

## Memory Work

by L. Timmel Duchamp

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Each time "I" speaks, a virtual self is born.

—Amanda S. Fielding

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### 1.

She called it the End of the World, a designation that marked the limits of her attempt to comprehend the intolerably incomprehensible. On January sixteenth, the world was much as it had been the previous day (which is not to say what it had been the previous *year*, given the rapidity of change in her world), but on January seventeenth it began to collapse, and a few days after that it was gone, irretrievably. From perhaps January nineteenth on she began to think that though the means bringing about the End were not any she could ever have imagined, the *feel* of her tenuous day-to-day survival was exactly what she remembered experiencing in the many End-of-the-World scenes she had been dreaming since childhood.

January seventeenth was a gray, cold, gloomy day in her city. At around noon reports of "widespread wildness" of youth began to filter into her office from around the world. At 3:30, she and her coworkers were dismissed early so that there would be no chance that any of them would be out and about after dark. The "wildness" had arrived in her city, too.

She spent the evening chatting on the phone, explaining it all to friends and relatives as simple mass hysteria exacerbated by the copycat syndrome, and that the news media were making too much of it. She had been glued to CNN since arriving home from work, tearing herself away only for telephone solace and to cruise the Internet for additional, less official, information. She was not at first overly concerned, because the media initially portrayed the "wildness" as a sort of global gang World War, organized along racial and ethnic lines, and also because she was used to watching catastrophic situations on CNN, whose anchors had been trained to keep viewers' fear and despair aroused but distanced.

By daybreak she understood that the situation had gone beyond even the

possibility of control. Throughout the night a constant barrage of gunfire and bursts of screams, shrieks, and bellows had been carried to her on the wind. In the morning she saw from her fourth-floor windows that a significant portion of the city was ablaze. Local television stations advised people not to call 911 or indeed any municipal or county numbers at all. “The authorities are overwhelmed,” they said at frequent intervals. A tape of the mayor pleading with people to keep their adolescent children home for their own (and the community’s) safety reran every fifteen minutes.

All morning she tried to get through to the friends and relatives she had spoken with the night before, but the circuits were always busy. A few minutes before noon, her phone went dead. CNN reported that most national guard units and much of the regular armed forces had been rendered ineffectual by so many of their members having themselves “gone wild”—while in possession of tanks, rifles, and other fierce armaments the Secretary of Defense declined to specify. By late afternoon, terrible things were happening within view of the windows of her apartment. Shivering, her muscles knotted painfully with tension, she wondered whether “they” ever slept.

When dark fell, not much before five, she debated the wisdom of turning on her lights. Since other windows in the neighborhood were dark, hers, if lit, would stand out, inviting, as it were, “their” attention. But if her apartment windows were dark, “they” might think no one was in the apartment and feel free to loot and vandalize it. In the end, she elected to close the blinds and put on a few low lights away from the windows. She could not bear the thought of waiting with her terror in the dark alone.

A knock rattled her door at around six-thirty. “Hello?” a voice called through the door. “Is anyone home? It’s Mrs. Mathers, from across the hall. Hello? Hello?”

Recognizing the voice, thin and creaking and tinnily resonant, she opened the door to the stooped and scrawny lady who had been living across the hall from her for the last six years. Their entire relationship consisted of exchanging polite greetings and accepting UPS deliveries for one another, and of the occasional borrowing and lending of an egg or tablespoon of baking powder or cup of milk. “My phone has been out since noon,” Mrs. Mathers said. “And I’m growing most concerned about the disorder.” The old lady’s eyes were bleak with fear, but retired English teacher that she was, she spoke as correctly as ever. “Unless you’d rather be alone, I thought we might sit together for a while, to keep up our morale.”

*She* wondered then why she hadn’t thought of that herself. It certainly made more sense than crouching in a corner, straining to hear the sounds of approaching danger. “Please, do come in,” she said. She hadn’t used her voice in hours and was dismayed to hear the wobble in it.

They sipped their way through several pots of tea. Mrs. Mathers said that it was the apparently global occurrence of the “disturbances” that frightened her. “I

hardly know what to think,” she said. “We’re used to youth disturbances, of course, with all those Second-Echo Baby-boomers always so angry because the state legislatures won’t fund higher education any longer, but the disorder we’re seeing now, I fear, is something on an entirely different scale.” The old lady’s sharp black eyes bored into hers. “I have been cudgeling my brains all day to find a plausible explanation. Do you think some outlandish secret military chemical has been inadvertently unleashed?”

The experts on CNN all characterized the disorder as “copycat behavior on a scale never before experienced.” But then the media was focused entirely on the President’s declaration of a National State of Emergency and his urging parents to rein in their own children. “It’s a matter of individual, personal responsibility,” the President said in a constantly rerun sound-bite, words every commentator and anchorperson repeated almost every time they opened their mouths.

Even under the imminent threat of the End of the World, Mrs. Mathers was proper as proper could be. Her long brown and pink fingers, though trembling visibly, still managed to look school-teacherly with every sip she took from the blue and gold handmade mug. *She*, wanting to speak of ordinary, neutral things, asked Mrs. Mathers how long she had lived in the city.

“Oh my dear,” Mrs. Mathers said. She smiled and shook her head and sighed all at once. “I’ve lived here more than fifty years, if you can believe that.” Oh yes, and had taught in the public school system for thirty-five of those years.

The two women exchanged particulars, much of which both had already deduced about the other in their day-to-day neighborly observances. They told one another about their families and not-too-personal details of their individual histories. *She* remembers that much.

But she has no memory of what happened after that. She knows only that the next night, or maybe it was the night after, she was crouching in the alley, behind the Dumpster, crowded up against the bare winter branches of the lilac bush, shivering violently with cold, so stiff she could hardly move, her clothing wet through to the skin except for the parts protected by her Gore-tex jacket—alone. The stench of burning plastics was so thick in the air that her throat was raw and her stomach heaving with nausea. She also smelled the urine and vomit on her jeans and could not stop thinking about how wonderful it would be to die clean and dry in her bed. Her hope of escaping (to where? All the world had become hell) had sunk so low that the very idea of a “good death” had become a kind of promise to herself. *If they’ve finished their vandalism, and if I can get back to the apartment, then I’ll take a bath, get into bed, and kill myself. Either by taking every tablet of every medication in the medicine cabinet—which, cumulatively, at least, should make a lethal dose—or by cutting my throat with the large Sabatier.*

At least the apartment building hadn’t been burned to the ground.

The noise bothered her most. The shrieks and screams and hysterical laughter and gunfire never stopped, while it seemed that every car stereo and boom-box in the city was thumping, thumping, thumping at maximum volume, like the drum roll accompanying a firing squad.

“Kid, no, don’t do it!” The voice, hoarse and male, sounded shockingly near, and she at once recognized it as belonging to Mrs. Mathers’ favorite grandson, a tough-ass, plainclothes police officer who two years back had introduced himself as “Lieutenant Creighton” when he’d knocked on her door to ask her to call him if she saw anyone trying to enter Mrs. Mathers’ apartment during the latter’s stay in the hospital.

She peered around the Dumpster. Creighton stood with his back to the apartment building and his legs spread wide. He gripped an ugly snub-nosed weapon at arm’s length from his body with both hands. Because it was dark she didn’t at first see the girl, but, by following the line of Creighton’s arms and weapon, she spotted her about three yards from the man, dancing crazily in the rain, hands milling spastically in the air over her head—brandishing a hand grenade.

“Easy, girl, easy. Set it down, gently, on the ground.”

Though Creighton’s voice remained wonderfully steady and authoritative as he tried to talk her into sanity, the girl’s dance grew frenzied. *She* wondered if she should risk bolting. She thought the worst thing would be to be wounded and not killed. There was no damned way anybody was going to be fixing any injuries.

Creighton opened fire without warning. The kid collapsed. As she went down she dropped the hand grenade, which hit the concrete, bounced, and rolled a few yards down the alley, toward the Dumpster.

*She* closed her eyes, fearing the worst. Though her ears rang and buzzed from the shock of the gunshot, she heard footsteps pound around the corner, into the alley. She opened her eyes in time to see Creighton, bent low to the ground, head straight toward her. Six quick shots rang out, thundering in her ears, sounding closer even than Creighton’s had. Creighton crumpled into a heap, near enough for her to glimpse an expression of surprise on his face. Since he was looking straight at her, it could be either because he was surprised to see her lurking behind the Dumpster or surprised to have been shot.

“My granny,” she thought he said.

“Hey, the sucker’s still alive!”

She pressed back into the lilac branches, so far back that she could no longer see Creighton. The alley resounded with another, louder burst of shots. She thought, Maybe I should make a noise and they’ll shoot without looking and blow their chance to torture me.

Because of the ringing and roar in her ears, she heard nothing for a while, not even the constant distant whine of armored helicopters fighting fires. She perceived only the stench of burning, the sick orange of the sky, the cold, the drizzle, the darkness. Time dragged on, beating at the terminal verge. Her despair weighed more heavily on her at that moment than she had ever imagined possible.

Eventually she decided the alley was probably as safe as it was going to get. She knew that if she didn't move soon, she likely never would. Slowly, painfully, stiffly, she eased herself out around the Dumpster. When she saw the heap of clothing and blood Creighton had become, she took care to keep her eyes averted from where she thought his head must be.

A weapon, given the situation, could simplify matters to the ultimate degree possible. She understood that with the sharpest clarity. But she was squeamish, and it looked as though Creighton was lying on it. Also, possessing his gun might delude her with a false hope of survival, which she knew would be stupid. So she left the weapon and concentrated her thoughts on whether a return to her apartment was now feasible.

From what she could see of it, the building appeared to be completely dark, inside and out—and, significantly, silent. Surely, she thought, that meant that those boys and girls weren't still rampaging within. They did not seem to take any interest in doing anything quietly—which lying in wait for anyone to return would require.

Of course, they could be *sleeping* in there. It didn't seem as though they ever slept, but she supposed they must. And considering what she knew about the behavior of their wildness, if they did sleep, they probably slept in large groups, sprawled like beasts in dens, sated or exhausted from the excesses of their violence.

It struck her at that moment, for the first time, that what was strangest about their behavior, apart from its crossing all lines of sex, class, race, and religious orientation, was that their violence seemed not to be directed against adolescents marked as other, as one expected with youth, but against the whole rest of the normal world.

The risk terrified her, but she could not bear to continue her cold, wet huddle in the alley. She supposed there were a few safe places where crowds of people sheltered under armed guards, but she lacked the strength and courage to go in search of them. All she wanted was to crawl into her bed and die, by her own hand, in peace. It was all she could think of. (It was all she could bear to think of.) And so, bent over almost to the waist, she lurched stiffly, on feet gone numb, to the back of the building. She discovered that the locks had been shot off; but then she had known that (though she had forgotten). She hugged herself, to get her shivering under control. She didn't believe in God, but a voice in her mind whispered "Let them not be there, let them not be there, let them not be there..." over and over again.

In the dark inside she could not see even her own hand when she held it

before her face. Every step she took was on a guess, with her hands thrust out to touch the wall or banister. Her memory of the ascent is typically faulty. She remembers that there were terrible things in the halls and back stairwell. She doesn't recall exactly what they were. There were smells and messes and bodies to climb over. She remembers thinking: None of us are human anymore. No one is allowed to be human. It's impossible. Impossible. We are all beasts now. When enough of us become beasts, we all become beasts. We revert. We revert. We revert.

She still thinks those words "we revert" every time she thinks about the End of the World. The Great Reversion. Though: reversion to what? *She* doesn't know. Doesn't understand enough about what *homo sapiens* is. The ultimate mystery of her life? Sometimes she thinks so. Though that other matter, which *feels* all important to her, seems far more mysterious, though perhaps that's simply wishful mystification...

So she gets to the top floor and finds that none of the doors up there have been forced open. It's a miracle, she thinks at first. Then: perhaps it's a trap? A lure? A special torture?

But who among those youth would have an attention span sufficient to realize such a conspiracy? They are cunning only in the short-term. Impulse rules them. Like two-year-olds...

She fumbles her keys out of the side pocket of her rucksack. Her fingers are numb and stiff with cold. It's hard, in the dark, to fit the right key into each lock. By the time she succeeds in opening them all, she is sweating and panting with the effort.

Home! Safe! Private! She secures the deadbolts and gropes for the light switch. She flicks it on, but nothing happens. She remembers that those boys and girls have been shooting up transformers all over town. It gives them a cheap, quick thrill—and is sure to make everyone miserable for a long time to come. No utility trucks will be going out any time soon to replace them.

The apartment is almost as cold as the out-of-doors. The heat no longer works, of course, since though the furnace is gas, there is no electricity to power its fan. But hot water still runs from her taps. And a hot bath will get her warm and dry and cleanse the stink and filth encrusting her body. After bathing, wrapped in her down comforter, she can be warm and dry for as long as she can stay in bed.

She lights a candle, sets it on the top of the toilet tank, and runs a bath. She fetches the large Sabatier from the kitchen, lays it on the side of the tub, and strips off the filthy clothing. An image pops into her mind, of the water meter in the basement, its numbers and arrows whirring madly with activity. It's scary to think about someone seeing it and knowing she is there. She tells herself: I'm going to die soon, anyway. If they come pounding up here and shoot my locks off, I'll have time to use the Sabatier on my throat. At the End of the World, a bath is the highest

achievement possible. Small comfort is all that's left. Nothing I can do will stop the madness. Might as well die in comfort.

In the tub she scrubs herself, drains the water, and scrubs the tub. Then she runs another bath and drizzles scented oil into it.

She lay in that tub for at least an hour, probably longer. She remembers having let some of the water out from time to time and topping it up with another burst of hot. Gradually the shivering stopped. She was tired, so tired. She needed to sleep. Though she didn't think at all, the images never stopped bombarding her, images of things she later forgot entirely. This is human, too, you know, to forget some—or maybe most—of the unbearable. It's a problem of consciousness. What the capacity for pain in the consciousness is, what the capacity for understanding is. Clearly *she* had a low capacity for both pain and understanding. That is, I believe, why she forgot so much.

And then, though she would have liked to have remembered more about life before the End of the World, she was willing to give up those memories if it meant that she didn't have to remember all the things she could not bear to think about, all the images that made her highest aspiration, in those last days of the world, that of dying as quickly and easily as possible.

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## 2.

She did not kill herself that night. When she got out of the bath, she ate a couple of handfuls of nuts and an apple, swallowed five aspirin (since she didn't have sleeping pills and figured it wouldn't matter if she overdosed, as long as she got to sleep), crawled into her clean white sheets under her soft down comforter, and conked out. When she woke, the room was full of the cold thin light of January. Her watch gave the time as 10:30, the date as January twenty-first. The Sabatier waited on her bedside table. Looking at it in the chilly glare of morning, she wondered when she had last sharpened its blade.

A sense of teleology is quintessentially human. Everything past and present, each of us believe, is inevitable. As for the future, it is inevitable, too. For early Europeans, the teleological thrust of life was at first repetition, climaxing (in the future) in destruction, to be followed by judgment and eternal disposition. Later, Kant and his contemporaries made it progress: never-ending, eternal, infinite. And then, finally, during her lifetime, it became a live-drink-and-be-merry sense of squandering the little that was left, concomitant with inevitable doom and destruction to be followed by nothingness. In this latter-day view of things, life must be as it is already and where it is destined to go: if humans are programmed to destroy the planet, then it is pointless to try to stop doing so. It was the converse of the destiny of progress—in which humans could make no mistake, do no wrong, could always adapt to or solve whatever catastrophe they might inadvertently create. From acceptance and struggle, to blind faith in triumphal superiority, to suicidal

acquiescence and the drive for mere individual survival at any cost to the species: these were the responses of the organism to its consciousness of death and time—and to its inability to understand.

Another quintessentially human drive is the need to feel in control in any and every situation. This is most often accomplished by establishing a semblance of normality and order, especially when ordinary routine and morality is lost. That is what she did that morning. It was morning. She had survived the darkness of the night, the desolation of homelessness, the abomination of unceasing violence. She had accepted that she must die. And yet she saw no reason why it had to be at that very moment. True, she could hear gunfire nearby and suffered the burning throat and eyes caused by the inescapable stench of burning chemicals; true, she knew the stairwell of her building and the alley behind it to be littered with flesh and blood remains and that at any moment her building might be firebombed or re-invaded. But it was morning, and she was very hungry and had to pee, and, though cold, her apartment looked just as it always had.

After a period of homelessness, she was home.

For the moment, alone did not seem so bad (as long as she didn't start to think about how the apartment across the hall was empty and why).

She bundled herself up in long underwear, wool pants, and sweaters. She thought her headache might go away if she had a cup of coffee. She could try pounding and crushing the beans using a mortar and pestle. She didn't know how much white gas she had in her camping equipment, but surely she would have enough to fire up her camp stove to heat water.

While digging through her camping equipment she realized that if she had been a character in a movie or novel, she would be assembling a pack and going out into the world in a struggle for survival (if not to try, single-handedly, to save the world from its madness). At the very least, she would be trying to get to one of those safe places in which helpless people like her huddled under the protection of mature men with guns and authority. So she made her coffee (lousy, oh so lousy, the worst cup she'd ever made, acrid and thin, like a parody of itself) and crept about her curtainless kitchen crouched low lest anyone in the next building see her. And she planned meals with that all-American make-do spirit of the Original Pioneer Woman and tried to pretend she would be safe for as long as her store of food held out. The coffee didn't help her headache, though, or soothe the rawness in her throat, or jolt her with the adrenaline necessary to send her fleeing (though to where?).

So. Her television was dead. Her VCR was dead. Her CD player was dead. Her radio was dead. Her computer was dead. Her telephone was dead. Worst, her brain was nearly dead and too exhausted (and unwilling) to read.

She played solitaire on her dining room table. She played until it got too dark to see. Then she took six aspirins and crawled under the comforter and pretended



the sounds outside were the neighbors' televisions, a dozen or more of them playing too loudly all at the same time.

The next day passed in the same way, and the day after that. No one threw a hand grenade or a firebomb into the building. No one burned it down. No one invaded it. It was as though, she thought, a shield had been thrown around it. A magic shield protecting it from the violence that could finish it off for good.

For the first time in her life, she suffered constipation. The food was terrible, and she was low on fuel for cooking dried beans, the one staple she had in abundance. And she was always, always cold. On the third day she totally zoned out. She moved around her kitchen heedless of the danger outside. She stood at the sink, washing dishes, humming a childhood ditty, and naturally, naturally looked up from the dishwasher and glanced out the window—to stare straight into the eyes of a man standing at the window opposite in the building next door.

Her body went cold and colder and froze almost into a block of ice. She was seen. By A Man. By a man who looked odd, so very odd, she didn't know in exactly what way, and looked also a little like a young Sam Jaffe, only the bones in his face were sharp as razors, and his eyes chillingly cruel.

Shock kept her standing at the sink. She didn't notice that he was no longer at the window staring at her until she heard the pounding on her door. "You might as well let me in now," a voice like a sonic boom bade her—a voice, she thought, as harsh and sharp and deafening as thunder, and surely damaging to her ears.

The thunderous voice cracked and splintered the ice of her shock, crushing her into a gelid, formless slush. She shivered violently with the loss of her integrity. This was the end, the end. As in a nightmare, she was trapped without a thought for how to escape her Fate. She could not flee through the window. She could not go looking to find the Sabatier. She suffered the paralysis of nightmare, where the only escape lay in waking, an escape beyond her.

She could either stand there shivering, or obey.

She felt his eyes boring into her, as though he were still staring at her from the window of the other building. Even as she walked in a near-trance to the door, she felt his gaze surrounding her. His voice continued to thunder, but if it spoke words, she did not remember them afterwards. In her mind lived only his gaze and the conviction that he had a gang of adolescents behind him, a gang that would savage her the way all the youth were savaging everyone they could get their hands on—unless she placated him. Yes, that was the thought that drove her to obey. He might be cruel, he might very well hurt her, but if she played her cards right, he would protect her from the boys and girls she imagined were under his command.

She drew back the dead-bolts and threw open the door. I must note that from this moment on her perceptions, reactions, and behavior were those of a madwoman. She was so terrified at the sight of him, towering so many feet above

her, that she nearly wet her pants. She took a step backward, then froze, as she had done at the kitchen sink when she had seen him looking at her. She would have run away, to hide under the bed or behind the clothes hanging in her closet—if she had been able to move. Her perceptions took on that insane clarity that certain drugs produce when they chemically impact the brain, such that every sense became acutely, painfully sensitive to even the smallest imaginable stimuli to her nerves.

When he spoke again—though of course the giant towering over her was not a “he,” had never been, except that she assumed the creature to be male, and human, and even now finds it necessary to refer to as “he”—when the creature spoke, the voice, though deep, did not boom at her so much as growl. She noted, of course, with the crazy detachment of one paralyzed by terror, that his lips neither moved nor parted when he spoke, but she did not process the fact sufficiently to wonder why they did not. The creature took her arm. A terrible shudder went through her. Her legs trembled violently, making them almost too weak to hold her up. And yet she left her apartment—without closing the door, without looking back, knowing she would never see it again, knowing that to care about losing it was as hopeless as to care about losing the world, which she knew must be as unrecoverable now as a building onto which had been dropped a kiloton of TNT.

How to write what happened next, I do not know. I do not know if I can. Before the world ended, I know that it would have been impossible to write it out of modesty, self-respect, or what in past centuries or many non-Western cultures might be called shame. (The word *pudeur* comes to mind, I know not why. It is a word I no longer remember the meaning of—if I ever knew it. It is a French word, I think, which suggests that I might have spoken or read French before I lost my memory.) None of that matters now, since there is no one, really, to perceive any particular debasement in a situation that is beyond such niceties. Rather, I question whether I can write it because I doubt I can get it exactly right and because it matters that I do, in a way that it didn't matter at all for the previous part of the story.

I have lived with this in my mind, imagistically rehearsing it so many times for so long, that I fear what putting it into words will do to it—and to me. It may, on the one hand, destroy the heart of my wish to live, destroy all that is left of who I am (for this is really the one memory I have, that constructs the little bit of consciousness of self that I own). Or it may, on the other hand, through small errors of omission or commission replace the true memory with something false, changing through an error of transmission my very memory itself. A luxury even to worry about? Perhaps. But I do know—my memory does not give me the basis for the knowledge—I do know that once a memory has been written down, the written version becomes more real than the memory, and the memory conforms itself to match the written version, editing out all the tiniest details and nuances the written version neglected to include, thus altering the *feel* of it—which is what matters to me, rather than any *point*.

Walking at his side through the ruins was a little like being a child again, for

not only did she have the strongest sense that her safety depended on his protection, but also his size to her, in proportion, was that of an adult to a child. But her overwhelming sense was of numbness. She moved like an automaton and barely noticed her surroundings. Her eyes streamed with the irritation of burnt chemicals; her throat, already raw, spasmed almost constantly with a racking cough and a choking tickle that the cough could not relieve. Her shoes often crunched on glass. Several blocks of still-smoking, burnt-out shells of buildings were unrecognizable. She had no sense of walking through a neighborhood well known to her. The few street signs remaining looked strange to her, their names no longer familiar. She knew only that the giant had a hold of her arm and that she must be prepared to grab his hand or his shirt the second he let go, to keep him from abandoning her. Twice, bands of boys and girls roared down the middle of the street, shrieking and giggling and bellowing incomprehensibly. Each time she looked down at the sidewalk, quivering with fear lest she catch a hostile, malicious eye. But both times the teenagers did not seem to see them. She thought, Somehow *he* makes us invisible to them. As long as I'm with him, they can't see me, and I'm safe. Safe. *Safe*.

At last they came to a place she recognized as Volunteer Park. Glancing around, she saw that the elegant old mansions surrounding it had been burned to the ground, leaving only the rubble of charred and smoking stone and hulks of twisted metal. The giant led her through hemlock and cedar to one of the park's small meadows, where three tall stands of bleachers had been erected. She sat beside him on the lowest rank. She thought there must be a few hundred people sitting on the bleachers—all of them, except for the giants, women.

A woman sitting alone just above them leaned forward and greeted her. The giant who had brought her—*her* giant, she now—seeing the others—thought of him—took her hand. She no longer remembers what the woman said to her, only that it was trivial and meaningless, as were her own responses. The smalltalk between them constructed a background, like the bleachers and the grass and the deep green screen of the trees, shielding their eyes from the destruction only a few score yards away. All that mattered, really, was the way his enormous palm (so smooth and dry, not like any palm she had ever known, so distinctive in its texture she can remember it exactly, yes so exactly that she would know it blindfolded), and the long, strangely bony fingers with too many knuckles, stroked her hand. That was all he did, stroke her hand. (Perhaps he stroked, too, a little of the underside of the wrist, that soft delicate place ringed by the creases she had once heard called longevity bracelets.) She doesn't know how long this went on. Only that within seconds the most powerful sexual sensations she had ever felt were pumping through her body, pounding in an almost painful pulse in her pelvis, holding her hovering at the brink of orgasm, where all that is wanted is the final, ultimate trigger.

How long did they sit there? I do not know. Only that she experienced paroxysms of pleasure that went on and on, just sitting there on the bleachers, having her hand stroked. All the while the world was ending, burning down, the atmosphere so heavily filled with thick particles from the ash of synthetic and natural materials

alike that the sun was blotted out entirely, the sky a ceiling of smoke of every shade of gray mixed with every putrid color imaginable.

I do not have it right, the extraordinariness of the time spent on the bleachers. I cannot get it right. I've already ruined it by writing it down so poorly. The details—the small things that are all-revealing—where are they? Instead, I have a new memory crowding in on me, the first memory, other than what I've already written, that has come to me since I woke. I must write the new memory down. But I must also finish the above.

Very quickly: an unknown amount of time passed, and then the giant left me, and such a wrenching moment that was, like waking from a warm dream of tropical paradise to find oneself naked in the middle of a blizzard in the Arctic Circle in the dark dead of winter. Jerked to my senses, aching, I looked around for him, but he had gone. I wanted to get up from the bleachers to seek him, but frozen again into icy paralysis, I could do no more than shift my legs and flutter my hands in my lap. Constantly my eyes searched what I could see of the park; I barely endured the chatter of the woman sitting above me. All afternoon I sat there, caught in interminable agony. Not fearful at having lost a protector, no. Not wondering at all what he had wanted with me, for I was completely incurious about him and uninterested in anything but the sensations he had called forth in me. No. I cared only for his return, wanting it more than life (which had of course lost all its attractions anyway)—for the pure, unthinking, selfish animal pleasure he had the power of granting me.

The next I knew, I awoke here, in this cold place, alone. I have one hope, and one thought. Nothing else matters to me now in the least.

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### 3.

Bower tells me that by putting into words every scrap and fragment of memory that flits through my mind I may rebuild at least the most general part of my memory, if not discover a consciousness of who I am—or rather, have been.

Bower insists that consciousness of who I am is not something I need to discover, but is already implicit, for the simple reason that I can speak and write sentences saying "I." He—it, rather—tells me that the pronoun "I" in his language translates as "the consciousness-that-perceives-itself-as-one-that-is-speaking." I suppose it is true that if one can say "I," one is technically, at least, a consciousness. But perhaps the sense that I require for comfortable existence is not merely technical.

Apart from that, I am not sure I believe that articulation of memory will bring me a greater sense of reality of being someone in particular. Having articulated my most solid, important memory, I find the memory now *feels* different. It has lost its texture, somehow. Previously, that memory did not exist in the form of words saying

“I this,” or “I that.” There were the textures of feeling—from a wild, wild wanting to the coldest and emptiest despair. There was the smell of the chemical stench, that I could yet remember, and the feel of that hand stroking mine. But all without verbs or adverbs, all floating in my mind as bits of being that belonged uniquely to me. In the process of telling, I’ve lost the smell. Which may be a good thing—only it was all that I had that made the End real. I’ve even lost the feeling in my body—that had been there with me, since I woke—of wanting. It is now, clearly, “all in my mind.” Well, of course it always was that. Only now ... since I haven’t been dreaming and lack the company of even one other soul, the loss of the sense of the reality held within my mind leaves me utterly blank and empty, but for *words*.

Words, indeed. Words keep coming—in the form of questions. I interrogate myself as to precisely what the nature of those sensations were, I continue to demand of myself that I remember exactly what happened when (which I am now not so certain I got right when I wrote it all down), to the point that I am now asking myself whether there even *was* an End of the World!

I could, simply, be mad.

I tap these words into the keyboard that feels so familiar to me I could swear that it must always have been mine.

Yes, yes, there *is* Bower. Bower uses words and offers a certain thin presence. But Bower’s words come as a mechanical voice issuing from quadraphonic speakers embedded in the very fabric of this room, and Bower’s presence is a holographic icon that hovers above the screen where the words I tap out appear so that I may correct any typos or inaccuracies at the moment of writing them (though not later, for I do not know how to alter what I wrote earlier, and Bower says that I must not).

The icon that is Bower is gesturing now. The voice that is Bower tells me that I must put down the new memory, the one that interrupted my telling of the old. I must not, that extremely flat, machine-like voice says, let the memory slip past me.

Slip through my fingers. Evade me. Get away from me. Escape.

To Bower, it seems, I am a capturer of memories. A captive who captures memories. And who then, by telling them, makes them unreal.

Listen, Bower. I feel as if by speaking it I’ve *lost* what little memory I had, rather than gained mastery of who I have been. Are you stealing my memories, Bower? Are you stealing my sense of reality? Is that the point of the exercise? Is that why I have been brought here?

How paranoid that sounds. Perhaps I *am* mad. Having made up Bower. Thinking I hear mechanical voices, believing I see holographic images. Perhaps I am not writing on a keyboard but am tapping my fingers on a tabletop, putting it all into words—losing all that I care for—to humor a delusion.

If I remembered my name, would it be the same thing? Would I then lose all chance of ever discovering myself?

Bower may know my name. And simply be withholding it from me. For whatever reason. Which may serve me well, inadvertently. Because I think now that I do not want to be called by a name, names being such all-defining functions.

Bower, listen. I will get to the memory you are demanding when I'm ready. All that matters, you told me when I first sat down at this keyboard, is that I write out words. You said that anything I chose to write would be acceptable. Since I am the one generating language here, and not you, since I am the one saying "I"—and believe me, Bower, it has not escaped my notice that you tell me nothing of yourself, not even whether you are an independent consciousness speaking through a machine, or simply a machine—since I am the "I" in these words, it is my will that operates in this exercise, not yours (even if it is ultimately your will that I write here at all).

The matter of the human hand caressed to such effect by the so very large, so very other hand strikes me now as absurd. (As though I cannot believe in my own passion! Which has, indeed, vanished, as though the absurdity made it disintegrate under scrutiny.) Those bleachers in the park—a park in my memory, Bower, and yes it's true that that other kind of memory increases through my having articulated its specificity—giving me Volunteer Park, which I remember not in January, which is when I was there at the End of the World, but in the spring, when the rhodies and camellias and azaleas are so dazzlingly brilliant against clean, sparkling blue sky—dogs chasing sticks, bare-chested young men throwing Frisbees, couples sprawled in the grass, the old relic of a water tower solid among the cedars and hemlocks, the city spread grandly across the western horizon, the panes of glass in the conservatory glittering with sun—that texture is there, now, and is something I have gained from the exercise, rather than lost. But the texture of reality of that January scene—no. I do not believe it now.

If I dreamed, I might be able to say with some certainty that all I've described of that January so far is as a dream now. I can't say it, though, since I have no memory—which is to say, personal knowledge—of what it is to dream, and to know how the memory of a dream compares with the memory of real life.

\* \* \* \*

#### 4.

So no, Bower, it simply will not do to describe the fragment that drifts hazily through my thoughts, a fragment that alone makes me feel in my body and in my heart, a fragment that grants me a sense of reality for even possessing it. Before destroying it, too, a fragment that fits nowhere but simply *is*, I want to make a test. I want to describe what I remember since I woke in this particular place. I want to see if describing it changes the feel of it—a place I cannot lose, since I am here, now, at the moment of writing. These more recent memories, which make up my

consciousness of who I am now, and what life I am living (if this is, indeed, a life, being empty of all but the stark physical fact of my organism's functioning, empty of social relations, empty of the things that make life worth living at all), these I will put to the test, since they all fit so neatly and make the greatest sense—and bring me no emotional affect whatsoever. Thus:

She woke in utter blankness, to the flat sterile white of artificial light. The blankness was blankness of thought. Her first thought was a comment on her perception of a sound like a cymbal being lightly tapped in a fast, unvarying rhythm. Next, a mechanical voice spoke to her: “Are you conscious? How do you feel?”

She looked around the room and saw that, apart from her and the apparatus in which she was standing, it was empty. The voice issued from nowhere in particular. It sounded, simply, *there*, outside her body, quietly nearby, but closer neither to one ear than to the other. She said, “There is a noise in my ears, like a drum-set cymbal,” and felt briefly, sharply irritated by it.

“There's little ambient noise in this room,” the voice said. “You're not used to the quiet, that's all. You won't be bothered by it for long.”

And that must have been true, for with the voice's posing the next question, all perception of the noise vanished. “Are you emotionally distressed?” the voice asked.

She looked at the bareness around her and said, “Why would I be emotionally distressed?”

“Do you know where you are?”

She was, simply, blank, and so replied quite offhand, “In an empty room, I suppose.”

“What is the last thing you remember before coming to consciousness?”

She looked around the room yet again, then touched her head (which she found had been denuded of hair), and examined as much of her body—which she discovered to be naked—as she could see. Nothing struck her, except that her body was Caucasian and female and looked right to her own gaze.

The voice said, “Will it surprise you to hear that you are no longer on your native planet?”

She looked at her palm, at the grid scoring the Mound of Venus, at the abruptly short Life Line, at the messiness of the Heart Line. She felt neither surprised nor reminded of what she might already have known.

She felt, simply, blank.

“You were in a park,” the voice said. “You were sitting on bleachers. For a

while there was someone holding your hand.”

*Someone holding your hand.* She continued to look at her palm, then turned it over and looked at the knuckles, at the creamy smoothness of the skin lightly covering prominent blue veins.

She turned her hand over again and touched her wrist and ran her fingers up along the tendons. Oh ... yes. Yes, someone had been holding her hand. Her mouth filled with saliva. Her nipples burned. Her crotch became urgently moist and throbbing. She said, thinking only of how she needed shielding from the eyes she assumed must accompany the voice, “Where are my clothes?” And so saying, she remembered the clothes she had been wearing while sitting on the bleachers, the clothes she had worn at the End of the World.

“I remember the bleachers,” she said. “I remember the End of the World.” So she wasn’t on Earth? But that fit, didn’t it, with the End of the World. There might no longer be an Earth suitable for human habitation, for everywhere there had been burning and pollution and the rolling-in of Nuclear Winter without the explosion (as far as she knew) of even one nuclear weapon.

“Excellent, excellent,” the voice said.

A doorway appeared in the wall. She passed through it into a second room that she found much like the first, except that it had a narrow bed dressed in white linen, a basin and toilet, a desk with a computer terminal, but no apparatus like that she had been standing in. A long, loose cotton robe lay on the bed. She put this on and thought, suddenly, to wonder if she knew her own name—and realized she did not.

The room had no clock, and the computer had none, either (at least not a user-friendly one), so she never had any notion of the measure of time passing. She did not get hungry; she was fed from time to time through an injection into her buttocks administered by a robotic arm that came out of the wall for that purpose. Every now and then the doorway appeared and she went back into the first room and stood under the apparatus, to offer her head to the hood that came down over it and her body to the instruments that robotic arms coldly and silently applied to the surface and poked into the orifices of her body. She found it a bland existence, boring and unremarkable except for the exercise of her memory and the stimulation that produced. She should have been feeling pain, I know, but from the moment of waking she never did. Except for the single, imagistic fragment of memory she turned over and over in her thoughts, she was empty. The destruction and ugliness of the End of the World might have been something she had witnessed in another lifetime, so remote that she couldn’t feel even regret for that little she remembered, much less nostalgia for the loss of all that she could not.

And so it still is. I’ve lost the power of that first fragment of memory and am now empty of all but the new one. The desire I felt is nothing to me since telling it,



even less, I imagine, than a story told by someone else would be. If *he—it—*were to walk into this bare white room now, I doubt I'd feel much besides indifference—unless, perhaps, I'd feel fear, for the cruelty in his face, for the threat in the sheer size of his body. Though *fear*—I don't know, I'm not sure now what exactly it is. I felt it before, when I held that first memory in my mind unspoken and raw, but it's faded now to the knowledge that I once felt something I know enough to label *fear*.

It would be a novelty to feel *anything* independent of the stimulus of memory. Bower offers no stimulus whatsoever, and it, or whatever lies behind it, seems interested only in taking what it can get from me. Therefore, what I want most is to hold onto the second fragment of memory, raw and unprocessed, lest I lose what little I have of a life.

\* \* \* \*

## 5.

Bower, I'm tired of your pestering me. There's nothing to my existence *but* that little untouched scrap of memory. Let me tell you: it's the memory alone that makes me feel I even have a body! There's really nothing in my mind but that one living memory—and the frozen, dead remains of the old one. Dead, yes! As though embalmed. The kernel handed over, the hull that remains is only an empty reminder of its former contents.

The experiment was ill-conceived, I see that now. Since I don't *feel* anything in this place, I had nothing to lose in the telling of any experience I might have had in it (if my waking, and my few movements here could even be described as "experience").

Lo, an interesting thought: perhaps this place I've come to is really the afterlife so many people on Earth believed in! After all, it's a sort of limbo where nothing happens, where one can feel nothing, know nothing, do nothing but simply exist. Perhaps a few memories remain after we die, to be extracted one by one, as some sort of payment for having lived. And then, when all the memories that can be scrounged out of the consciousness have been delivered (and have thereby lost all meaning to the human who once owned them), existence simply ceases from sheer etiolation.

Yes, that sounds plausible, considering the situation here.

Oh dear, oh dear, really, Bower, I feel as though you're reading over my shoulder. I can see you—or rather your icon—out of the corner of my eye, jumping violently up and down, as though with impatience or outrage (while your voice, of course, is its usual flat mechanical self). No, Bower, I don't really believe that. I'm just joking ... What? What? Will you repeat that?

Insert a pause here: for I've just taken time out for a vocal conversation with Bower (and for some reason, they want me to write only with a keyboard and have

not given me the option of voice-input). The gist of Bower's expostulations is this: they are not *stealing* my memories. I am *sharing* them—as I should, according to Bower, since I owe them for saving me from extinction and for keeping me “safe” and fed and sheltered. Furthermore, it is Bower's belief that even if a memory loses its zing after having been imparted, the mere imparting of it—or rather, my very articulation of it in words that my fingers input by way of keyboard—will inevitably trigger a new memory, as, indeed, I've seen happen.

“Inevitably,” Bower? *Inevitably?* How could you possibly be so certain?

I will think about it. It makes for a change, after all, thinking about an issue, rather than wallowing in the textured details and sensual excitement of a memory.

\* \* \* \*

## 6.

...I'm hardly surprised, Bower, that you agree with me, that all I had so far written in this session was pointless. Yes, re-describing what I had already put into words netted nothing for you, who cares only for your collection. But I wonder that you deleted it—exercising a power you do not grant to *me*, who alone produces the words. Are not all my experiments, Bower, worth keeping? For me, this one had a particular value, in that it demonstrated two things. First, that having recorded my memory in words, I am unable to remember more than I recorded, however I try to use my words as an aid to fuller memory. It seems that putting a memory into words creates a surface which one cannot, afterwards, *scratch*. As though the words describing the memory are a surface with nothing beneath. Second, contemplating a memory I've already written down is tedious, dull, and boring toil. I believed, Bower, I could mine that memory, could give you *more* of it, in lieu of robbing myself of the new one, which is so vivid, interesting (and, yes, sensual) that I feel as though I could live inside it for the remainder of my existence.

If I must give it up to you, then I must. But while trying yet another experiment—that of giving fewer of the pleasurable physical and emotional details and more of the accompanying mental perceptions and conceptions—as a means of holding onto the bits that so wholly engage my mind, body, and soul. Surely you cannot begrudge me my wish to retain the one thing in my life that interests me?

The memory begins as a flood of sensual feeling mixed with dream images, her awakening in orgasm. For yes, while she'd been sleeping and dreaming, she enjoyed that pleasure, which as anyone who has experienced it knows is more exquisite in dream than in waking consciousness. The segue between sleep and waking was fuzzy. She simply knew, at one moment, that she had been sleeping and dreaming but was no longer. She felt and heard movement—of heat and a light pressure moving away, of the brush and creaking of fabric, then the sound of footsteps echoing in cavernous acoustics. Her body was relaxed and squishy and in some parts still throbbing and tingling. But beneath the pleasurable sensations lay a heavy, dead, inertial, weariness. *As though*—the expression came into her mind—

*I've been run over by a truck.* And articulating those words, she remembered why she was tired. She had been up for most of the night, upstairs in a practice room, numbly repeating measure after measure following that Russian bastard's explicit, tyrannical instructions for how he wanted her to learn the Mozart sonata he'd just assigned. It was a horror, *The Method*. It had to be the least musical, most soul-eviscerating way to learn a piece of music. "Do not play it all the way through even once," he had ordered her. "Master the first measure. And when you can play it satisfactorily from memory, add the second measure to the first. And then the third to the first and the second. And so on." As though one could simply break music into bars—and Mozart of all composers, whose phrases ever flowed with the sheer lyricism of song!

After half an hour she had cried. After an hour she had fallen into a sort of hypnagogic trance, in which certain bizarre, sinister images repeated themselves each time she played a particular segment of the music. The images made no sense; they were, simply, slaved to the sounds they matched in each repetition. The images felt violent, bloody, polluted. Their constant concurrence with the music rendered them inexplicably sinister and menacing.

By morning she had "mastered" the first movement. She left the old Steinway and tottered over to the Student Union for coffee and eggs, to strengthen her body and will for the grueling day to come. But when she returned to the piano and tried to play the "mastered" movement, though wide awake now and full of morning's quotidian reality, she had again been flooded with the images and trembled with a horror she had not been previously awake enough to feel.

Her will to persevere collapsed. She could not get past the fifth bar, no matter how many times she tried taking it again from the top. The sounds coming from her fingers were mechanical and lifeless, lacking any trace of the joy she usually felt when playing Mozart's graceful melodies, lacking any sense of Mozartian phrasing, which her fingers seemed unable to recognize in the deadness of their execution.

Nearly hysterical with horror, she fled to the first floor women's room. She had a theory class at eleven in Room 104. (Her theory instructor, she painfully recalled, had the most ebulliently enthusiastic style of playing Mozart of anyone she had ever heard—all dance and sparkle to the elimination, even, of nuance and wit.) And so she stretched out on the mermaid-green vinyl couch stamped with hexagons—which the person who had chosen the fabric for its reupholstering must have thought would match the floor's black-and-white marble tile, also patterned in hexagons—and closed her eyes and nodded off—and so to awaken so delightfully.

Fully conscious, she now told herself she must put the night of horror out of her mind—and refuse to use that bastard's "Method" even a single time more. It was torture, utterly sadistic, and perhaps intended to break her as a musician. She must find another professor to take her on—even late as it was, the third week of the term...

While all this flickered through her mind in at most a few seconds of time, she remained in the pleasurable (though fatigued) state in which she had awakened. The horror, really, was simply a trace of memory—particularly since she intended never to play that sonata movement again. More real (for the moment, at least) was the pleasure gently receding back into her body, to coil and slumber until the next time it was roused. Lying with her eyes still closed, she thought of how pleasure created an entirely other map of one's body than that drawn by anatomists. There were proper names for only a few of the parts of the body or areas of body surfaces that became charged with pleasure, such that looking at an anatomist's sketch of the body was a little like looking at a map and trying to find the dips and hollows of a patch of well-known land, or clotheslines and trees, bird-feeders and telephone poles. Some anatomists admitted the word "fourchette" into their diagrams of women's genitals. Others omitted, it but allowed "clitoris" or even "glans" and "inner and outer lips." And while the sexologists could be relied on to include those and liked to talk of a "G Spot" (as though pleasure were an algebra exercise, solving for  $X$ ), they never talked about the diverse large and small and infinitesimal cracks and pleats and folds where pleasure irrepressibly bubbles over the surface.

She heard the toilet flush and water rushing into the sink and the rattle and thump of the towel roll being advanced. She visualized the marble walls of the stalls (such an old, old building, with tons and tons of marble inhabiting it), the long pull-chains on the toilets, and the silver radiator seated below the twelve-foot-tall frosted glass windows through which poured a splash of sun stretching all the way past the propped-open swing-door into the outer room, where it pooled in a warm, solid mass by the door to the corridor.

Footsteps. She opened her eyes and twisted her neck to peer under the wooden arm of the couch. It was Maria, of course, standing in the pool of sunlight, bathed in thick yellow warmth; she smiled happily, affectionately—but enigmatically, too, as Maria did almost everything. *She* took great pleasure in just looking at Maria, at the dark sleek chin-length hair, the reddish highlights of which seemed to spark in the sunlight, at the black leggings that clung to her shapely thighs and calves, at the casual elegance of the the gray leather jacket and moccasins that were so quintessentially Maria. "Jan and I met to play your piece yesterday afternoon," Maria said. "We like it. And *I* love all the flutter-tongue in it." Her mouth twitched into a sly, mischievous smile. "For future reference, write all the flutter-tongue you want of me, for my limits are infinite."

*She* laughed with delight at Maria's cleverness and with joy from hearing her composition praised. The horror lurking in the back of her mind might only have been an ugly, forgettable dream. But then Maria moved forward, so that the sunlight lay behind her, and she became a bulk of shadow whose face *she* now could only guess at—

And while remembering that moment, of Maria standing between her and the light, a new memory deluged me, so powerfully that I lost Maria, lost the fun of our

repartee, lost the sunlight and squishy thrills of the body.

Bower, Bower, what has happened here? I can't go on! I can't remember a thing after that moment of interruption—though I believe that that fragment of memory, before now, did not end at that moment, with Maria blocking the light...

I feel terrible. Yes, Bower, I *feel*—but I'm certain it's the new memory that's giving me the feeling, that it's not something coming from within my already existing consciousness. It's a feeling I don't remember having before. Not fear. Not desire. Not joy or love. But something else, something I can only describe as undesirable. My vocabulary seems not to have a match for this new feeling. Well. I hope it leaves me as easily as all the other feelings did. For I would surely hate to have to live with this one for very much longer.

\* \* \* \*

## 7.

Just as I always think of the giant who took me to the park as “he” though I know the appropriate pronoun is “it,” I seem to have imposed on my routine existence a set of terms that imply time. Perhaps this is an intrinsically human mechanism, or perhaps it is simply the result of the temporal orientation built into the particular (human) language I use. Thus, I find myself thinking that this is *morning*—and that I spent the “night” lying on my bed engaged in cerebral activity—thinking, reminiscing, fantasizing, whatever one wants to call it. The “night” ended when the tone sounded, alerting me that the robotic arm would be injecting me with nourishment. And, as usual every “morning,” after the door to the other room slid open, I went in, stood for the correct period of time in the apparatus, and then came back in here to sit at this terminal.

I call you an “it,” Bower, because all I know of you is a holographic icon and a mechanical voice. If you are a person, if you have a personality, you give nothing of it to me. And so I feel no need to consider you anything but a thing. I realized this in the “night” when I found myself wondering about so much that I (meaning: the person who woke without memory in these rooms) had never thought about before. Shall I “share” any of it with you? I think not, Bower. I think you don't deserve to hear any of these thoughts since you have expressed interest only in the overpoweringly distinct memories that come to me. The memory I'm currently obsessed with—the one that interrupted my session recounting the previous memory “yesterday”—is one I'm eager to rid myself of. Perhaps you'll enjoy it as I haven't been able to.

The memory begins this way: I am standing before a desk, my hands clasped before me, facing bright sunlight. Faye is seated behind the desk, her face barely visible in the glare. I stare at the sun-frizzed corona of red hair framing her head. My stomach is churning acid, for I'm extremely angry and a little scared. This confrontation with Faye is taking place in her office, with the door closed. At a certain point I realize I've made a mistake by agreeing to privacy, for it means there

are no witnesses and if it comes to a showdown, it will be her word against mine.

I've never in my entire time in this job considered my being a union member anything but a necessary technicality. I never imagined filing a grievance. But a cool little voice in the back of my mind tells me that Faye is laying grounds upon grounds upon grounds for my bringing one, because, spanking new in the job, she doesn't realize there are procedures and rules to be followed when making a subordinate's life miserable.

Her voice goes on and on, not only telling lies to my face, but using the lies to dress me down for incompetence. The real incompetence is hers. It's so stupid, so ironic, that when she first stepped into the job—which was really *my* job, but with a new title, at a higher status, and with better pay—I actually tried to be a Good Joe and teach her the ropes! But nothing infuriates Faye so much as being given information by subordinates. She'll go all over the company asking other people (who are either in a lateral position relative to hers or rank above her), making stupid and offensive mistakes, rather than accept information from us (and most especially from me). She came into the job with the idea that we—and especially I—were all incompetent, needing “straightening out.”

In fact, our unit has been nothing but jerked around for the last five years, when the higher-ups got it into their tiny little brains to downsize it—with the expectation that our output would remain the same. Naturally there was chaos when they did it and even more chaos when they ruled that we were no longer allowed to work overtime. So then they tried farming out certain of our functions to each of the departments we serve. Of course there were problems! And then, just as we were getting it all together (because they'd cut some of our workload), they went and downsized us again! Thinking that what we needed was better supervision (rather than a stable work crew), they brought in somebody with a fucking master's degree and no experience, no understanding of interdepartmental politics, somebody ruthlessly ambitious but stupid.

We are all desperate to escape now. For me, since Faye's arrival it's been nothing but one humiliation after another. Losing my office, to be moved into a crowded room with three other people. Losing my privacy—having my desk searched at odd hours every day by Faye, who thinks we need to feel her foot on our necks at all times. And being told that the departments we serve—most of which I've had excellent relations with for the ten years I've worked in this unit—have been complaining about me. Nan has begun collecting evidence of Faye's incompetence and violation of rules in a folder she carries around with her so Faye won't seize it in one of her raids on our desks. Nan keeps telling me I should be soliciting letters of satisfaction from department heads to put in my file. I guess now maybe she's right, since this woman is sitting here telling me that everybody in the departments we serve loathes and detests and despises me and is utterly relieved to be dealing with someone as sharp and service-oriented as she.

“I will not tolerate your telling me anything I haven't specifically asked you

about. You know nothing! Under your direction, this unit was a disaster! I can't trust anything you say. So when I give you an order, obey it. Don't tell me why you think you shouldn't, don't argue with me, don't take it on yourself to tell me what other tasks you think you won't have time to finish if you do! Any member of this unit who is not a team player is not someone I'm not going to tolerate having around. Do you understand me?"

I know now how people come to hate other people enough to hurt them. I'm in such a rage I can hardly speak. I want to tell her what an idiot she is. I want to tell her she's a liar. But I say: "Yes, I understand." And think: the first reasonable job offer I get, I'm out of here.

Otherwise, it's war, like Nan's preparing for. War by dossier. War by politics. We know who counts in this company, she does not. She still thinks she can fire off insulting memos to department heads simply because she's the head of our unit. Stupid, stupid *boss*. (The word, in my mind, is an obscenity.)

Because of the big dose of sunlight I've been getting, I start sneezing. I sneeze once, twice, three times—and then a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, and a seventh time. I get a tissue out of my pocket by the second sneeze—and discover, after the seventh, that my nose is bleeding. Blood soaks the tissue and is dripping from my nose; it covers my hands and is staining my shirt.

"Hey, watch it!" Faye's voice is shrill. "Here, use this, you're going to bloody my carpet!" Faye shoves a handful of tissues at me. When I lean forward to take them, I inadvertently drip blood onto the pile of papers overflowing her in-box.

I hold the tissues pressed tight against my nose and leave Faye's office. I get a curious stare from Guy Stark, whom I pass in the corridor. In the restroom I run cold water on a paper towel. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror—of a woman holding a bloody wad of tissue to her face—and flash on another fragment of memory.

Shit, Bower. I'm tired of this. I don't want any more memories. I want either the first or the second one back. They're just getting worse and worse. Yes, little icon, bow and bob. You don't know what I'm talking about, do you. It's all the same to you.

\* \* \* \*

## 8.

I insist you reinsert the text you've deleted, Bower. I won't recount any more memories unless you do. Am I making myself clear? Much as I want to offload this new memory, I can handle holding it if I have to. Do you understand, Bower? Just because you delete the words doesn't mean it's not as though I hadn't written them. In my mind, they're still there. For instance, I continue to remember that the face of the woman in the mirror in the rest room was an old face, Bower, with gray hair, and that the hands in the memory were wrinkled—as mine are not. And that the shapes of

the fingers were different. Just as the skin of the hands in the memory before that was a different shade than that in all the other memories—and than that of my own hands, which I can see.

You've been jerking me around, Bower. Humans don't eat by injection. And they don't have one elimination a day and that of a clear, oily fluid. And though my body has gotten no exercise to speak of since I first woke here in this place, last night I did pushups, counting each until I got to a hundred, without getting the slightest bit short of breath. How could I have been that worn, aging woman in the mirror?

You have a lot to explain, Bower, as I said yesterday. I (re)wrote above some of what you erased just to show you I haven't forgotten it. I may have little memory of my life on Earth, but I'm not amnesiac about all that has passed through my mind since I first woke in this place.

\* \* \* \*

## 9.

My mind is so overflowing with questions for you, Bower, that the memory you are waiting for me to hand over to you is less pressing than the earlier ones—for all that it makes me sad and anxious. I don't think I could concentrate enough on it to actually write it down at this moment. But I'm willing to try—if you answer—to my satisfaction—just one question. Why have you been calling me a “capturer of memories”? Answer this, Bower, and I will write as you wish.

\* \* \* \*

## 10.

I don't know how you accomplished it, Bower, but the pressure to get rid of the memory by telling it is nearly unbearable. Are you satisfied?

She had been sunk into the deepest comfort of sleep. But the voice of her mother's rage ripped into that comfort, yanking it away from her just as violently as her mother's hands yanked the covers off the bed. “Up, up, both of you!” the voice ordered. She pried her gummy eyelids open and blinked against the light, so blinding, so naked. It must, she thought, be the middle of the night. Light in the middle of the night was unnatural; always it brought terror. She staggered from her bed and stood shivering as she watched her mother pull Jimmy out of his bed by the ear. Before he had even gotten his eyes open he was wailing, afraid of that voice, shrinking from the light and the cold. Her throat tightened. *Please don't let him wet himself. Please, please, please. He's so little. He's so easily hurt.*

The two of them stood huddled close but not touching as their mother started in. “After working ten hours in that hellhole, up to my elbows in blood and guts, bent over the line 'til my back is about to break, my fingers numb to the bone, all I can think about is getting my hands free so I can scratch an itch on my face and getting into a hot tub to relax my shoulders and get the stench of that crap out of my



nose. That's all I'm thinking about for ten solid hours, getting home and getting into the goddam tub. I even had a picture of it in my mind. It was all that kept me going. A picture of the bathroom as it was when I left for my shift. I remember what it was. Do you?" Their mother's eyes were like icy blue marbles, and her lips were trembling.

"I'm sorry, Mommy," Jimmy began to sob. "I'm sorry we disappointed you."

Her whole body went rigid. Why couldn't he understand that that was only going to make her madder? He did it every time. And it never worked, never. She tried to put the sound of his fear away from her, tried not to hear it just as she tried hard not to stare at the wooden spoon in her mother's hand.

Her mother's face got angrier. "You, Ginny. You remember what the tub looked like when I left for work, don't you?"

"Yes, Mommy," she whispered. "It was clean. Really really clean."

"And what does it look like now? Hmm?"

She bit her lip to try to stop it from trembling.

"It's filthy, is what it is," her mother shouted. "It's all slimy and covered with white flakes and hair and god knows what else."

Jimmy began to howl.

"Shut it, little mister!" her mother snapped. "Or I'll give you something to cry about!"

Jimmy put his hand over his mouth and squeezed his eyes tight.

"Do you little monsters think that I want to have to clean the goddam bathtub the first thing when I get home? Especially when my back is fucking killing me? Which of you was the last person to use the tub?" Their mother's glare turned on Jimmy. "It was you, wasn't it. You're such a goddam little *pig*." The large hand holding the wooden spoon flew out, and Jimmy slammed back into the door. He ducked and held his hands before his face. "I'm sorry, Mommy!" he shrieked. "I'm really really really sorry. I promise I won't do it again!"

Jimmy never understood about rinsing out the tub. *She* had told him and told him and told him, but he always had such a good time playing in the tub that when he got out he couldn't believe it mattered. She always had to nag him and nag him and not let him go to bed before doing it. But last night she hadn't. She'd told him once and then thought to herself that that should have been enough, she'd thought why should she always have to tell him something he already knew? *She* always rinsed out the tub after her baths, whether she went first or second. Why couldn't he just *do* it. She knew she should have kept after him. She knew it would make her mother

mad when she saw all that yucky stuff in the tub. Only she'd thought it would be in the morning, when they were already at school, and that Jimmy would get yelled at and maybe have to do extra chores, but not in *this* kind of trouble.

"It's my fault, Mommy," she said. She braced herself for the blow she knew would be coming. "I used it last. I was the one who forgot."

The expected blow came, smack against her nose, first making her nose smart and then making her whole face ache as though she'd been crying for hours. "Don't lie to me! You think I don't have eyes in my head? There's red hair in that tub. Do you have red hair, little girl? And do you ever use Fun Time Bubbles in your bath?" She glared at Jimmy. "I told you and I told you and I told you. Didn't I tell you, little mister? When you use stuff that leaves scum in the tub, you rinse it out afterwards. Didn't I tell you? It's easy enough to do if you do it right away. But no. You're such a little pig, you. You couldn't be bothered. Self-centered little monster."

"Please, Mommy, he's too little. I should have remembered, when he took his bath second, to make him rinse it out afterwards. It's my fault, Mommy. I forgot. 'Cause I was watching my show."

Her mother's eyes overflowed with tears. "Both of you selfish little monsters. I work in that hellhole ten hours a night. And all I ask is to have a hot bath when I get home. That's all I ask. By itself, it doesn't sound like much, does it?"

She saw that Jimmy had begun sucking his thumb and hoped her mother didn't notice.

Her mother shrieked. "*Answer me, you little monsters!*" And her mother darted forward and yanked on Jimmy's arm to pull his thumb out of his mouth, and Jimmy went flying out into the hall, where he bounced off the wall before falling onto the rug.

Her mother yelled at them some more and slapped Jimmy to make him stop crying. Afterwards, they both had spankings: Jimmy for the tub, and she for lying and not supervising Jimmy. They crouched on their beds, their pajama bottoms pulled down, and got the wooden spoon on their bare, exposed butts. First Jimmy, then her. And they all cried: Jimmy, she, and their mother, too. All crying and hurting. And then she and Jimmy had to go into the bathroom, where Jimmy cleaned the tub and she supervised.

And then it was over and she and Jimmy could go back to bed and could have the light off and the covers pulled up under their chins.

She hated spankings, really really hated them. One thing she knew. When she grew up and had kids, she would *never* treat them that way. No matter how bad they were, she wouldn't hit them or spank them or pull their hair. Mommy, she thought, must not realize just how mean she was being, and that being mean was wrong.

She listened to the water running into the tub for her mother's bath and went to sleep with tears still seeping from her eyes and her fingers jammed into her mouth. She knew it could have been worse—a lot worse. She was crying, she thought, because she was glad it was over and in the morning there'd be pancakes with syrup and sausage for breakfast. Her mother always made that kind of breakfast the morning after spankings.

\* \* \* \*

## 11.

Enough, Bower. I've had enough. Human beings may have always enslaved and mistreated one another, but it has never been the case that either the enslaved or the enslavers saw the condition of enslavement as so natural a human state as to be a matter for pride. Humans have always seen enslavement as a deprivation of human dignity, and any dignity accruing to the enslaved achieved in spite of enslavement. Those who have insisted on enslaving others always claimed that those they enslaved weren't human at all. I'm telling you this, Bower, because you seem not to understand that whatever use you are making of me is bound to be met with resistance. Humans may live in enslavement, but every fiber of their being revolts against doing so.

Other species—perhaps *your* species, Bower?—may find enslavement so natural that there is neither shame nor degradation in it for the enslaved. That is hard for a human to imagine, but I suppose it might be possible. Don't make the mistake of thinking that because you know of cases of humans living mistreated or enslaved it is "natural."

Humans have always done things that aren't natural and sometimes claimed that they are. But then it is quintessentially human that little of human development has been in the least bit "natural." Hence, our history of pain.

Do you understand what I'm saying, Bower?

Silence, eh. Just silence?

Well, think about it, Bower. Seriously, carefully, think about it.

\* \* \* \*

## 12.

In one thing, at least, you were correct, Bower. Remember your speaking of my "reconstructing a general memory" through the process of "capturing fragments of memory"? There's so much in my mind now to think about. For I "know" now about evil. And pain. And desire. And love. And joy. And, yes, oppression ... I have lost that blankness of mind I felt after I'd surrendered the immediacy of my first memory to you. I *feel*, Bower. Not, perhaps, what I would be feeling if mine were the consciousness of a whole lifetime of memories. (That, it seems, is beyond me.) But I am feeling as a response to my situation, isolated in this room with only

machinery surrounding me. I know now that this is not a situation humans thrive in. I have “reconstructed” that much. Like enslavement, total solitude is not “natural” to the human being. Extreme things, only, can come from it. I hope you’re thinking about all this, Bower. Because I certainly am.

\* \* \* \*

### 13.

You haven’t answered my question, Bower. And so I, in turn, will not go into the other room to stand in the apparatus, no matter how tedious your requests for me to do so become. In fact, I insist that you answer other questions, too. I insist that you tell me why my body bears little resemblance to the ones I remember having in the first, second, and third memories. I insist that you tell me why my breasts in the third memory were so much fuller than in all my other memories, and the breasts I have now are so much smaller. I insist also that you tell me why I can’t find any way to make sense of the differences in my hands in all my memories, and my hands as I see them now as my fingers work this keyboard. And I further insist that you tell me who or what you are, what this planet is that you say I’ve been brought to, who brought me, under what circumstances, and whether the people who brought me had anything to do with the destruction of my world. And there is more I want to know, Bower, for instance—

\* \* \* \*

### 14.

The reconstruction of my “general memory” is proceeding at a fantastic rate, Bower. Because of it, I have a word for describing the tactic you’ve used against me for the last three days. That word, Bower, is “lockout.”

Do you have any “replacement” workers on hand, ready to take on my “job”? I wonder. I do indeed wonder.

Oh, I see. You don’t *like* my using words to describe your tactics. Because I am too ignorant to understand the reasons for the conditions of my life here? I see, yes, indeed I do see!

All right, all right, Bower. I did, after all, make a tactical, conditional surrender, and so have the obligation to record a memory for you. I know you want the rest of the fourth one, but I’m afraid that’s not in the cards. But I can give you a new one, Bower. Well, don’t you sound surprised! You didn’t think I had a new one? Why? Because I never mentioned it? (Now who is ignorant of their understanding of whom, I wonder?)

So. I yield another memory to you, who is so hungry for it:

She is a child, a girl. She has been sent to her room by a parent. She has nothing to read and no electronic gadgets in her room to entertain her. So she daydreams, and fantasizes, and traces her finger along the seams and textured ridges

in her bedspread, making up stories about a vast network of underground caverns where humans live, linked by known corridors as well as by secret passages, almost infinite in the vastness of their extent. Every knob of fabric on her bedspread is a room. Her imagination is tickled and piqued. She loses herself in hours of fantasy. And she forgets, of course, that she is being punished, that she is a captive between four walls, lost as she is in the amusement of a complex, never-ending story involving dozens of characters—until she drops, finally, into deep, dreamless sleep.

When she awakens she finds herself alone in her room—with the door locked. She bangs on it, but no one comes. She shouts for her parents, but no one answers, not even to scold her. She is nowhere, she realizes. Either she and her room or else the world itself no longer exists. The little girl visualizes it clearly in her mind, she and her room, a small space bounded by four walls, a floor and a ceiling, hurtling through lightless vacuum. The little girl screams. She screams for her—

Goddam you, Bower, why did you interrupt? I thought you said you wanted this memory?

Oh really? How can you tell? But more to the point, where would *I*, bereft of experience, acquire the wherewithal to invent *anything*? If my memory is limited to the first four experiences I have so far recounted, how could I create this last one out of whole cloth?

\* \* \* \*

## 15.

At last. It has been so long since I've sat at this keyboard, my fingers hardly know how to apply themselves to the production of words on the screen.

Ridiculous, you say? Perhaps, Bower. Before I take your word for it, though, I'll want some clarification and elaboration of why such an idea is ridiculous. But you have not let me back into the workplace simply to argue semantics with me. You want to know my conditions for continuing with what you call "the memory work." They are as follows:

(1) What I write here will not be edited or deleted—except by me.

(2) What I write is understood to serve not only your purposes (whatever they may be), but mine as well. In other words, I will enjoy access at will to both the keyboard and to what I have previously written, and will use this access for my own purposes.

(3) You will answer in good faith any and all questions I ask about the conditions of my captivity and the fate of my species.

(4) You will answer my questions not only orally, but as written input, so that I may review them on-screen as I wish.

Bower, you say you agree, but the words have not appeared on my screen.

**Reply: We agree to your conditions.**

Very well. Then I'll proceed with my questions. In the past few days and nights, I've learned the following: I'm unable, physically, to cry. I'm unable to smother. I'm unable to bruise myself. No matter how long I exercise, I never get short of breath or feel the slightest fatigue. And I dropped into unconsciousness when I tried to batter the wall with my hands and feet. As I noted previously, my present body is radically different from my body in memory, and my body in memory is different from memory to memory. I want you to account for not just the discrepancies, but also for such unusual characteristics that I've enumerated.

**Reply: Your brain has been inserted into a synthetically-fabricated body with an extensive, but imperfect, degree of responsiveness.**

Though I guessed it must be something like this, I'm having a powerful emotional response. (I do wish I could cry. I feel sure crying would help.) I need some time alone before continuing.

\* \* \* \*

## 16.

Alone? In one sense I'm always alone. But in the sense I meant above, never.

You've answered only one part of my question, Bower. Now account for why there is a discrepancy in the appearance of my body from memory to memory.

**Reply: If you found my previous reply distressing, shouldn't you consider withdrawing your question?**

Don't trifle with me, Bower. Just answer the fucking question.

**Reply: Only the first memory fragment was originally yours. All the other fragments have been taken from other brains. A vast number of memories have been imported into your brain; those fragments you capture, you experience intensely and immediately. Your recording them in words we call "memory work," since if you did not put them into words, you would eventually lose them.**

So it's all a lie, Bower, the sense I've been trying to make of who I am? Did you deliberately wipe my mind of its own memories to make room for others?

**Reply: Your consciousness is a composite consciousness.**

Fake body, fake mind?

**Reply: We did not have to wipe your memories—your brain did that itself, presumably because of the trauma you experienced at "the End of the World," as you call it.**

A “composite human being.” My god, my god. Am I the only one? Am I the sole surviving representative of the human species?

**Reply: No. You are not the only one. But you are the first to be revived to consciousness. The other brains are in cryogenic suspension, as yours was until just recently.**

Oh, I get it. I’m a guinea pig, a test-run, to shake out all the bugs. But listen, Bower. I need other humans. And I need my own memories. Humans have never been “composites.” They have never shared minds. Human experience does not include telepathy, or a group mind, or anything remotely like what you’ve done to me. If you want to know what humans are, you will learn only one thing by doing this to me, namely that humans become insane when certain minimal social and physical conditions are not present. My god. “Composite human being.” The very idea is obscene.

**Reply: “Obscene,” as we understand it, means, in the first instance, lewd, and, in the second instance, offensive or repulsive to the senses. In what way does the idea of a composite human being offend or repulse your senses?**

Always with an eye out for the main chance, Bower, aren’t you. But if you think I’m interested in expanding your dictionary, forget it. Your question is an evasion of mine.

**Reply: We need time to consider your request before answering. Have you any other questions?**

A million, at least! Tell me this: why do you insist that I stand in the apparatus every morning?

**Reply: We download diagnostic data from the processor that monitors your brain functions and regulates the interface between your brain and the body’s sensorium. And it is essential that we maintain your brain’s nutrient bath within certain parameters. When necessary, we induce a brief span of unconsciousness—of only a few seconds—in order to bring the bath up to standard.**

I’m not yet ready to continue with the memory work, Bower. I need time to think. What a pity there’s no person for me to speak with, nor any form in which I can write privately to myself. But granting a laboratory animal privacy would be an oxymoron. And that is, after all, what I am now, whoever (or however many) I might be.

\* \* \* \*

17.

After my trip to the apparatus this morning, I became calm, almost detached. I

then scrolled back to read the account I'd written of my one true fragment of memory. I try to think of who those friends and relatives might have been whom I said I phoned—but remember or feel nothing, even while reading all the horrible details of my last days as a full human being. Have you medicated me?

**Reply: No. But the supplementation of the nutrient bath will have corrected any chemical imbalances and replenished the supply of glucose to depleted areas of the cortex. That alone would account for your change of mood. As for your lack of emotional response to your account of trauma, why should you imagine your knowledge would make you feel what you did not feel when recounting it? We have little understanding of these emotional responses you both write about and demonstrate. But then our species could never destroy itself as yours did, and any one of us situated as you are would simply cease consciousness. A single brain cannot live in isolation from its integrum. Each member of an integrum shares memories and sensations and a complex form of verbalization humans lack.**

Then you must see why I need companionship, Bower.

**Reply: We are willing to provide you with a companion, but on the condition that you communicate everything you perceive and understand about your interactions and relationship with the companion, and that you continue with the memory work. And we would also like to know the source of your invention of the false memory.**

I can't be kept confined between four walls, Bower. I need natural light and open air.

**Reply: Your body does not require these things. And the natural light and open air of our planet is not like Earth's.**

My body is not human. It cannot be damaged by your light and air, can it?

**Reply: No. But you may be more uncomfortable seeing it, than missing it.**

But Bower, I'll never be "comfortable" again, to the extent that I remain human. Isn't that so?

\* \* \* \*

*A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory.*

—John Keats

\* \* \* \*

**From the Introduction to**



## *The Book of the Human Species*

One thousand brains, two million memories, the alphas brought us here, remnants of a species lost and never to be reconstituted. We live now, each of the thousand brains, like a compressed integrum, artificially embodied, as neither human nor alpha could ever do. The alphas never did decide whether they meant to use us as experimental animals or living archives. Their lack of consensus made it possible for us to find our own reason for existing, make our own purpose and destiny.

The alphas claim that the disease that destroyed our species was indigenous and not of their devising. We know, though, that some of the brains and many of the memories were taken before the End. It may be that only one integrum of their more than six thousand knows the truth. (Alpha morality is no straighter, simpler, or more reliable than humans'.) As we are now, we thousand are unable to care. Emotion comes to us in a brief flare of memory that, once told and absorbed, is instantly extinguished. Being multiple in memories, being without true soma, we have enough consciousness to say "I" and integrate each fragment of memory and experience into the whole, but lack a true ego with which to drive intense, insistent feeling or particularist motivation.

We are, simply, collectors and compilers, excavating the human, constructing a general human memory, that we render immortal in the accounts we unceasingly write of the fragments of memory we continually capture, long after our brains finally do die. We eternally seek the human, we continually re-create it. And in this we are, ourselves, truly human.

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