiet, Nanetta," said Vonderjan.

She was silent.

They stood there.

Outside the closed windows, in the closed dark, the disturbed noises below were dying off.

Had it had eyes? Where had it gone to?

Jeanjacques remembered a story of Paris, how the guillotine would leave its station by night, and patrol the streets, searching for yet more blood. And during a siege of antique Rome, a giant phantom wolf had stalked the seven hills, tear-ing out the throats of citizens. These things were not real, even though they had been witnessed and attested, even though evidence and bodies were left in their wake. And, although unreal, yet they existed. They grew, such things, out of the material of the rational world, as maggots appeared spontaneously in a corpse, or fungus formed on damp.

The black woman had been keeping quiet. Now she made a tiny sound.

They turned their heads.

Beyond the windows—dark blotted dark, night on night.

"It's there."

A second time Vonderjan flung open the doors, and light flooded, by some trick of reflection in their glass, out across the place beyond.

It crouches by the wall, where yestereve the man carnally had his wife, where a creeper grows, partly rent away by their movements.

"In God's sight," Vonderjan says, startled finally, but not afraid.

He walks out, straight out, and they see the beast by the wall does not move, either to attack him or to flee.

Jeanjacques can smell roses, honeysuckle. The wine glass drops out of his hand.

Antoinelle dreams, now.

She is back in the house of her aunt, where no one would allow her to speak, or to play the piano. But she has slunk down in the dead of night, into the sitting-room, and rebelliously lifted the piano's lid.

A wonderful sweet smell comes up from the keys, and she strokes them a moment, soundlessly. They feel... like skin. The skin of a man, over muscle, young, hard, smooth. Is it Justus she feels? (She knows this is very childish. Even her sexuality, although perhaps she does not know this, has the wanton ravening quality of the child's single-minded demands.)

There is a shell the inclement aunt keeps on top of the piano, along with some small framed miniatures of ugly relatives.

Antoinelle lifts the shell, and puts it to her ear, listens to hear the sound of the sea. But instead, she hears a piano playing, softly and far off.

The music, Antoinelle thinks, is a piece by Rameau, for the harpsichord, transposed.

She looks at the keys. She has not touched them, or not enough to make them sound.

Rameau's music dies away.

Antoinelle finds she is playing four single notes on the keys, she does not know why, neither the notes, nor the word they spell, mean anything to her.

And then, even in the piano-dream, she is aware her husband, Gregers Vonderjan, is in the bed with her, lying behind her, although in her dream she is standing upright.

They would not let her speak or play the piano—they would not let her have what she must have, or make the sounds that she must make...

Now *she* is a piano.

He fingers her keys, gentle, next a little rough, next sensually, next with the crepitation of a feather. And, at each caress, she sounds, Antoinelle, who is a piano, a different note.

His hands are over her breasts. (In the dream, too, she realizes, she has come into the room naked.) His fingers are on her naked breasts, fondling and describing, itching the buds at their centres. Antoinelle is being played. She gives off, note by note and chord by chord, her music.

Still cupping, circling her breasts with his hungry hands, somehow his scalding tongue is on her spine. He is licking up and up the keys of her vertebrae, through her silk-thin skin.

Standing upright, he is pressed behind her. While lying in the bed, he has rolled her over, crushing her breasts into his hands beneath her, lying on her back, his weight keeping her pinned, breathless.

And now he is entering her body, his penis like a tower on fire.

She spreads, opens, melts, dissolves for him. No matter how large, and he is now enormous, she will make way, then grip fierce and terrible upon him, her toothless springy lower mouth biting and cramming itself full of him, as if never to let go-

They are swimming strongly together for the shore.

How piercing the pleasure at her core, all through her now, the hammers hitting with a golden quake on every nerve-string.

And then, like a beast (a cat? a lion?), he has caught her by the throat, one side of her neck.

As with the other entry, at her sex, her body gives way to allow him room. And, as at the very first, her virgin's cry of pain changes almost at once into a wail of delight.

Antomelle begins to come (to enter, to arrive).

Huge thick rollers of deliciousness, purple and crimson, dark and blazing, tumble rhythmically as dense

waves upwards, from her spine's base to the windowed dome of her skull.

Glorious starvation couples with feasting, itching with rubbing, constricting, bursting, with implosion, the architecture of her pelvis rocks, punches, roaring, and spinning in eating movements and swallowing gulps—

If only this sensation might last and last.

It lasts. It lasts.

Antomelle is burning bright. She is changing into stars. Her stars explode and shatter. There are greater stars she can make. She is going to make them. She does so. And greater. Still she is coming, entering, arriving.

She has screamed. She has screamed until she no longer has any breath. Now she screams silently. Her nails gouge the bed-sheets. She feels the blood of her virginity falling drop by drop. She is the shell and her blood her sounding sea, and the sea is rising up and another mouth, the mouth of night, is taking it all, and she is made of silver for the night which devours her, and this will never end.

And then she screams again, a terrible divine scream, dredged independently up from the depths of her concerto of ecstasy. And vaguely, as she flies crucified on the wings of the storm, she knows the body upon her body (its teeth in her throat) is not the body of Vonderjan, and that the fire-filled hands upon her breasts, the flaming stem within her, are black, not as black is black, but black as outer space, which she is filling now with her millions of wheeling, howling stars.

The bird which cries *Shadily! Shadily!* flies over the island above the boiling afternoon lofts, and is gone, back to the upper city mainland, where there are more trees, more shade.

In the branches of the snake-willow, a wind chime tinkles, once.

Yse's terrace is full of people, sitting and standing, with bottles, glasses, cans, and laughing. Yse has thrown a party. Someone, drunk, is dog-paddling in the alley of water.

Lucius, in his violet shirt, looks at the people. Sometimes Ys« appears. She's slim and ash-pale, with long, shining hair, about twenty-five. Closer, thirty-five, maybe.

"Good party, Yse. Why you throw a party?"

"I had to throw something. Throw a plate, or myself away. Or something."

Carr and the fat man, they got the two lids up off the piano by now. It won't play, everyone knew it wouldn't. Half the notes will not sound. Instead, a music centre, straddled between the piano's legs, rigged via Yse's generator, uncoils the blues.

And this in turn has made the refrigerator temperamental. Twice people have gone to neighbours to get ice. And in turn these neighbours have been invited to the party.

A new batch of lobsters bake on the griddle. Green grapes and yellow pineapples are pulled apart.

"I was bored," she says. "I couldn't get on with it, that vampire story."

"Let me read it."

"You won't decipher my handwriting."

"Some. Enough."

"You think so? All right. But don't make criticisms, don't tell me what to do, Lucius, all right?"

"Deal. How would / know?"

He sits in the shady corner, (*Shadily't* the bird cried mockingly [*J'ai des lits!*] from Yse's roof) and now he reads. He can read her handwriting, it's easier than she thinks.

Sunset spreads an awning.

Some of the guests go home, or go elsewhere, but still crowds sit along the wall, or on the steps, and in the loft people are dancing now to a rock band on the music centre.

"Hey, this piano don't play!" accusingly calls Big Eye, a late learner.

Lucius takes a polite puff of a joint someone passes, and passes it on. He sits thinking.

Sunset darkens, claret colour, and now the music centre plays Mozart.

Yse sits down by Lucius on the wall.

"Tell me, Yse, how does he get all his energy, this rich guy? He's forty, you say, but you say that was like fifty, then. And he's big, heavy. And he perks this Anna three, four times a night, and then goes on back for more."

"Oh that. Vonderjan and Antoinelle. It's to do with obsession. They're obsessive. When you have a kink for something, you can do more, go on and on. Straight sex is never like that. It's the perversity—so-called perversity. That revs it up."

"Strong guy, though."

"Yes."

"Too strong for you?"

"Too strong for me."

Lucius knew nothing about Yse's "obsession" with Per Laszd. But by now he knows there is something. There has never been a man in Yse's life that Lucius has had to explain to that he, Lucius, is her friend only. Come to that, not any women in her life, either. But he has come across her work, read a little of it—never much—seen this image before, this big blond man. And the sex, for always, unlike the life of Yse, her books are full of it.

Lucius says suddenly, "You liked him, but you never got to have him, this feller."

She nods. As the light softens, she's not a day over thirty, even from two feet away.

"No. But I'm used to that."

"What is it, then? You have a bone to pick with him for him getting old?"

"The real living man, you mean? He's not old. About fifty-five, I suppose. He looks pretty wonderful to me still."

"You see him?" Lucius is surprised.

"I see him on TV. And he looks great. But he was—well, fabulous when he was younger. I mean actually like a man out of a fable, a myth." She's forgotten, he thinks, that she never confided like this in Lucius. Still though, she keeps back the name.

Lucius doesn't ask for the name.

A name no longer matters, if it ever did.

"You never want to try another guy?"

"Who? Who's offering?" And she is angry, he sees it. Obviously, he is no use to her that way. But then, did she make a friendship with Lucius for just that reason?

"You look good, Yse."

"Thank you." Cold. Better let her be. For a moment.

A heavenly, unearthly scent is stealing over the evening air.

Lucius has never seen the plant someone must have put in to produce this scent. Nothing grows on the terrace but for the snake-willow, and tonight people, lobster, pineapple, empty bottles.

"This'll be a mess to get straight," he says.

"Are you volunteering?"

"Just condoling, Yse."

The sunset totally fades. Stars light up. It's so clear, you can see the Abacus Tower, like a Christmas tree, on the mainland.

"What colour are his eyes, Yse?"

"... Eyes? Blue. It's in the story."

"No, girl, the other one."

"Which—? Oh, *that* one. The vampire. I don't know. Your vampire had yellow eyes, you said."

"I said, he made me feel like a king. But the sex was good, then it was over. Not as you describe it, extended play."

"I did ask you not to criticise my work."

"No way. It's sexy. But tell me his eyes' colour?"

"Black, maybe. Or even white. The vampire is like the piano."

"Yeah. I don't see that. Yse, why is it a piano?"

"It could have been anything. The characters are the hotbed, and the vampire grows out of that. It just happens to form as a piano—a sort of piano. Like dropping a glass of wine, like a cloud—the stain, the cloud, just happens to take on a shape, randomly, that seems to resemble some familiar thing."

"Or is it because you can play it?"

"Yes, that, too."

"And it's an animal."

"And a man. Or male. A male body."

"Black as black is black. Not skin-black."

"Blacker. As black as black can be."

He says quietly, "La Danse aux Vampires."

A glass breaks in the loft, and wine spills on the wooden floor—shapelessly? Yse doesn't bat an eyelash.

"You used to fuss about your things."

"They're only things."

"We're all only things, Yse. What about the horses?"

"You mean Vonderjan's horses. This is turning into a real interrogation. All right. The last one, the white one like a fish, escapes, and gallops about the Island."

"You don't seem stuck, Yse. You seem to know plenty enough to go on."

"Perhaps I'm tired of going on."

"Looked in the mirror?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look in the mirror, Yse."

"Oh that. It's not real. It won't last."

"I never saw a woman could do that before, get fifteen years younger in a month. Grow her hair fifty times as thick and twenty times longer. Lose forty pounds without trying, and nothing *loose*. How do *you* feel, Yse?"

"All right."

"But do you feel good?"

"I feel all right."

"It's how they make you feel, Yse. You said it. They're not beautiful, they don't smell like flowers or the sea. They come out of the grave, out of beds of earth, out of the cesspit shit at the bottom of your soul's id. It's how they make you feel, what they can do to change you. Hudja-magica. Not them. What they can do to *you*."

"You are crazy, Lucius. There've been some funny smokes on offer up here tonight."

He gets up.

"Yse, did I say, the one I followed, when he went into his grave under the headstone, he say to me, *You come in with me, Luce. Don't mind the dark. I make sure you never notice it.*"

"And you said no."

"I took to my hot heels and ran for my fucking life."

"Then you didn't love him, Lucius."

"I loved my fucking life."

She smiles, the white girl at his side. Hair and skin so ivory pale, white dress and shimmering eyes, and who in hell is she? "Take care, Yse."

"Night, Lucius. Sweet dreams."

The spilled wine on the floor has spilled a random shape that looks like a screwed-up sock.

Her loft is empty. They have all gone.

She lights the lamp on her desk, puts out the others, sits, looking at the piano from the Sound, forty feet away, its hind lid and its fordid now raised, eyes and mouth.

Then she gets up and goes to the piano, and taps out on the keys four notes.

Each one sounds.

D, then E, then A. And then again D.

It would be *mart* in French, *dood* in Dutch, *tod* in German. Danish, Czech, she isn't sure... but it would not work.

I saw in the mirror.

PianO. O, pain.

But, it doesn't hurt.

. Danse Macabre

A wind blew from the sea, and waxy petals fell from the vine, scattering the lid of the piano as it stood there, by the house wall.

None of them spoke.

Jeanjacques felt the dry, parched cinnamon breath of Nanetta scorching on his neck, as she waited behind him. And in front of him was Vonderjan, examining the thing on the terrace.

"How did it get up here?" Jeanjacques asked, stupidly. He knew he was being stupid. The piano was supernatural. It had run up here.

"Someone carried it. How else?" replied Vonderjan.

Did he believe this? Yes, it seemed so.

Just then a stifled cry occurred above, detached itself and floated over them. For a moment none of them reacted to it; they had heard it so many times and in so many forms.

But abruptly Vonderjan's blond head went up, his eyes wide. He turned and strode away, half running.

Reaching a stair that went to the gallery above, he bounded up it.

It was the noise his wife made, of course. But she made it when he was with her (inside her). And he had been here—

Neither Nanetta nor Jeanjacques went after Gregers Von-derjan, and neither of them went any nearer the piano.

"Could someone have carried it up here?" Jeanjacques asked the black woman, in French.

"Of course." But as she said this, she vehemently shook her head.

They moved away from the piano.

The wind came again, and petals fell again across the blackness of its carapace.

Jeanjacques courteously allowed the woman to precede him into the salon, then shut both doors quietly.

"What is it?"

She looked up at him sleepily, deceitfully.

"You called out."

"Did I? I was asleep. A dream..."

"Now I'm here," he said.

"No," she said, moving a little way from him. "I'm so sleepy. Later."

Vonderjan stood back from the bed. He gave a short laugh, at the absurdity of this. In the two years of their sexual marriage, she had never before said anything similar to him. (And he heard Uteka murmur sadly, "Please forgive me, Gregers. Please don't be angry.")

"Very well."

Then Antoinette turned, and he saw the mark on her neck, glowing lushly scarlet as a flower or fruit, in the low lamplight

"Something's bitten you." He was alarmed. He thought at once of the horses dying. "Let me see."

"Bitten me? Oh, yes. And I scratched at it in my sleep, yes, I remember."

"Is that why you called out, Anna?"

She was amused and secretive.

Picking up the lamp, he bent over her, staring at the place.

A little thread, like fire, still trickled from the wound, which was itself very small. There was the slightest bruising. It did not really look like a bite, more as if she had been stabbed on purpose by a hat pin.

Where he had let her put him off sexually, he would not let her do so now. He went out and came back, to mop up the little wound with alcohol.

"Now you've made it sting. It didn't before."

"You said it itched you."

"Yes, but it didn't worry me."

"I'll close the window."

"Why? It's hot, so hot—"

"To keep out these things which bite."

He noted her watching him. It was true she was mostly still asleep, yet despite this, and the air of deception and concealment which so oddly clung to her, for a moment he saw, in her eyes, that he was old.

When her husband had gone, Antoinette lay on her front, her head turned, so the blood continued for a while to soak into her pillow.

She had dreamed the sort of dream she had sometimes dreamed before Vonderjan came into her life. Yet this had been much more intense. If she slept, would the dream return? But she slept quickly, and the dream did not happen.

Two hours later, when Vonderjan came back to her bed, he could not at first wake her. Then, although she seemed to welcome him, for the first time he was unable to satisfy her. She writhed and wriggled beneath him, then petulantly flung herself back. "Oh finish, then. I can't. I don't want to."

But he withdrew gently, and coaxed her. "What's wrong, Anna? Aren't you well tonight?"

"Wrong? I want what you usually give me."

"Then let me give it to you."

"No. I'm too tired."

He tried to feel her forehead. She seemed too warm. Again, he had the thought of the horses, and he was uneasy. But she pulled away from him. "Oh, let me sleep, I must sleep."

Before returning here, he had gone down and questioned his servants. He had asked them if they had brought the piano up on to the terrace, and where they had found it.

They were afraid, he could see that plainly. Afraid of unknown magic and the things they beheld in the leaves and on the wind, which he, Vonderjan, could not see and had never believed in. They were also afraid of a shadowy beast, which apparently they, too, had witnessed, and which he thought he had seen. And naturally, they were afraid of the piano, because it was out of its correct situation, because (and he already knew this perfectly well) they believed it had stolen by itself out of the forest, and run up on the terrace, and *was* the beast they had seen.

At midnight, he went back down, unable to sleep, with a lamp and a bottle, and pushed up both the lids of the piano with ease.

Petals showered away. And a wonderful perfume exploded from the inside of the instrument, and with it a dim cloud of dust, so he stepped *off*.

As the film cleared, Vonderjan began to see that something lay inside the piano. The greater hind lid had shut it in against the piano's viscera of dulcimer hammers and brass-wire strings.

When all the film had smoked away, Vonderjan once more went close and held the lamp above the piano, leaning down to look, as he had with his wife's bitten throat.

An embalmed mummy was curled up tight hi the piano.

That is, a twisted knotted thing, blackened as if by fire, lay folded round there in a preserved and tarry skin, tough as any bitumen, out of which, here and there, the dull white star of a partial bone poked through.

This was not large enough, he thought, to be the remains of a normal adult. Yet the bones, so far as he could tell, were not those of a child, nor of an animal.

Yet it was most like the burnt and twisted carcass of a beast.

He released and pushed down again upon the lid. He held the lid flat, as if it might lunge up and open again. Glancing at the keys, before he closed them away, too, he saw a drop of vivid red, like a pearl of blood from his wife's neck, but it was only a single red petal from the vine.

Soft and loud. In his sleep, the clerk kept hearing these words. They troubled him, so he shifted and turned, almost woke, sank back uneasily. *Soft and loud*—which was what *pianoforte* meant...

Jeanjacques's mother, who had been accustomed to thrash him, struck him round the head. A loud blow, but she was soft with grown men, yielding, pliant. And with him, too, when grown, she would come to be soft and subserviently polite. But he never forgot the strap, and when she lay dying, he had gone nowhere near her. (His white half, from his father, had also made sure he went nowhere near his sire.)

Nanetta lay under a black, heavily furred animal, a great cat, which kneaded her back and buttocks, purring. At first she was terrified, then she began to like it. Then she knew she would die.

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Notes: The black keys are the black magic. The white keys are the white magic. (Both are evil.) Anything black, or white, must respond.

Even if half black, half white.

Notes: The living white horse has escaped. It gallops across the Island. It reaches the sea and finds the fans of the waves, snorting at them, and canters through the surf along the beaches, fish-white, and the sun begins to rise.

Gregers Vonderjan dreams he is looking down at his dead wife, (Uteka) in the rain, as he did in Copenhagen that year she died. But in the dream she is not in a coffin, she is uncovered, and the soil is being thrown onto her vulnerable face. And he is sorry, because for all his wealth and personal magnitude, and power, he could not stop this happening to her. When the Island sunrise wakes him at Bleumaner, the sorrow does not abate. He wishes now she had lived, and was here with him. (Nanetta would have eased him elsewhere, as she had often done in the past. Nanetta had been kind, and warm-blooded enough.) (Why speak of her as if she, too, were dead?)

Although awake, he does not want to move. He cannot be bothered with it, the eternal and repetitive affair of getting up, shaving and dressing, breakfasting, looking at the accounts, the lists the clerk has made, his possessions, which will shortly be gone.

How has he arrived at this? He had seemed always on a threshold. There is no time left now. The threshold is that of the exit. It is all over, or soon will be.

Almost all of them had left. The black servants and the white, from the kitchen and the lower rooms. The white housekeeper, despite her years and her pernicky adherences to the house. Vonderjan's groom—he had let the last horse out, too, perhaps taken it with him.

Even the bird had been let out of its cage in Antoinelle's boudoire, and had flown off.

Stromn stayed, Vonderjan's man. His craggy indifferent face said, *So, have they leff!*

And the young black woman, Nanetta, she was still there, sitting with Antoinelle on the balcony, playing cards among the Spanish flowers, her silver and ruby earrings glittering.

"Why?" said Jeanjacques. But he knew.

"They're superstitious," Vonderjan, dismissive. "This sort of business has happened before."

It was four in the afternoon. Mornings here were separate. They came in slices, divided off by sleep. Or else, one slept through them.

"Is that—is the piano still on the terrace? Did someone take it?" said Jeanjacques, giving away the fact he had been to look, and seen the piano was no longer there. Had he dreamed it?

"Some of them will have moved it," said Vonderjan. He paced across the library. The windows stood open. The windows here were open so often, anything might easily get in.

The Island sweated, and the sky was golden lead.

"Who would move it?" persisted Jeanjacques.

Vonderjan shrugged. He said, "It wasn't any longer worth anything. It had been hi the sea. It must have washed up on the beach. Don't worry about it."

Jeanjacques thought, if he listened carefully, he could hear beaded piano notes, dripping in narrow streams through the house. He had heard them this morning, as he lay in bed, awake, somehow unable to get up. (There had seemed no point in getting up. Whatever would happen would happen, and he might as well lie and wait for it.) However, a lifetime of frantic early arisings, of hiding in country barns and thatch, and up chimneys, a lifetime of running away, slowly curdled his guts and pushed him off the mattress. But by then it was past noon.

"Do they come back?"

"What? What did you say?" asked Vonderjan.

"Your servants. You said, they'd made off before. Presumably they returned."

"Yes. Perhaps."

Birds called raucously (but wordlessly)-m the forest, and then grew silent.

"There was something inside that piano," said Vonderjan, "a curiosity. I should have seen to it last night, when I found it."

"What—what was it?"

"A body. Oh, don't blanch. Here, drink this. Some freakish thing. A monkey, I'd say. I don't know how it got there, but they'll have been frightened by it."

"But it smelled so sweet. Like roses—"

"Yes, it smelled of flowers. That's a funny thing. Sometimes the dead do smell like that. Just before the smell changes."

"I never heard of that."

"No. It surprised me years ago, when I encountered it myself."

Something fell through the sky—an hour. And now it was sunset.

Nanetta had put on an apron and cooked food in the kitchen. Antoinelle had not done anything to assist her, although, in her childhood, she had been taught how to make soups and bake bread, out of a sort of bourgeois pettiness.

In fact, Antoinelle had not even properly dressed herself. Tonight she came to the meal, which the black woman had meticulously set out, in a dressing robe, tied about her waist by a brightly coloured scarf. The neckline drooped, showing off her long neck and the tops of her round, young breasts, and the flimsy improper thing she wore beneath. Her hair was also undressed, loose, gleaming and rushing about her with a water-wet sheen.

Stromn, too, came in tonight, to join them, sitting far down the table, and with a gun across his lap.

"What's that for?" Vonderjan asked him.

"The blacks are saying there's some beast about on the Island. It fell off a boat and swam ashore."

"You believe them?"

"It's possible, *mijnheer*, isn't it. I knew of a dog that was thrown from a ship at Port-au-Roi, and reached Venice."

"Did you, indeed."

Vonderjan looked smart, as always. The pallid topaz shone in his ring, his shirt was laundered and starched.

The main dish they had consisted of fish, with a kind of ragout, with pieces of vegetable, and rice.

Nanetta had lit the candles, or some of them. Some repeatedly went out. Vonderjan remarked this was due to something in the atmosphere. The air had a thick, heavy saltiness, and for once there was no rumbling of thunder, and constellations showed, massed above the heights, once the light had gone, each star framed in a peculiar greenish circle.

After Vonderjan's exchange with the man, Stromn, none of them spoke.

Without the storm, there seemed no sound at all, except that now and then, Jeanjacques heard thin little rills of musical notes.

At last he said, "What is that I can hear?"

Vonderjan was smoking one of his cigars. "What?"

It came again. Was it only in the clerk's head? He did not think so, for the black girl could plainly hear it, too. And oddly, when Vonderjan did not say anything else, it was she who said to Jeanjacques, "They

hang things on the trees—to honour gods—wind gods, the gods of darkness."

Jeanjacques said, "But it sounds like a piano."

No one answered. Another candle sighed and died.

And then Antoinelle—*laughed*.

It was a horrible, terrible laugh. Rilling and tinkling like the bells hung on the trees of the Island, or like the high notes of any piano. She did it for no apparent reason, and did not refer to it once she had finished. She should have done, she should have begged their pardon, as if she had belched raucously.

Vonderjan got up. He went to the doors and opened them on the terrace and the night.

Where the piano had rested itself against the wall, there was nothing, only shadow and the disarrangement of the vine, all its flower-cups broken and shed.

"Do you want some air, Anna?"

Antoinelle rose. She was demure now. She crossed to Vonderjan, and they moved out onto the terrace. But their walking together was unlike that compulsive, gliding inevitability of the earlier time. And, once out in the darkness, they *only* walked, loitering up and down.

She is mad, Jeanjacques thought. This was what he had seen in her face. That she was insane, unhinged and dangerous, her loveliness like vitriol thrown into the eyes of anyone who looked at her.

Stronn poured himself a brandy. He did not seem unnerved, or particularly *en garde*, despite the gun he had lugged in.

But Nanetta stood up. Unhooking the ruby eardrops from her earlobes, she placed them beside her plate. As she went across the salon to the inner door, Jeanjacques noted her feet, which had been shod in city shoes, were now bare. They looked incongruous, those dark velvet paws with their nails of tawny coral, extending long and narrow from under her light gown; they looked lawless, in a way nothing of the rest of her did.

When she had gone out, Jeanjacques said to Stronn, "Why is she barefoot?"

"Savages."

Old rage slapped the inside of the clerk's mind, like his mother's hand. Though miles off, he must react. "Oh," he said sullenly, "barbaric, do you mean? You think them barbarians, though they've been freed."

Stronn said, "Unchained is what I mean. Wild like the forest. That's what it means, that word, savage—forest."

Stronn reached across the table and helped himself from Vonderjan's box of cigars.

On the terrace, the husband and wife walked up and down. The doors stayed wide open.

Trees rustled below, and were still.

Jeanjacques, too, got up and followed the black woman out, and beyond the room he found her, still in the passage. She was standing on her bare feet, listening, with the silver rings in her eyes.

"*What can you hear?*"

"You hear it, too."

"Why are your feet bare?"

"So I can go back. So I can run away."

Jeanjacques seized her wrist and they stood staring at each other in a mutual fear, of which each one made up some tiny element, but which otherwise surrounded them.

"What—" he said.

"Her pillow's red with blood," said Nanetta. "Did you see the hole in her neck?"

"No."

"No. It closes up like a flower—a flower that eats flies. But she bled. And from her other place. White bed was red bed with her blood."

He felt sick, but he kept hold of the wand of her wrist.

"There *is* something."

"You know it, too."

Across the end of the passageway, then, where there was no light, something heavy and rapid, and yet slow, passed by. It was all darkness, but a flier of pallor slid across its teeth. And the head of it one moment turned, and, without eyes, as it had before, it gazed at them.

The black girl sagged against the wall, and Jeanjacques leaned against and into her. Both panted harshly. They might have been copulating, as Vonderjan had with his wife.

Then the passage was free. They felt the passage draw in a breath.

"Was in my room," the girl muttered, "was in my room that is too small anything so big get through the door. I wake, I see it there."

"But it left you alone."

"It not want me. Want *her*."

"The white bitch."

"Want her, have her. Eat her alive. Run to the forest," said Nanetta, in the patois, but now he understood her, "run to the forest." But neither of them moved.

"No, no, please, Gregers. Don't be angry."

The voice is not from the past. Not Uteka's. It comes from a future now become the present.

"You said you have your courses. When did that prevent you before? I've told you, I don't mind it."

"No. Not this time."

He lets her go. Lets go of her.

She did not seem anxious, asking him not to be angry. He is not angry. Rebuffed, Vonderjan is, to his

own amazement, almost relieved.

"Draw the curtains round your bed, Anna. And shut your window."

"Yes, Gregers."

He looks, and sees her for the first time tonight, how she is dressed, or not dressed.

"Why did you come down like that?"

"I was hot... does it matter?"

"A whore in the brothel would put on something like that." The crudeness of his language startles him. (Justus?) He checks. "I'm sorry, Anna. You meant nothing. But don't dress like that in front of the others."

"Nanetta, do you mean?"

"I mean, of course, Stronn. And the Frenchman."

Her neck, drooping, is the neck of a lily drenched by rain. He cannot see the mark of the bite.

"I've displeased you."

Antoinelle can remember her subservient mother (the mother who later threw her out to her aunt's house) fawning in this way on her father. (Who also threw her out.)

But Vonderjan seems uninterested now. He stands looking instead down the corridor.

Then he takes a step. Then he halts and says, "Go along to your room, Anna. Shut the door."

"Yes, Gregers."

In all their time together, they have never spoken in this way, in such platitudes, ciphers. Those things used freely by others.

He thinks he has seen something at the turn of the corridor. But when he goes to that junction, nothing is there. And then he thinks, of course, what *could* be there?

By then her door is shut.

Alone, he walks to his own rooms, and goes in.

The Island is alive tonight. Full of stirrings and displacements.

He takes up a bottle of Hollands, and pours a triple measure.

Beyond the window, the green-ringed eyes of the stars stare down at Bleumaneeer, as if afraid.

When she was a child, a little girl, Antoinelle had sometimes longed to go to bed, in order to be alone with her fantasies, which (then) were perhaps "ingenuous." Or perhaps not.

She had lain curled up, pretending to sleep, imagining that she had found a fairy creature in the garden of her parents' house.

The fairy was always in some difficulty, and she must rescue it—perhaps from drowning in the birdbath,

where sparrows had attacked it. Bearing it indoors, she would care for it, washing it in a teacup, powdering it lightly with scented dust stolen from her mother's box, dressing it in bits of lace, tied at the waist with strands of brightly coloured embroidery silk. Since it was seen naked in the teacup, it revealed it was neither male nor female, lacking both breasts and penis (she did not grossly investigate it further), although otherwise it appeared a full-grown specimen of its kind. But then, at that time, Antoinelle had never seen either the genital apparatus of a man or the mammalia of an adult woman.

The fairy, kept in secret, was dependent totally upon Antoinelle. She would feed it on crumbs of cake and fruit. It drank from her chocolate in the morning. It would sleep on her pillow. She caressed it, with always a mounting sense of urgency, not knowing where the caresses could lead—and indeed they never led to anything. Its wings she did not touch. (She had been told, the wings of moths and butterflies were fragile.)

Beyond Antoinelle's life, all Europe had been at war with itself. Invasion, battle, death, these swept by the carefully closed doors of her parents' house, and by Antoinelle entirely. Through a combination of conspiracy and luck, she learned nothing of it, but no doubt those who protected her so assiduously reinforced the walls of Antoinelle's self-involvement. Such lids were shut down on her, what else was she to do but make music with herself—*play* with herself...

Sometimes in her fantasies, Antoinelle and the fairy quarrelled. Afterwards they would be reconciled, and the fairy would hover, kissing Antoinelle on the lips. Sometimes the fairy got inside her nightdress, tickling her all over until she thought she would die. Sometimes she tickled the fairy in turn with a goose feather, reducing it to spasms identifiable (probably) only as hysteria.

It never flew away.

Yet, as her own body ripened and formed, Antoinelle began to lose interest in the fairy. Instead, she had strange waking dreams of a flesh-and-blood soldier she had once glimpsed under the window, who, in her picturings, had to save her—not from any of the wild armies then at large—but from an escaped bear... and later came the prototypes of Justus, who kissed her until she swooned.

Now Antoinelle had gone back to her clandestine youth. Alone in the room, its door shut, she blew out the lamp. She threw wide her window. Standing in the darkness, she pulled off her garments and tossed them down.

The heat of the night was like damp velvet. The tips of her breasts rose like tight buds that wished to open.

Her husband was old. She was young. She felt her young-ness, and remembered her childhood with an inappropriate nostalgia.

Vonderjan had thought something might get in at the window. She sensed this might be true.

Antoinelle imagined that something climbed slowly up the creeper.

She began to tremble, and went and lay down on her bed.

She lay on her back, her hands lying lightly over her breasts, her legs a little apart.

Perhaps after all Vonderjan might ignore her denials and come in. She would let him. Yes, after all she had stopped menstruating. She would not mind his being here. He liked so much to do things to her, to render her helpless, gasping and abandoned, his hands on her making her into his instrument, making her utter sounds, noises, making her come over and over. And she, too, liked this best. She liked to do

nothing, simply to be made to respond, and so give way. In some other hie she might have become the ideal fanatic, falling before the godhead in fits whose real, spurious nature only the most sceptical could ever suspect. Conversely, partnered with a more selfish and less accomplished lover, with an ignorant Justus, for example, she might have been forced to do more, learned more, liked less. But that now was hypothetical.

A breeze whispered at the window. (What does it say?)

That dream she had had. What had that been? Was it her husband? No, it had been a man with black skin. But she had seen no one so black. A blackness without any translucence, with no blood inside it.

Antoinelle drifted, in a sort of trance.

She had wandered into a huge room with a wooden floor. The only thing in it was a piano. The air was full of a rapturous smell, like blossom, something which bloomed yet burned.

She ran her fingers over the piano. The notes sounded clearly, but each was a voice. A genderless yet sexual voice, crying out as she touched it—now softly, excitedly, now harsh and demanding and desperate.

She was lying on the beach below the Island. The sea was coming in, wave by wave—glissandi—each one the ripples of the wire harp-strings under the piano lid, or keys rippling as fingers scattered touches across them.

Antoinelle had drained Gregers Vonderjan of all he might give her. She had sucked him dry of everything but his blood. It was his own fault, exalting in his power over her, wanting to make her a doll that would dance on his fingers' end, penis's end, *power's* end.

Her eyes opened, and, against the glass windows, she saw the piano standing, its lids lifted, its keys gleaming like appetite, black and white.

Should she get up and play music on it? The keys would feel like skin.

Then she knew that if she only lay still, the piano would come to *her*. She was *its* instrument, as she had been Vonderjan's.

The curtain blew. The piano shifted, and moved, but as it did so, its shape altered. Now it was not only a piano, but an animal.

(Notes: Pianimal.)

It was a beast. And then it melted and stood up, and the form it had taken now was that of a man.

Stronn walked around the courtyard, around its corners, past the dry Spanish fountain. Tonight the husks of flowers scratched in the bowl, and sounded like water. Or else nocturnal lizards darted about there.

There was only one light he could see in Gregers Vonderjan's big house, the few candles left undoused in the salon.

The orange trees on the gallery smelled bittersweet

Stronn did not want to go to bed. He was wide awake. In the old days, he might have had a game of cards with some of the blacks, or even with Vonderjan. But those times had ceased to be.

He had thought he heard the white horse earlier, its shod hoofs going along the track between the

rhododendrons. But now there was no sign of it. Doubtless one of the people on the Island would catch the horse and keep it. As for the other animal, the one said to have escaped from a passing ship, Stronn did not really think it existed, or if it did, it would be some-thulg of no great importance.

Now and then he heard the tinkling noise of hudja bells the people had hung on the banana trees. Then a fragment like piano music, but it was the bells again. Some nights the sea breathed as loudly up here as in the bay. Or a shout from one of the huts two miles off might seem just over a wall.

He could hear the vrouw, certainly. But he was used to hearing that. Her squeaks and yowls, fetching off as Vonderjan shafted her. But she was a slut. The way she had come in tonight proved it, in her bedclothes. And she had never given the meester a son, not even tried to give him a child, like the missus (Uteka) had that time, only she had lost it, but she was never very healthy.

A low, thin wind blew along the cane fields, and Stronn could smell the coffee trees and the hairy odour of kayar.

He went out of the yard, carrying his gun, thinking he was still looking for the white horse.

A statue of black obsidian might look like this, polished like this.

The faint luminescence of night, with its storm choked within it, is behind the figure. Starlight describes the outline of it, but only as it turns, moving towards her, do details of its forward surface catch any illumination.

Yet too, all the while, adapting to the camouflage of its environment, it grows subtly more human, that is, more recognizable.

For not entirely—remotely—human is it.

Does she comprehend?

From the head, a black pelt of hair waterfalls away around it, folding down its back like a cloak.

The wide flat pectorals are coined each side three times. It is six-nippled, like a panther.

Its legs move, columnar, heavily muscled and immensely vital, capable of great leaps and astonishing bounds, but walking, they give it the grace of a dancer.

At first there seems to be nothing at its groin, just as it seems to have no features set into its face... except that the light had slid, once, twice, on the long rows of perfect teeth.

But now it is at the bed's foot, and out of the dark it has evolved, or made itself whole.

A man's face. '

The face of a handsome Justus, and of a Vonderjan in his stellar youth. A face of improbable mythic beauty, and opening in it, like two vents revealing the inner burning core of it, eyes of grey ice, which each blaze like the planet Venus.

She can see now, it has four upper aims. They, too, are strong and muscular, also beautiful, like the dancer's legs.

The penis is large and upright, without a sheath, the black lotus bulb on a thick black stem. No change of shade. (No light, no inner blood.) Only the mercury-flame inside it, which only the eyes show.

Several of the side teeth, up and down, are pointed sharply. The tongue is black. The inside of the mouth is black. And the four black shapely hands, with their twenty long, flexible fingers, have palms that are black as the death of light

It bends towards Antoinelle. It has the smell of night and of the Island, and of the sea. And also the scent of hothouse flowers, that came out of the piano. And a carnivorous smell, like fresh meat.

It stands there, looking at her, as she lies on the bed.

And on the floor, emerging from the pelt that falls from its head, the long black tail strokes softly now this way, now that way.

Then the first pair of hands stretch over onto the bed, and after them the second pair, and fluidly it lifts itself and *pours* itself forward up the sheet, and up over the body of the girl, looking down at her as it does so, from its water-pale eyes. And its smooth body rasps on her legs, as it advances, and the big hard firm organ knocks on her thighs, hot as the body is cool.

He walked behind her, obedient and terrified. The Island frightened him, but it was more than that. Nanetta was now like his mother (when she was young and slim, dominant and brutal). Once she turned, glaring at him, with the eyes of a lynx. "*Hush.*"

"But I—" he started to say, and she shook her head again, raging at him without words.

She trod so noiselessly on her bare feet, which were the indigo colour of the sky in its darkness. And he blundered, try as he would.

The forest held them in its tentacles. The top-heavy plantains loomed, their blades of black-bronze sometimes quivering. Tree limbs like enormous plaited snakes rolled upwards. Occasionally, mystically, he thought, he heard the sea.

She was taking him to her people, who grasped what menaced them, its value if not its actual being, and could keep them safe.

Barefoot and stripped of her jewels, she was attempting to go back into the knowingness of her innocence and her beginnings. But he had always been overaware and a fool.

They came into a glade of wild tamarinds—could it be called *mat*? A *gladel* It was an aperture among the trees, but only because trees had been cut down. There was an altar, very low, with frangipani flowers, scented like confectionary, and something killed that had been picked clean. The hudja bells chimed from a nearby bough, the first he had seen. They sounded like the sistra of ancient Egypt, as the cane fields had recalled to him the notion of a temple.

Nanetta bowed to the altar and went on, and he found he had crossed himself, just as he had done when a boy in church.

It made him feel better, doing that, as if he had quickly thrown up and got rid of some poison in his heart.

Vau l'eau, Vonderjan thought. Which meant, going downstream, to wrack and ruin.

He could not sleep, and turned on his side to stare out through the window. The stars were so unnaturally clear. Bleumaneer was in the eye of the storm, the aperture at its cen-tie. When this passed, weather would resume, the ever-threatening presence of tempest.

He thought of the white horse, galloping about the Island, down its long stairways of hills and rock and

forest, to the shore.

Half asleep, despite his insomnia, there was now a split second when he saw the keys of a piano, descending like the levels of many black and white terraces.

Then he was fully awake again.

Vonderjan got up. He reached for the bottle of schnapps, and found it was empty.

Perhaps he should go to her bed. She might have changed her mind. No, he did not want her tonight. He did not want anything, except to be left in peace.

It seemed to him that after all he would be glad to be rid of every bit of it. His wealth, his manipulative powers. To live here alone, as the house fell gradually apart, without servants, or any authority or commitments. And without Anna.

Had he been glad when Uteka eventually died? Yes, she had suffered so. And he had never known her. She was like a book he had meant to read, had begun to read several times, only to put it aside, unable to remember those pages he had already laboriously gone through.

With Anna it was easy, but then, she was not a book at all. She was a demon he had himself invented (Vonderjan did not realize this, that even for a moment, he thought in this way), an oasis, after Uteka's sexual desert, and so, like any fantasy, she could be sloughed at once. He had masturbated over her long enough, this too-young girl, with her serpentine body (apple tree and tempting snake together), and her idealized pleas always for more.

Now he wanted to leave the banquet table. To get up and go away and sleep and grow old, without such distractions.

He thought he could hear her, though- Hear her fast starved feeding breathing, and for once, this did not arouse him. And in any case it might not be Anna, but only the gasping of the sea, hurling herself far away, on the rocks and beaches of the Island.

It—he—paints her lips with its long and slender tongue, which is black. Then it paints the inside of her mouth. The tongue is very narrow, sensitive, incites her gums, making her want to yawn, except that is not what she needs to do—but she stretches her body irresistibly.

The first set of hands settles on her breasts.

The second set of hands on her rib cage.

Something flicks, flicks, between her thighs... not the staff of the penis, but something more like a second tongue——

Antoinelle's legs open, and her head falls back. She makes a sound, but it is a bestial grunting that almost offends her, yet there is no room in her body or mind for that. *"No—" she tries to say.

The *no* means yes, in the case of Antoinelle. It is addressed, not to her partner, but to normal life, anything that may intrude, and warns *Don't interrupt*.

The black tongue wends, waking nerves of taste and smell in the roof of her mouth. She scents lakoum, pepper, ambergris, and myrrh.

The lower tongue, which may be some extra weapon of the tail, licks at a point of flame it has

discovered, fixing a triangle with die fire-points of her breasts.

He—it—slips into her, forces into her, bulging and huge as thunder.

And the tail grasps her, muscular as any of its limbs, and, thick as the phallus, also penetrates her.

The thing holds Antoinelle as she detonates about it, faints and cascades into darkness.

Not until she begins to revive does it do more.

The terror is, she comes to already primed, more than eager, her body spangled with frantic need, as if the first cataclysm were only ... foreplay.

And now the creature moves, riding her and making her ride, and they gallop down the night, and Antoinelle grins and shrieks, clinging to its obsidian form, her hands slipping, gripping. And as the second detonation begins, its face leaves her face, her mouth, and grows itself faceless and *only* mouth. And the mouth half rings her throat, a crescent moon, and the many side teeth pierce her, both the veins of her neck.

A necklace of emeralds was nothing to this.

Antoinelle drops from one precipice to another. She screams, and her screams crash through the house called Blue View, like sheets of blue glass breaking.

It holds her. As her consciousness again goes out, it holds her very tight.

And somewhere in the limbo where she swirls, fire on oil, guttering but not quenched, Antoinelle is raucously laughing with triumph at finding this other one, not her parasite, but her twin. Able to devour her as she devours, able to eat her alive as she has eaten or tried to eat others alive. But where Antoinelle has bled them out, this only drinks. It wastes nothing, not even Antoinelle.

More—more— She can never have enough.

Then it tickles her with flame so she thrashes and yelps. Its fangs fastened in her, it bears her on, fastened in turn to it.

She is arched like a bridge, carrying the travelling shadow on her body. Pinned together, in eclipse, these dancers.

More—

It gives her more. And indescribably yet more.

If she were any longer human, she would be split and eviscerated, and her spine snapped along its centre three times.

Her hands have fast hold of it. Which—it or she—is the most tenacious? Where it travels, so will she.

But for all the *more*, there is no more *thought*. If ever there was thought.

When she was fourteen, she saw all this, in her prophetic mirror, saw what she was made for and must have.

Perhaps many thousands of us are only that, victim or predator, interchangeable.

Seen from above: Antoinelle is scarcely visible. Just the edges of her flailing feet, her contorted forehead and glistening strands of hair. And her clutching claws. (Shockingly, she makes the sounds of a pig, grunting, snorting.)

The rest of her is covered by darkness, by something most like a manta ray out of the sea, or some black amoeba.

Then she is growling and grunting so loudly, on and on, that the looking glass breaks on her toilette table as if unable to stand the sound, while out in the night forest birds shrill and fly away.

More—always more. *Don't stop*— Never stop.

There is no need to stop. It has killed her, she is dead, she is re-alive and death is lost on her, she is all she has ever wished to be—nothing.

"Dearest... are you awake?"

He lifts his head from his arm. He has slept.

"What is it?" *Who are you?* Has she ever called him *dear* before?

"Here I am," she says, whoever she is. But she is his Anna.

He does not want her. Never wanted her.

He thinks she is wearing the emerald necklace, something burning about her throat. She is white as bone. And her dark eyes — have paled to Venus eyes, watching him.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Perhaps later."

"I know."

Vondeijan falls asleep again quickly, lying on his back. Then Antoinelle slides up on top of him. She is not heavy, but he is; it impedes his breathing, her little weight.

Finally she puts her face to his, her mouth over his.

She smothers him mostly with her face, closing off his nostrils with the pressure of her cheek, and one narrow hand, and her mouth sidelong to his, and her breasts on his heart.

He does not wake again. At last his body spasms sluggishly, like the last death throes of orgasm. Nothing else.

After his breathing has ended, still she lies there, Venus-eyed, and the dawn begins to come. Antoinelle casts a black, black shadow. Like all shadows, it is attached to her. Attached very closely.

Is this her shadow, or is she the white shadow of *if*!

Having sat for ten minutes, no longer writing, holding her pen upright, Yse sighs, .and drops it, like something unpleasant, dank, or sticky.

The story's erotographic motif, at first stimulating, had become, as it must, repulsive. Disgusting her—also as it should.

And the murder of Vondeijan, presented deliberately almost as an afterthought, (stifled under the slight

white pillar of his succubus wife).

Aloud, Yse says almost angrily, "Now surely I've used him up. All up. All over. Per Laszd, I can't do another thing with you or to you. But then, you've used me up, too, yes you did, you have, even though you've never been near me. Mutual annihilation. That Yse is over with."

Then Yse rises, leaving the manuscript, and goes to make tea. But her generator, since the party, (when the music machine had been hooked into it by that madman, Carr) is skittish. The stove won't work. She leaves it, and pours instead a warm soda from the now improperly working fridge.

It is nighttime, or morning, about three-fifty A.M.

Yse switches on her small TV, which works on a solar battery and obliges.

And there, on the first of the fifteen mainland (upper city) channels, is he—is Per Laszd. Not in his persona of dead trampled Gregers Vonderjan, but that of his own dangerous self.

She stands on the floor, dumbfounded, yet not, not really. Of course, who else would come before her at this hour.

He looks well, healthy and tanned. He's even shed some weight.

It seems to be a talk show, something normally Yse would avoid—they bore her. And the revelation of those she sometimes admires as overordinary or distasteful, disillusion and frustrates her.

But him she has always watched, on a screen, across a room when able, or in her own head. Him, she knows. He could not disillusion her, or put her off.

And tonight, there is something new. The talk has veered round to the other three guests—to whom she pays no attention—and so to music. And now the TV show's host is asking Per Laszd to use the piano, that grande piano over there.

Per Laszd gets up and walks over to this studio piano, looking, Yse thinks, faintly irritated, because obviously this has been sprung on him and is not what he is about, or at least not publicly, but he will do it from a good showman's common sense.

He plays well, some melody Yse knows, a popular song she can't place. He improvises, his large hands and strong fingers jumping sure and finely trained about the keyboard. Just the one short piece, concluded with a sarcastic flourish, after which he stands up again. The audience, delighted by any nov-elty, applauds madly, while the host and other guests are all calling *encore!* (more! more! Again—don't stop). But Laszd is not manipulable, not truly. Gracious yet immovable, he returns to his seat. And after that a pretty girl with an unimportant voice comes on to sing, and then the show is done.

Yse finds herself enraged. She switches off the set, and slams down the tepid soda. She paces this end of her loft. While by the doors, forty feet away, the piano, dredged from the Sound, still stands, balanced on its forefeet and its phallic tail, hung in shade and shadow. It has been here more than a month. It's nearly invisible.

SO why this now? This TV stunt put on by Fate? Why show her this, now? As if to congratulate her, giving her a horrible mean little failed-runner's-up patronizing nonprize. Per Laszd can play the piano.

Damn Per Laszd.

She is sick of him. Perhaps in every sense. But of course, she still wants him. Always will.

And what now?

She will never sleep. It's too late or early to go out.

She circles back to her writing, looks at it, sits, touches the page. But why bother to write anymore?

Vonderjan was like the enchanter Prospero, in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, shut up there on his sorcerous Island, infested with sprites and elementals. Prospero, too, kept close a strange young woman, who in the magician's case had been his own daughter. But then arrived a shipwrecked prince out of the sea, to take the responsibility off Prospero's hands.

(Per's hands on the piano keys. Playing them. A wonderful amateur, all so facile, no trouble at all. He is married, and has been for twelve years. Yse has always known this.)

Far out on the Sound, a boat moos eerily.

Though she has frequently heard such a thing, Yse starts.

Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises,

Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.

She can no longer smell the perfume, like night-blooming vines. When did that stop? (Don't stop.)

Melted into air, into thin air...

. Passover

They had roped the hut house round, outside and in, with their amulets and charms. There were coloured feathers and dried grasses, cogs of wood rough-carved, bones and sprinkles of salt and rum, and of blood, as in the Communion. When they reached the door, she on her bare, navy blue feet, Jeanjacques felt all the forest press at their backs. And inside the hut, the silver-ringed eyes, staring in affright like the staring stars. But presently her people let her in, and let him in as well, without argument. And he thought of the houses of the Chosen in Egypt, their lintels marked by blood, to show the Angel of Death he must pass by.

He, as she did, sat down on the earth floor. (He noted the earth floor, and the contrasting wooden bed, with its elaborate posts. And the two shrines, one to the Virgin, and one to another female deity.)

Nothing was said beyond a scurry of whispered words in the patois. There were thirty other people crammed in the house, with a creche of chickens and two goats. Fear smelled thick and hot, but there was something else, some vital possibility of courage and cohesion. They clung together soul to soul, their bodies only barely brushing, and Jeanjacques was glad to be in their midst, and when the fat woman came and gave him a gourd of liquor, he shed tears, and she patted his head, calming him a little, like a dog hiding under its mistress's chair.

In the end he must have slept. He saw someone looking at him, the pale icy eyes blue as murder.

Waking with a start, he found everyone and thing in the hut tense and compressed, listening, as something circled round outside. Then it snorted and blew against the wall of the hut house, and all the interior stars of eyes flashed with their terror. And Jeanjacques felt his heart clamp onto the side of his body, as if afraid to fall.

Even so, he knew what it was, and when all at once it retreated and galloped away on its shod hoofs, he

said quietly, "His horse."

But no one answered him, or took any notice of what he had said, and Jeanjacques discovered himself thinking, *After*

all, it might take that form, a white horse. Or she might be riding on the white horse.

He began to ponder the way he must go in the morning, descending towards the bay. He should reach the sea well in advance of nightfall. The ship would come back, today or tomorrow. Soon. And there were the old buildings, on the beach, where he could make a shelter. He could even jump into the sea and swim out. There was a little reef, and rocks.

It had come from the sea, and would avoid going back to the sea, surely, at least for some while.

He knew it was not interested in him, knew that almost certainly it would not approach him with any purpose. But he could not bear to *see* it. That was the thing. And it seemed to him the people of the Island, and in the hut, even the chickens, the goats, and elsewhere the birds and fauna, felt as he did. They did not want to *see* it, even glimpse it. If the fabric of this world were torn open in one place on a black gaping hole of infinite darkness, you hid your eyes, you went far away.

After that, he started to notice bundles of possessions stacked up in corners. He realized not he alone would be going down the Island to the sea.

Dreaming again, he beheld animals swimming in waves away from shore, and birds flying away, as if from a zone of earthquake, or the presage of some volcanic eruption.

Nanetta nudged him.

"Will you take me to St Paul's Island?"

"Yes."

"I have a sister there."

He had been here on a clerk's errand. He thought, ridiculously, *Now I won't be paid*. And he was glad at this wince of anxious annoyance. Its normalcy and reason.

Per Laszd played Bach very well, with just the right detached, solemn cheerfulness.

It was what she would have expected him to play. Something like this. Less so the snatch of a popular tune he had offered the talk show audience so flippantly. (But a piano does what you want, makes the sounds you make it give—even true, she thinks, should you make a mistake—for then that is what it gives you. Your mistake.)

As Yse raised her eyes, she saw across the dim sphere of her loft, still wrapped in the last flimsy paper of night, a lamp stood glowing by the piano, both of whose lids were raised. Her stomach jolted and the pain of shock rushed through her body.

"Lucius—?"

He was the only other who held a key to her loft. She trusted Lucius, who anyway had never used the key, except once, when she was gone for a week, to enter and water her (dying) plants, and fill her (then operable) refrigerator with croissants, mangoes, and white wine.

And Lucius didn't play the piano. He had told her, once. His *amouretta*, as he called it, was the drum.

Besides, the piano player had not reacted when she called, not ceased his performance. Not until he brought the twinkling phrases to their finish.

Then the large hands stepped back off the keys, he pushed away the chair he must have carried there, and stood up.

The raised carapace of the piano's hind lid still obscured him, all but that flame of light which veered across the shining pallor of his hair.

Yse had got to her feet. She felt incredibly young, light as thin air. The thick silk of her hair brushed round her face, her shoulders, and she pulled in her flat stomach and raised her head on its long throat. She was frightened by the excitement in herself, and excited by the fear. She wasn't dreaming. She had always known, when she *dreamed of* him.

And there was no warning voice, because long ago she had left all such redundant noises behind.

Per Laszd walked around the piano. "Hallo, Yse," he said.

She said nothing. Perhaps could not speak. There seemed no point. She had said so much.

But "Here I am," he said.

There he was.

There was no doubt at all. The low lamp flung up against him. He wore the loose dark suit he had put on for the TV program, as if he had come straight here from the studio. He dwarfed everything in the loft.

"Whyr she said, after all.

She, too, was entitled to be flippant, surely.

"Why? Don't you know? You brought me here." He smiled. "Don't you love me anymore?"

He was wooing her.

She glanced around her, made herself see everything as she had left it, the washed plate and glass by the sink, the soda can on the table, her manuscript lying there, and the pen. Beyond an angle of a wall, a corridor to other rooms.

And below the floor, barracuda swimming through the girders of a flooded building.

But the thin air sparkled as if full of champagne.

"Well, Yse," he said again, "here I am."

"But you are not *you*."

"You don't say. Can you be certain? How am I different?"

"You're what I've made, and conjured up."

"I thought it was," he said, in his dry, amused voice she had never forgotten, "more personal than that."

"*He* is somewhere miles off. In another country."

"This is another country," he said, "to me."

She liked it, this breathless fencing with him. Liked his persuading her. *Don't stop.*

The piano had not been able to open—or be opened—until he—or she—was ready. (Foreplay.) And out of the piano came her demon. What was he? *What?*

She didn't care. If it were not him, yet it was, him.

So she said, archly, "And your wife?"

"As you see, she had another engagement."

"With you, *there*. Wherever you are."

"Let me tell you," he said, "why I've called here."

There was no break in the transmission of this scene, she saw him walk away from the piano, start across the floor, and she did the same. Then they were near the window-doors. He was standing over her. He was vast, overpowering, beautiful. More beautiful, now she could see the strands of his hair, the pores of his skin, a hundred tiniest imperfections—and the whole exquisite manufacture of a human thing, so close. And she was rational enough to analyse all this, and his beauty, and his power over her; or pedantic enough. He smelled wonderful to her as well, more than his clean fitness and his masculinity, or any expensive cosmetic he had used (for her?). It was the scent discernible only by a lover, caused by her chemistry, not his. Unless she had made him want her, too.

But of course he wanted her. She could see it in his eyes, their blue view bent only on her.

If he might have seemed old to an Antoinelle of barely sixteen, to Yse this man was simply her peer. And yet, too, he was like his younger self, clad again in that searing charisma which had later lessened, or changed its course.

He took her hand, picked it up. Toyed with her hand as Von-derjan had done with the hand of the girl Yse had permitted to destroy him.

"I'm here for you," he said.

"But I don't know you."

"Backwards," he said. "You've made it your business. You've bid for me," he said, "and you've got me."

"No," she said, "no, no, I haven't."

"Let me show you."

She had known of that almost occult quality. With what he wanted in the sexual way, he could communicate some telepathic echo of his desires. As his mouth covered and clasped hers, this delirium was what she felt, combining with her own.

She had always known his kisses would be like this, the ground flying off from her feet, swept up and held only by him in the midst of a spinning void, where she became part of him and wanted nothing else, where she became what she had always wanted... nothing.

To be nothing, borne by this flooding sea, no thought, no anchor, and no chains.

So Antoinelle, as her vampire penetrated, drank, emptied, reformed her.

So Yse, in her vampire's arms.

It's how they make us feel.

"No," she murmurs, sinking deeper and deeper into his body, drowning as the island will, one day (five years, twenty).

None of us escape, do we?

Dawn is often very short and ineffectual here, as if to recompense the dark for those long sunsets we have.

Lucius, bringing his boat in to West Ridge from a night's fishing and drinking out in the Sound, sees a light still burning up there, bright as the quick green dawn. All Yse's blinds are up, showing the glass loft, translucent, like a jewel. Over the terrace the snake-tree hangs its hair in the water and ribbons of apple green light tremble through its coils.

Yse is there, just inside the wall of glass above the terrace, standing with a tall heavysset man, whose hair is almost white.

He's kissing her, on and on, and then they draw apart, and still she holds on to him, her head tilted back like a serpent's, bonelessly, staring up into his face.

From down in the channel between the lofts and towerettes, Lucius can't make out the features of her lover. But then neither can he make out Yse's facial features, only the tilt of her neck and the lush satin hair hanging down her back.

Lucius sits in the boat, not paddling now, watching. His eyes are still and opaque.

"What you doing, girl?"

He knows perfectly well.

And then they turn back, the two of them, farther into the loft where the light still burns, although the light of dawn has gone, leaving only a salty stormy dusk.

They will hardly make themselves separate from each other. They are together again and again, as if growing into one another.

Lucius sees the piano, or that which had been a piano, has vanished from the loft. And after that he sees how the light of the guttering lamp hits suddenly up, like a striking cobra. And in the ray of the lamp, striking, the bulky figure of the man, with his black clothes and blond hair, becomes transparent as the glass sheets of the doors. It is possible to see directly, too, through him, clothes, hair, body, directly through to Yse, as she stands there, still holding on to what is now actually invisible, drawing it on, in, away, just before the lamp goes out and a shadow fills the room like night.

As he is paddling away along the channel, Lucius thinks he hears a remote crash, out of time, like glass smashing in many pieces, but yesterday, or tomorrow.

Things break.

Just about sunset, the police come to find Lucius. They understand he has a key to the loft of a woman called Yse (which they pronounce /fez).

When they get to the loft, Lucius is aware they did not need the key, since the glass doors have both

been blown outwards and down into the water-alley below. Huge shards and fragments decorate the terrace, and some are caught in the snake-willow like stars.

A bored detective stands about, drinking coffee someone has made him on Yse's reluctant stove. (The refrigerator has shut off, and is leaking a lake on the floor.)

Lucius appears dismayed but innocuous. He goes about looking for something, which the other searchers, having dismissed him, are too involved to mark.

There is no sign of Yse. The whole loft is vacant. There is no sign either of any disturbance, beyond the damaged doors which, they say to Lucius and each other, were smashed outwards but not by an explosive.

"What are you looking for?" the detective asks Lucius, suddenly grasping what Lucius is at.

"Huh?"

"She have something of yours?"

Lucius sees the detective is waking up. "No. Her book. She was writing."

"Oh, yeah? What kind of thing was that?"

Lucius explains, and the detective loses interest again. He says they have seen nothing like that.

And Lucius doesn't find her manuscript, which he would have anticipated, anyway, seeing instantly on her worktable. He does find a note—they say it is a note, a letter of some sort, although addressed to no one. It's in her bed area, on the rug, which has been floated under the bed by escaped refrigerator fluid.

"Why go on writing?" asks the note, or letter, of the no one it has not addressed. "All your life waiting, and having to invent another life, or other lives, to make up for not having a life. Is that what God's problem is?"

Hearing this read at him, Lucius's dead eyes reveal for a second they are not dead, only covered by a protective film. They all miss this.

The detective flatly reads the note out, like a kid bad at reading, embarrassed and standing up in class. Where his feet are planted is the stain from the party, which, to Lucius's for-a-moment-not-dead eyes, has the shape of a swimming, three-legged fish.

"And she says, 'I want more.'

" 'I want the terror and the passion, the power and the glory—not this low-key crap played only with one *hand*. Let me point out to someone, Yse is an anagram of Yes. */// drown my book.*' "

"I guess," says the detective, "she didn't sell."

They let Lucius go with some kind of veiled threat he knows is only offered to make themselves feel safe.

He takes the water bus over to the Cafe Blonde, and as the sunset ends and night becomes, tells one or two what he saw, as he has not told the cops from the tideless upper city.

Lucius has met them all. Angels, demons.

"As the light went through him, he wasn't there. He's like glass."

Carr says, slyly (inappropriately—or with deadly perception?), "No vampire gonna reflect in a glass."

. Carried Away

When the ship came, they took the people out, rowing them in groups, in the two boats. The man Stronn had also appeared, looking dazed, and the old housekeeper, and others. No questions were asked of them. The ship took the livestock, too.

Jeanjacques was glad they were so amenable, the black haughty master wanting conscientiously to assist his own, and so helping the rest.

All the time they had sheltered in the rickety customs buildings of the old port, a storm banged round the coast. This kept other things away, it must have done. They saw nothing but the feathers of palm boughs blown through the air and crashing trunks that toppled in the high surf, which was grey as smashed glass.

In the metallic after-storm morning, Jeanjacques walked down the beach, the last to leave, waiting for the last boat, confident.

Activity went on at the sea's edge, sailors rolling a barrel, Nanetta standing straight under a yellow sunshade, a fine lady, barefoot but proud. (She had shown him the jewels she had after all brought with her, squeezed in her sash, not the ruby earrings, but a golden hair pin, and the emerald necklace that had belonged to Vonderjan's vrouw.)

He never thought, now, to see anything, Jeanjacques, so clever, so accomplished at survival.

But he saw it.

Where the forest came down on to the beach, and caves opened under the limestone, and then rocks reared up, white rocks and black, with the curiously quiescent waves glimmering in and out around them.

There had been nothing. He would have sworn to that. As if the reality of the coarse storm had scoured all such stuff away.

And then, there she was, sitting on the rock.

She shone in a way that, perhaps one and a quarter centuries after, could have been described as radioactively.

Jeanjacques did not know that word. He decided that she gleamed. Her hard, pale skin and mass of pale hair, gleaming.

She looked old. Yet she looked too young. She was not human-looking, nor animal.

Her legs were spread wide in the skirt of her white dress. So loose was the gown at her bosom, that he could see much of her breasts. She was doing nothing at all, only sitting there, alone, and she grinned at him, all her white teeth, so even, and her black eyes like slits in the world.

But she cast a black shadow, and gradually the shadow was embracing her. And he saw her turning over into it like the moon into eclipse. If she had any blood left in her, if she had ever been Antoinette—these things he ignored. But her grinning and her eyes and the shadow and her turning inside out within the shadow—from these things he ran away.

He ran to the line of breakers, where the barrels were being rolled into a boat. To Nanette's sunflower sunshade.

And he seemed to burst through a sort of curtain, and his muscles gave way. He fell nearby, and she glanced at him, the black woman, and shrank away.

"It's all right—" he cried. He thought she must not see what he had seen, and that they might leave him here. "I missed my footing," he whined, "that's all."

And when the boat went out, they let him go with it.

The great sails shouldered up into the sky. The master looked Jeanjacques over, before moving his gaze after

Nanetta. (Stronn had avoided them. The other whites, and the housekeeper, had hidden themselves somewhere below, like stowaways.)

"How did you find him, that Dutchman?" the master asked idly.

"As you said. Vonderjan was falling."

"What was the other trouble here? They act like it was a plague, but that's not so." (Malignly, Jeanjacques noted the master, too, was excluded from the empathy of the Island people.) "No," the master went on bombastically, "if you sick, I'd never take you on, none of you."

Jeanjacques felt a little better. "The Island's gone bad," he muttered. He would look, though, only up into the sails. They were another sort of white to the white thing he had seen on the rock. As the master was another sort of black.

"Gone bad? They do. Land does go bad. Like men."

Are they setting sail? Every grain of sand on the beach behind is rising up. Every mote of light, buzzing—

Oh God—*Pater noster—libera me—*

The ship strode from the bay. She carved her path into the deep sea, and through his inner ear, Jeanjacques hears the small bells singing. Yet that is little enough, to carry away from such a place.

Seven months after, he heard the story, and some of the newspapers had it, too. A piano had been washed up off the Sound, on the beach at the Abacus Tower. And inside the lid, when they hacked it open, a woman's body was curled up, tiny, and hard as iron. She was Caucasian, middle-aged, rather heavy when alive, now not heavy at all, since there was no blood, and not a single whole bone left inside her.

Sharks, they said.

Sharks are clever. They can get inside a closed piano and out again. And they bite.

As for the piano, it was missing—vandals had destroyed it, burned it, taken it off.

Sometimes strangers ask Lucius where Yse went to. He has nothing to tell them. ("She disappears?" they ask him again. And Lucius once more says nothing.)

And in that way, resembling her last book, Yse disappeared, disappears, is disappearing. Which can happen, in any tense you like.

"Like those hallucinations which sometimes come at the edge of sleep, so that you wake, flunking two or three words have been spoken close to your ear, or that a tall figure stands in the corner... like this, the

image now and then appears before him.

"Then Jeanjacques sees her, the woman, sitting on the rock, her white dress and ivory-coloured hair, hard-gleaming in a poststorm sunlight. Impossible to tell her age. A desiccated young girl, or urdined old woman. And the transparent sea lapping in across the sand...

"But he has said, the Island is quite deserted now."