R. Neill Hadder

TRAINS AND TRANSFORMATIONS
SENIOR HONORS COLLOQUIUM

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Echoes are soundless.
Memories have no memory,
Except for those who hear sounds in echoes
And discover memories in memory.

-- Orkhan Muyassar

'Transformations'
Introduction

Welcome to your first and last class in Neillism. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to participate in an informal, unstructured discussion based on but not necessarily tied to the selections presented here. You needn't, as far as I'm concerned, spend any more time on the stories than is required to read them once through; in fact, if time does not permit your reading every story, then we can just say "turn-about is fair play," if you take my meaning. Actually, I doubt whether, seeing these pieces in a magazine, I would bother to read them. They are experiments which attempt nothing more or less than to adequately reflect whatever bit of literary theory I happened to be toying with at the time. However, having said that, I also say that the experiments were successful, and I am inviting you to help me make these stories better through any and all comments you care to give. I won't ask you to do anything painful, but your help is greatly appreciated.

The first fictional section, "In Other Words" intends solely to provide a brief example of the level on which my writing can undergo analysis. To that end, I carefully designed it to illustrate the concepts pointed out in the explication which follows it. I have included these parts because I didn't feel that such analysis fell within the pale of our common ground for discussion, and time should therefore not be spent upon these stylistic concerns. On the other hand, the commentary reflects the purposes of my rather odd structural strategies and word choice. Thus, since some discussion of style seemed necessary, I've included this parenthetical section.

Naturally, when we begin a discussion on each story, I want any and all personal and professional criticisms which might help me improve my work. At the same time, when themes appear in the stories which prompt more broad discussions, I would place more emphasis on the discussion than on the primary sources. Then, after we all get tired of it, we’ll quit.

Selections

In the end, I've included the four stories which seem to me to have the greatest potential both for collaborative discussion and interdisciplinary content. Since these stories are not intended primarily to be marketed, I’ve felt free to exclude certain common literary conventions for theoretical reasons. In short, nowhere in these stories will you find:

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I mention these things because, being presently excluded on purpose, I feel immune to criticism regarding these paucities. Finally, I hope that the diversity in subject matters will give each of us at least one chance to lead any topical discussion which may waft our way. I feel somewhat apologetic that the last two stories here are so unpleasant (well written, but dark). One desire I had was to try to write the most emotionally violent story I could. Well, I did, and I thankfully never have to produce anything like it again.

"The Animal" is the second of thirteen episodes in the book *Garth of Izar*, the world’s first partly satirical work of Turbo-Anti-TREK fiction. I began this project as a meditation on how relatively innocuous source texts can be transformed into new, unified, literary works such as many of Shakespeare’s plays or the Hebrew Bible. Rather than tackling something historical or verifiable, I chose as my first attempt the "wading pool" of literature, Gene Rodenbury’s speculative STAR TREK universe. While never meant as more than an instructive entertainment, this multi-media phenomenon nevertheless has grown into something universal which purports to preach a coherent philosophy. I decided to critique it on the basis of cultural relativism and the viability of religious symbolism in a modern society, using as my backdrop a score of lesser-known tales drawn from the TREK "histories." A second reason for this project was a bet between myself and an English grad student to see who could write the best "bad" novel.

"Yesterday’s Fantasies" began as a stand-alone story, but a problematic yet vaguely necessary viewpoint forced me to sit down and calculate how quickly the viewpoint could be fully explored. It will take a minimum of six stories to fully constitute the "I" persona, the end result being a novel to be called *The Middle Kingdom*. While this title makes the inclusion of some vital Chinese character seem obligatory, the phrase here specifically refers to a similar phrase in Chan and Zen Buddhism. The brunt of this novel involves literature’s potentials for reflecting the existential reality presented in Kaiji Nishitani’s *Religion and Nothingness*, in which he quotes the Zen saying, "Man inhabits the middle ground between emptiness and illusion." Just for grins, the title also refers to the state of a small town transforming from a unique community into a faceless hive of institutionalized chain stores. "Fantasies" is the first story in this collection.

"Jazz Fiction" just sort of happened one day while I was compiling an instructive anthology of jazz tunes for a music enthusiast craving to know more about jazz. I have long been intrigued by the relationship between literature and music, and while listening to the newly-completed tapes, a certain combination of songs began to influence me so greatly that I began writing, reaching toward the
translation of notes into syllables and measures into clauses at some points, or a more subtle evocation of jazz textures in others. The next day, I went to the library on a hunch and discovered books on "phenomenological" and "structuralist" Literary Criticism and "transformational linguistics" put out by the Great Beaver Press on the planet Zembla. Boiling down several vat fulls of pulp from these volumes, I eventually found I had one drop more than before I started, that morsel being the word "transformational" as applied to literature. I have added this word to the list of technical terms which I have found to be more light than fog. I think that list now has three terms on it. If anyone cares, the songs represented in the story are Gershwin's "Summertime," which appears first in its Ella Fitzgerald/Lewis Armstrong version and then the John Coltrane experience thereof; "Nebbeccenezzar" and "Mystical Interlude" from Marcus Roberts' album, Deep In The Shed; and finally, "Concierto de Aranjuez" as performed by Miles Davis. It doesn't really live up to its title yet, but I'll work on it more later.

"Vicarity" was written while still exploring the same idea of transformational literature which characterizes "In Other Words." It is primarily an attempt to describe what I have called an intentionality paradox, wherein... well, let's see how much of it is explained in the story itself—probably none of it, but that's OK. My goal in cultivating this writing style revolves around the production of literary fiction which does not require reference to outside sources for the story's full impact. While it is inevitable that an author draws upon his cultural vocabulary when placing images in a text, I do not find it personally rewarding to demand that any hypothetical reader should have the same vocabulary. In other words, symbols present in my work may be reflections of external sources from time to time, but the use of such sources should not impede the journey from being to experience and back again.

Please keep in mind that these are drafts, and I am aware of many, many flaws which I will repair as soon as I learn how.

In Other Words: Demonstration

A tinkling bell and scurrying claws travelled excitedly from the vicinity of my feet to a point level with my head. A few seconds later, both sounds darted back at another oblique angle towards my feet. Opening my eyes, I stared into the pale blue porch light globe which revealed the shadowy roofbeams, floor planks, and the tiny cat who, at some vague point during half-consciousness, I had named snowball out of spite. Like everything else around me, the little guy was an anonymous shade of grayish blue. The only thing that didn’t fit this color scheme within view were the neighboring porchlights that turned everything around them grayish yellow instead. Swinging my feet down from the ratty couch which had
been my bed, I felt the dusty wood under my toes and sat waiting for the staggered black outlines of trees to do something. They disappointed me, so I stumbled inside to the bathroom.

I had spent the evening with a friend and his neighbors who I knew to greater or lesser extents. The girl whose porch we commanded was named Jennifer; she probably still is. She had the feminine ease and grace of a traffic light, and she was stuck on green even though the intersection stayed empty. But when the neighbors' children ran onto the porch all crying their eyes out, she bent down and blew their noses while their mother sipped her beer and stared around like a pretty little flower. Rosy had big fawn's eyes, a voice that thought it might be more comfortable somewhere else, and a body that Glen and Aran had drawled over since the day they moved next door. Rosy's husband Tom was like Glen and Aran, only quicker. Everyone was too drunk in the end to drive me home, so I laid down on Aran's porch to wait for dawn. Aran himself passed out in Jennifer's hedge across the street. When I crossed through his room, however, there he was, which told me I had slept.

Another cat thumped his tail just inside the screen door. He nudged the glass with his head and looked up at me, so I let him out. Snowball had finished chasing roaches, and now sat rigidly on the low wall fronting the porch. The other cat joined him in the same position, their backs directly in front of me, making the two look like a pair of stone lions in front of a library.

I looked up and noticed the sky had jumped to a half dozen brighter shades of blue, matching almost exactly the illumination of the porch light. It was neither light or dark, not breezy or still, hot or cold. I held my hand out and stared at it, waiting until I could see it using only natural light.

Having no thoughts to think, I thought about thinking thoughts—a habit I picked up to make sure that if I ever did have a thought, I wouldn't miss it. It never, never works. I noticed Jennifer's living room was barren of artworks. While my eyes roamed the room, their gaze bumped into Rosy's eyes and something caught like finding the spot where sunlight makes one bright beam into your eyes. She picked up the smaller child, squeezing it as a small girl might hold a teddy bear, before sending it into the next room to play. She probably didn't know what her eyes said, or maybe she did know as she looked at me over the bottle held to her mouth. I enjoyed the look, what there was of it, saluting her with my own beer before turning away. The Greeks and Romans got something dead wrong when they created their gods. They made Bacchus, Dionysus, the god of wine when it should have been Saturn. The god of wine must be the god of all artists and must sit brooding on his throne like Rafael's man; he may run through the fire, but must sit the throne before the wine makes him rise, and rise with knowledge Dionysus lacked.

A train screamed past scarcely two blocks away, passing from right to left with its constant whistle making me think of a hillside being ignited with napalm.
R. Neill Hadder / Senior Honors Colloquium

All the birds awoke at the same time, singing the moment the sky lifted out of total darkness. Their sound was the only thing that moved after that, except one slight breeze in which I smelled, like a half-heard unreported whisper, September. I moved, too, standing up and running a hand over my chest, finding a single cigarette loose in my shirt pocket. I quit smoking, but had bummed one last night anyway which left a bad taste. I bummed another, and it lay unlit in my hand as I stared at the pre-colored light. Then I put it back for safe keeping and passed by the immobile cats.

In Other Words: Commentary

Imagery and "Objectry": The human consciousness demands sufficient sensory images for creating its objects, and supplements actual input with invented details to a certain extent. If I say "car" with no conversational or visual context, then the hearer's mind must conjure up some kind of car, hazy but certainly more distinct than the label "car" alone. Without the consciousness' demand for objects, there could be no fiction, of course, since any phantom reality conjured textually could not effectively engage the audience's imagination. Since I don't generally need to explain this phenomenon in my daily life, and since you can't eat it, I've had to commit the sin of here giving it a label. "Objectry" is the opposite of imagery, for where the latter depends on providing details to bias a reader's conceptualization, the former withholds details so that the reader experiences a low level of reality in the object. Objectry is often preferable to imagery for transitional elements whose existence in the story should remain unaccented. Syllables require time to say or read, and so an object described with more detail will naturally beg greater attention. So, when I describe something, I try to mention first the details which bias the reader to an understanding of why I included the object, and I also describe an object with the time it warrants in the reader's mind. These are the technical reasons for one small element in all writing. I mention them here because, being conscious of them, I try to write extremely tight prose.

Viewpoint: Viewpoint establishes the work's ontological status. There is some one entity telling every story, whether it is an "I" narrator or the author himself speaking about other fictitious characters. How do this story-teller's observations relate to reality? Viewpoint governs all semantics, because only the story-teller's interpretations are made known. Viewpoint can also sublimate the flow of time, since certain kinds of narrators can sequence their story structures according to subjectmatter rather than temporal order.
Discursive Analysis: The first sentence places us squarely within the narrator’s mind by limiting description to what he hears (experiences) rather than what "is" there. By the time he describes the neighbors’ porchlights, he has emphasized grey and monochrome qualities, the only visual images thus far relating normally-vibrant colors somehow detracted by non-color. By this time, beginning with sentence 3, we have moved from strict imagery to some objectry. The cat joins the phenomenological with the objective styles, and also embodies the color/non-color emphasis. By the end of this paragraph, the text has established a few personal insights about the narrator (words like "spite" and "little guy"), has hinted at the narrator’s more general current outlook (color/non-color), and has established a viewpoint which grants the narrator complete power over the sequence and importance of his recollections while illuminating the reader to his biases before introducing non-described objects.

Having established tone, paragraph 2 back-tracks. Notice that female characters are described through analogy, while male characters only receive descriptions relative to one another. Though the women are viewed cynically, the men receive even worse treatment, being constituted by an inferred animal trait.

Paragraph 3’s return to non-revealing, matter-of-fact description accompanies a return to the same time frame. Relating the two, we find that his recollections of either people or the prior events have opinions, whereas his present situation is less dynamic, being in monochromes. He thinks of himself in the position of a library, hinting at a new subject, perhaps.

Paragraph 4 brings a new but related perceptual bias; all colors and outstanding qualities are neutralized, and he waits for something (his hand) to achieve some real distinction.

Paragraph 5 is the first direct notice of the man’s thoughts, perhaps because all external stimuli have been neutralized. Possibly adding meaning to his use of the word "library" earlier, he then expresses frustration arising from metathinking. The two sentences where this occurs, the first genuine revelation of his thoughts, describe the very condition which makes his world seem so vacant. What kind of world does a man see who, instead of thinking thoughts (the structure of experience; I think about food and enjoy it), thinks about the experience itself (I think about the fact that I’m enjoying the food, and forget what I’m eating), what kind of world except one characterized by manifestations of his internal separation. Things achieve some descriptive depth only when the narrator thinks about them later, such as the man on the porch remembering himself at the party.

The same paragraph then dips into the past, relating an incident of eye contact, typically a time where two people communicate on a far deeper level than color/non-color, deeper than a man’s conversation with a cat. Why does he turn from the gaze? He seems to judge its depth, but for some
reason deems it shallow and cuts the connection when nothing more can be achieved. We can see this in the context of his metathinking, a condition from which this judgmental quality springs. In the paragraph’s final sequence, the narrator tries to elevate his awareness to cosmic proportions by comparing Bacchus with Saturn. He compares sensual pleasure to brooding sovereignty, hinting that art springs from the schism developing in artists between normal thought and metathinking. Because of its close relation to the vivid eye contact, and its grammatical connection to gods and artists, alcohol seems to be the narrator’s way to stop metathinking or at least mollify it.

Paragraph 6 returns once more to the porch, with a striking fire image, though the stimulus is sound. Since events are recollected by the narrator according to his own unstated but inferable logic, this sentence illustrates how characterization governs imagery. Having just meditated on his undesirable condition, the loud noise seems a violent echo of his emotions. Note that, since his recollections themselves are organized into this text, which is entirely in the past tense, he is conscious while telling the story of his own condition. After explaining why he cannot experience anything vividly, here comes a train and he, in the text, belies himself while he, the story-teller, realizes his contradictory attitude. By the act of telling the story, the narrator, who now thinks about thinking about thinking thoughts, relates more how he felt than what he thought. In short, he creates a vivid picture of why his world was non-vivid.

Suddenly, following the train image, the previously monochrome world takes on depth. Light is now "pre-colored," and things might begin moving at any time. The second bummed cigarette is a stupidity waiting to happen, but since he might not smoke it, he is perhaps more optimistic than when he bummed it. Yet, all these closing images can scarcely be called positive; they are cautious, pensive, skeptical.

In total, we have here a character sketch which reveals a great deal about who the person is at a certain point in his life. We have absolutely no idea what he does, because nothing happens in the text. He is a character waiting to be used. The text itself says nothing. Anyone reading it in a larger context would gain only a vague sense of presence about the character unless they became obsessed and took a fine-toothed comb to it. But all the pieces would be in place, and the vague senses conveyed would be no less than what we gain from actual experiences in which we watch someone or listen to them, aiming at some unified explanation for why they see the world as they do. With these stylistic premises out of the way, discussion of the stories can involve more substantial and interesting story elements.
The Animal

A man, hair greying and tall stature erect, separated himself from the jungle wall and entered a small clearing. At the meadow’s center rose a stone temple to a height of about five meters. Its pinnacled roof hung low over four simple pillars, then flared suddenly upward beyond the temple’s base. There, the statue of a seated man facing the opposite direction was dimly visible within the morning shadows. The man stepped across a shallow stream, then seated himself on the temple steps, first dropping his assorted baggage on the ground next to him. As he mopped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his cotton tunic, an insect the size of his fist tried to light on his arm. He batted it away. At the same time, a small furry head poked out from the jungle foliage. It blinked and rotated its bat-like ears as the human’s head likewise turned its eyes on the creature. Its head retreated, after which several meters of jungle rippled, slight rustling noises growing quickly faint and disappearing.

A slight tremor preceded an audible roar which grew from the Westward mountain. A dot, gleaming with reflected silver light, passed overhead. The temple shadows crawled slowly down to the bank as the Azure Dragon began to set in the south. Purple clouds streaked the sky above the mountains, gathering a storm front that would push south overnight. The man tightened his grip on the item laid across his knees as a large animal appeared at the clearing’s edge. A dark brown color, it came cautiously out from the thick forest wall and approached the stream on four slender legs. Extending from a long thick neck was a head with sensitive nose and large eyes. Fourteen-pointed antlers rose high above the creature’s head. While the animal ducked to drink, the man raised his implement and squinted down its length. A forelimb splashed in the shallows as something annoyed the animal’s foot. Water dripped from its muzzle as it raised its head once more, head cocked. Suddenly, something buzzed by the man’s ear and a fist-sized flying insect lit on the man’s shoulder, digging its stinger through the shirt’s fabric. Still, he made no motion; his jaw whitened, though his eyes never blinked. The creature now turned side-long to the unswerving sights as it bent to graze. A crack echoed from the temple walls as a smoke trail leading to a spot behind its foreleg seemed to knock the animal on its side. Its legs kicked, then were still. The man slowly rose, picking up his bundle and strolling toward the carcass.

Taking a hatchet from his pack, he removed the animal’s genitals and cracked its pelvis. Similarly, he split the sternum and, removing a heavy knife from his belt, slit the creature down its belly. Instantly, the air swarmed with flies and other, larger insects. In double handfuls, he withdrew the guts, which flying hosts devoured within seconds. Next, he removed the heart and liver, dropping them into a small sack then wrapping this in his pack. Unrolling a blanket, he worked the creature onto the coarse
cloth so that the antlers came within half a meter of a nearby tree. Tying the antlers to the tree, he retrieved the knife and sliced through skin circumscribing the neck. Making two more holes just behind this cut, he passed another length of rope through them beneath the skin and tied the two ends, fashioning a crude yoke. Pausing momentarily, the man dipped his blood-drenched, gore-spotted arms up to their elbows in the stream, rapidly scrubbing them with bunches of grass.

He stood astride the fallen animal, lowering the yoke around his shoulders and digging his Star Fleet-issue boots into the soil. Lifting his face to the eastern hills, he took several preparatory deep breaths. Finally, clenching his jaw and gripping the rope, he began to pull.

The tiger crouched over the treetops and the Dragon retreated over the southern horizon as Fleet Captain Garth of Izar turned around for a final look at the place where he spent his last day on New Siam. Haghounds crowded the clearing’s edge, eyeing his rifle. Their upper mouths hung open, sweat coating their pink tongues, while the mouths on their bellies salivated acridly onto the ground. The carcass still lay upon Garth’s bloodied bedding, its antlers still secured to the tree. Only the neck and head retained their skin, and most of the meat had been stripped. The hide lay nearby. Catching the Dragon’s last slanting rays, the temple’s occupant smiled, a wheel of countless inscribed lines radiating from his raised, open palm.

Trees grew increasingly sparse on the remaining kilometers of road. The track itself consisted of nothing more than a dirt path, rutted with impressions made by ox carts, pack animals, and pedestrians. As the first huts appeared between the trees, three figures paused at the juncture of a side path and waited for Garth.

"Doctor," began a tall woman with an ironic smile and flashing gray eyes, "is your captain in uniform or out? I can’t tell."

A small Chinese man wearing a white lab coat over his uniform stroked his beard and winked in Garth’s direction. "Judging solely by his appearance, Commander Radyas, the man’s heart and mind are on vacation while his legs and feet do only as they are ordered. However, I am more intrigued by the accompanying smell that reminds me of work which I sometimes put off far too long."

"I take your meaning, Shih," Garth said, lowering the bundle of meat to the ground. He then turned to the third party, a pudgy man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a shirt decorated with brightly-painted flowers. "I hunted today, Nai Amphur. The meat is yours." He unslung the weapon from his shoulder and passed it to Tien.

The Nai Amphur waved a delicate hand, and a youth materialized to drag the heavy bundle to a
nearby hut. "Where are the horns, Captain?" Tien inquired.

"I don't take trophies, Nai Amphur." The trio began heading toward smoke rising from the village center. "My thanks, Captain. But we knew you would return on this evening and a feast has already been prepared."

"How did you know?"

"The spirits told me," the man laughed.

"Yes," Garth said, "I think I saw one of those spirits earlier today. One of my own shuttlecraft, in fact. And how was your trip, Doctor?"

"Most intriguing. The Federation has neglected making a proper survey of New Siam. It is an amazingly complex world, more so than the colonizers had intended, I think. And your quest?"

"No more eventful than usual."

"In that case, I should like to hear about it as I mend the rather unpleasant-looking wound on your left shoulder."

Garth's sleeve lay in tattered ruins. Furrows deepened on his brow and cheeks as his mouth turned down at the corners. "I forgot all about that."

Tien glanced at the wound. "You would be dead an hour from now without your doctor's medical supplies."

"Well, thank heavens for modern science. Nasty little bugs, aren't they?"

Tien grimaced. "An indigenous species. We control their numbers, and they control ours and our livestock's."

"But this planet is a member of the Federation," Radyas Kaur exploded. Moreover, it's an Earth colony entitled to all the technology in the known galaxy. Why--"

"Why do we walk to our padi fields every day and trudge beside ox-drawn carts? Why do we live in huts with tin roofs and die from insect bites, and buy meat which has stood rotting in the marketplace all day, covered with flies? Because we have nothing to sell, Commander. The technology is there, but not the means to acquire it."

"But surely Star Fleet--"

"--Has apparently forgotten about us. We are consigned to a computer file. The Federation is becoming a very big place, Commander Kaur, and when someone does see our condition, they either have no power to change it or are afraid of damaging our culture. I think our culture could stand some damaging. I think we could stand a few less starving people. When they gave us this world they said the indigenous species would create a diverse and healthily balanced ecology. But these species are taking
the planet back and we now have nothing with which to stop them." Tien produced an ornate handkerchief and dabbed the sweat on his plump face. "Have you been to Phnom Kailasa, Captain?"

"Yes," he replied, but stopped as they reached the cooking pit. A number of women bent over slabs of meat roasting on spits above the fire. Other women talked in countless languages while stirring the contents of enormous woks. Young children, playing a game with sticks and a melon, darted between the scattered thatched huts and wood buildings on whose verandas old women sat chewing beadle nut with blackened teeth, spitting red saliva into the dirt. The sky had turned a rose color, bathing everything in soft violet hues. Here and there, dogs and pigs roamed the village, playing with children or exploring garbage piled below buildings mounted on low stilts. Just then, a wiry old man, hunched so that his torso ran almost parallel to the ground, approached Garth and touched his sleeve, muttering something in his native language. Both Tien and Shih frowned, touching the earpieces of their universal translators. Garth said a few words in the same language, at which the old man cackled, patted Garth's hand, and shuffled away.

"You never cease to surprise me, Captain Garth." Tien's frown had deepened. "What did the man say?"

"Indeed," Shih began, lightly tapping his chin, "my translator does not know this language, yet you do."

"I learned a few phrases from some people I met recently. Tien, you mean you could not understand that villager?"

"Once I counted sixteen languages spoken by the thirty-two families living in my village. Now I think I count seventeen."

"Yes, I'm sure your universal translator helps a good deal. It looks amazingly like the Star Fleet issue device my people wear, Tien, though it does not bear the Star Fleet emblem. I wonder where it came from."

"What did the peasant say!"

Garth laughed. "He said he heard I throw like one of his wives, and I said I was honored."

Shih's mustache raised fractionally at the ends and his mouth revealed the tips of his teeth. "These were among the few phrases you mysteriously learned? and, if I may, what were you throwing?"

"Spears, doctor. It's a long story." A large group of crew members from the U.S.S. San Francisco congregated around the cooking fires. Garth halted before a dark-skinned woman with long braided hair who leaped to attention. Her empty left sleeve was tucked into her belt.

"How's the arm, Mr. Kaur?" Garth asked.
She raised an eyebrow. "The arm is fine," she said in a lilting voice. "It's the stump on my other side that itches sometimes."

Tien flexed his own arm slightly. "And how did this happen?"

"Klingons boarded my ship and we got in each other's way."

Radyas also spoke. "Captain Garth solved the problem for us. He blew up our ship."

Garth's jaw tightened and he turned toward several nearby crewmen. "Mr. Singh," he began, and three heads turned to him. "Legen Singh," he modified, and a tall man with pale face framed with long black hair came towards him. "Status report, Lieutenant. Are you as good as your word?"

"Aye, sir. Everything repairable here is functional, but we are still not going anywhere without a replacement for that burned-out dylithium crystal, Captain."

Unslinging his pack, Garth withdrew several opaque, finely cut crystals, dusky gray with age. "Then here you are. What will the ship's status be tonight?"

Legen gaped. "Well, we can have warp two all the way to Earth and limited sensors. But subspace and firing control are gone."

"Get on it."

"Aye, sir," Legen said, already on his way. "We'll be awaiting the word."

But the word that escaped Garth at that moment was not in any Star Fleet reg book as something attacked his arm. This time, however, it was Dr. Shih with his medical kit. Garth seated himself on the ground and leaned against a hut's bamboo wall. He piled his gear beside him, all but his pack, which he touched briefly and rested in his lap.

"So you have been to Phnom Kailasa," Tien repeated, seating himself across from Garth.

"Yes, Nai Amphur, I found your lost city in the mountains. For the good Doctor's benefit, and for the crewmembers I see eavesdropping, I'll start from the beginning. As you know, I started three weeks ago with a sack of rice, your slug thrower, and a few supplies. My first officer, kind heart that he is, complained that I was a fool to go into the jungle alone, so he came, too. You've met my first officer, Commander Mudra?" Tien shrugged. "He's tall, has a mane of dark hair, and wears dark glasses to protect his eyes."

"The man with four arms," Tien said simply.

Garth nodded. "We spent the first day travelling through lowland villages and slept in a farmer's barn at the end of the trail. In the morning, the farmer fed us from last night's ashes and we walked to the base of the mountains by nightfall. Mudra brought a phaser rifle along, and we took turns at watch during the night. The next day, we started climbing. Mudra was the first to notice signs that we weren't
alone. He has a better nose for that sort of thing than anyone I've seen. Occasionally, he would swear he heard footfalls and we found imprints where someone had sat and watched us. Later that day, we found a trail and followed it. We decided to camp that night on the trail, but took hypo sprays to remain alert. I remember being wide awake, looking out into the jungle, then suddenly I was being awakened by Commander Mudra. The first thing I noticed was that the leg of his uniform had been shredded and blood oozed from three puncture wounds. He was screaming, jumping around wildly, pointing into the bushes. But whatever had attacked him had already gone. I became aware of a creeping pain and discovered similar wounds on both my own legs. Apparently, poison in the creature's first bite knocked me unconscious before I knew it. She bit Mudra when he attacked her, but her poison was already expelled."

"A nagga," Tien whispered. "You should not be alive."

"I hear that a lot, but I have a tendency to disappoint people that way."

"Excuse me, but would you describe this animal for me, please?" Shih, having completed work on Garth's shoulder, had seated himself so that the three formed a tight circle.

"The nagga," Tien began, lighting a pipe and exhaling puffs of blue smoke, "resembles what, on your world doctor, would be a three-headed snake with legs. However, the so-called 'heads' are merely tendrils with mouths and three sharp fangs, each about eight centimeters long. The creature has smooth skin, impenetrable to our weapons and, aside from tongue-like organs in each mouth, possesses no other sense organs we can find. Its bite is poisonous, killing even faster than the rather annoying insects which your Captain has also encountered and survived. Our doctors say that the poison, always injected in the legs, works its way to the brain and paralyzes the tissues. I have seen the aftermath of their bites. The naggas are extremely rare, and have acquired somewhat of a mystical power over the minds of Siamese peasants. Your first officer's fright is quite understandable."

"Frightened! Hells, the man was outraged. He fired his phaser at the thing from the time it appeared until it vanished without effect. Mudra hates it when that happens. Our tricorder could analyze the poison, but could not offer a cure. We decided to find these phantom watchers while looking for a clearing where we could call for a shuttle to pick us up. The Dragon had meanwhile risen, and we set out, even though the activity sped the circulation of poison to the brain. Shih, stop looking like that; we lived. Scarcely a kilometer up the trail, we accomplished both our objectives."

As they spoke, women carried around portions of food, serving the men first, then women, then taking the remnants to the children. Though the San Francisco's crew remained grouped together, the planet's inhabitants separated themselves; men and women dined separately, while children were forbidden
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to see anyone except the woman who initially brought them their left-overs. The group of three, the first
to be served, sat aloof as Garth continued. "Mudra and I topped a rise, stumbling into a sudden valley
clear of trees and brush. It was obscured by morning fog, so that we could not see its far side. The
temperatures, by the way, declined sharply in the mountains. The area is extremely beautiful, and I
wouldn't be surprised to find a resort of some kind up there one day. We saw a collection of longhouses
far across the valley, with cultivated fields and gardens spreading out around it, almost reaching our
position. Each house was perhaps thirty meters long, mounted on low stilts much like your own huts, and
had a wide porch stretching the length of the house's front. A man, who had apparently been waiting for
us, approached, held out his hand, and introduced himself in perfect English as Kambu Lon Kim. As it
turned out, his grandparents both attended Oxford University on Earth and had emigrated here as teachers.
He then offered us a deal. Pointing at our bandages, he said he would allow us to live if we temporarily
surrendered all our possessions and listened to what he had to say. When we agreed, two more people
appeared out of nowhere to take our things. Simultaneously, I noticed something trotting towards us out
of the forest. It was a nagga, and I owe Mudra a medal for the way he restrained himself from taking
back the phaser and vaporizing everything in sight. Something in Kim's eyes told me this was somehow
part of the deal. He and another man approached the animal confidently and did something with it while
shielding their actions from us. The beast just stood there, shivering and sort of sweating. Kim returned
with some of the nagga's blood and told us to drink it. It seems the nagga's blood contains the antidote
for its poison. The courtship ritual of these creatures involves both partners sinking the fangs of all three
heads into the other's necks. In this way, the poison is injected and countered, following which the pair
is mated for life. We drained the glass, and Kim said that neither this nor any other nagga would attack
us henceforth, as we were now honorary naggas, so to speak. The blood also makes certain native
vegetation suitable for consumption."

"And it goes very nice with a stalk of celery and Saurian brandy," a voice broke in. Mudra
appeared around the corner, holding a plate of food, a bottle from ship's stores, a pair of chop sticks, and
a napkin. "I'd mass produce the stuff, but there's a problem with bottling it, you see. It clots rather
rapidly." He joined their circle as he continued. "I just fed a young child his dinner. Tien, why do you
force them to eat alone and give them the scraps? I fed him from my plate. I hope you don't mind my
having seconds. The highlanders feed their small one first. Still, for all their provincial charm, they're
all thin as bamboo shoots."

Glaring at Mudra, Tien opened his mouth. Garth quickly spoke. "We stayed quite a number of
days with these people. They are an independent lot who have learned to adapt to their surroundings.
R. Neill Hadder / Senior Honors Colloquium

After drinking the blood, he led us to his village, where we spent the day on a tour of their way of life. They are simple farmers, but possess a surprising degree of education about Earth and its accomplishments. We talked with Kim that night until the Dragon rose...

Working the sparker into life, Kim ignited the oil lantern hanging beside the door. He then sat in a woven chair like those occupied by Garth and Mudra. They sat on the longhouse veranda, from which steps descended a meter to the ground. His face stood out in flickering shadows as he spoke.

"How long has your ship been on this planet that you call 'New Siam,' Captain?"

"About ten of your days. We're trapped here without proper materials to make repairs. Hopefully, even if our engines are irreparable, we can salvage communications gear and contact Star Fleet to be rescued."

"What do you call your world, then," asked Mudra, almost invisible in the darkness except for flashing white teeth, "if not New Siam?"

"For the moment, I call it Ras Algethi Four. That is, after all, its astronomical designation. As for a more meaningful title, I believe it will find its own name, in time. Siam was a reference imposed on all our ancestors' homelands by Europeans as if these nations had no other identities. The region was also called Asia Minor, Indo-China, and many other pejoratives. These labels have not been heard on Earth, you understand, for four hundred years. But then scientists mastered anti-matter, and technology appeared to offer ways to solve all Earth's problems. So what was to be done with the poor countries of the planet who'd nothing to contribute but hunger and thirst? Well, gentlemen, here we are. They encouraged us to colonize this world, saying that everyone would eat plentifully and enjoy full citizenship in the U.F.P. And they called it New Siam, a convenient name for their catch-all solution. The results are evident. Earth is a beautiful planet, thanks to this and similar maneuvers. But technology does not mean technology for all. And where there is progress, there are those pushed by the wayside. There we stand, the disinflicted; there we have always been."

Garth rose, walking a few paces to the railing, and turned his face to the stars. "After hearing the complaints of Nai Amphur Tien and others in the community below, I've sent out several of my crew to survey the planet. What will they find, Kim?"

"Machines built to process cotton and rice now rusting into the ground, a fully-functional magnetic conveyer made from titanium durasteel with weeds creeping between the rails because there is no cargo, a system of roads which gleamed until native bacteria learned to overcome it... The native ecology proved
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most unique, Captain. It seems the surveyors who told us how to manage this planet were left scratching
their heads as their technology fell to the strength of a blind dynamism. Understand that the colonists at
first evinced no lack of expertise; the science failed them, and now the lowlanders do not know what to
do except buy new products on the black market. They have become great buyers and sellers, the
lowlanders, though they've forgotten everything else. And your team may find one other thing, too, if
they look in the right place."


Garth face the younger man. "I'm interested in hearing of this lost city. It is, in fact, my
destination. A modern city gone to ruin--it's my best chance to find what I need to repair my vessel. But
first tell me your solution to this world's problems. Today you've shown me a culture which has learned
to survive in the absence of Federation technology. Yet you yourself appear more educated than anyone
I've met here. Will you lead your group to an existence without modern medicines, without adequate
protection against nature?"

"Captain and Commander, you belong to a tradition which does not function here. We cannot
look at this world through the notions conceived a hundred parsecs away. That view binds us. It blinds
us to our real surroundings. We still exist here under mythology's sway because that's where knowledge
begins. But we have an advantage over the progenitors of your world--"

"I'm not an Earth man," muttered Garth.

"We know ourselves, Garth. And we know the traps which lead one to think that what lies out
there," he gestured at the sky "is where the answers lie. We are finding a harmony with our surroundings
and will fit whatever tools we have into its design. One day we will stand before the Federation, if we
choose to do so at all, displaying a civilization the depth of which Earth has not produced since its
beginnings. And yes, we educate our children, telling them all that we know in hopes that their fertile
minds can make sense from what we counted only as confusion. However, we are thankfully forbidden
by the nature of the planet from the temptation to conquer nature rather than live with her. Have your
starships made you wiser, Captain, or have they simply made it easier to leave the past behind? But now
it is time to discuss legends. Tell me, what have you heard about Phnom Kailasa?"

"When the United Earth Council decided to found this colony, they established a high-tech port
city on the other side of that ridge." Garth gestured at the dim imposing shape of Mount Kailasa's peak,
rising kilometers above the village. "By creating the space port, New Siam would remain an active part
in Earth's starward expansions. They carved out a reservoir several kilometers wide called the Bekheng
and levelled the ground to accommodate it. From that point, the details given me by the lowlanders
become sketchy. They say President Indravarmen commissioned a vast idol to be erected at the city’s center. It rose higher than any other structure, and joined Indravarmen to the god of the mountain, sovereign of power. And when this temple-mountain was complete, Indravarmen named it after himself and summoned the powers dwelling within it. This occurred during the season of long nights, when the Dragon and Tiger inhabit the sky simultaneously. The idol glowed, lighting up the sky, and then the god’s minions engulfed the city, driving out the people. It seems the mountain god is a god of destruction and of power. When summoned, the god’s fist turns eventually against the summoner. The city dwellers took to the hills and lowlands, beginning once again as they had lived on Earth."

Kim chuckled. "You tell a good story, Captain--very objective. You make a good anthropologist, but I suppose you’d have to, with your job. Still, I like that story. The mythology probably reflects how the people felt more accurately than any other explanation. Even so, allow me to frame the tale in the words of another mythology, the same science which forged the city in the first place. President Indravarmen did put his name to a structure standing in the middle of the city. He was fond of naming things after himself. However, the so-called idol was a matter/anti-matter reactor which, when operational, would power the entire city. My grandparents helped install that reactor, and I am convinced they did it correctly. What happened on the night when they stood behind the President during the opening ceremony has yet to be explained. Yes, bands of illumination did run up the reactor’s surface, casting the landscape in a bluish light. And as the structure thrummed with life, all the beasts of the air and land pounced upon the scene. Security quickly disposed of these initial invaders, and the ceremony was concluded. But later that night, with the reactor humming in the distance, wave upon wave of this planet’s spawn battered their way into the city. Imagine the contented citizenry at rest in their tower rooms overlooking the Bekheng or ‘sea of milk’ as it is also called, and seeing the pale emerald lake erupt with a million slimy forms wriggling up the tower walls. And swarms of flying things smashing the broad windows with their views of the mountain. These people were not space farers, mind you, but ordinary families--women, children... The plague lessened when daylight finally arrived. Creatures still arrived by the hundreds, but hundreds could be managed. No one linked the plague to the reactor, and indeed it is only speculation on my part. That night, the waves of clawed and fanged flesh returned. Countless hundreds died; the streets could not be kept free of bodies, both man and beast. Finally, the buildings were evacuated, the reactor shut down, and the city surrendered to New Siam. During our last communication with the Federation, we asked them to explain these events. They responded that their scientists had not reached a consensus."

"Did the animals stop coming?” Mudra asked.

"They still come. At least, the immigration had not halted ten years ago, when I was there."
"Did you see the reactor?" Garth inquired.

Kim pulled out an object suspended from a band of leather around his neck which had lain previously beneath his shirt. Though the stone’s cut edges were worn by handling, it remained recognizable, and both Star Fleet officers started. Kim turned the crystal in the light, sending rainbows cascading over its surfaces. "I am the only one who understands the significance of this. I do not believe there is another person on New Siam who knows what a dylithium crystal is."

"I have to go there," Garth said softly.

"It is very dangerous. Am I correct in believing that both of you are quite willing to risk your lives in the attempt?"

"Our ship is grounded. We can’t leave without a new crystal. I would take yours if it were not damaged."

Kim sighed, dropping the stone beneath his shirt once more. "You are a starship captain. One would think that makes you the master of your course. Yet, I think the ship masters you. Very well, I’ll arrange an expedition. Meanwhile, enjoy the rest." Just then, as Kim was standing, a beast resembling a meter-tall bat with a lion’s mane and primate face lit on the railing near Mudra’s head. Kim motioned skyward with one hand. With a piercing squawk, the thing extended its wings, becoming airborne once more. A fowl breeze blew back Commander Mudra’s hair in its wake.

"What," breathed Mudra, "was that?"

"A carrier bat. Never mind what it carries. They’re mostly harmless, though you’ll see a great many of them on the other side of Kailasa."

"You told it to leave," Garth said. "You communicated with it."

"Many of the animals here are very intelligent."

"And the nagga?" interrupted Mudra.

"I’m not sure. It seems to have purposes of its own."

"But you controlled it, too. I saw you do it at the blood ritual." Garth’s voice rose. "Did you tell it to attack us as well?"

"No, I did not. She has her own purposes, as I said. She chose you and Commander Mudra for something—I don’t know what. But your special providence forced us to take you in, an action we were reluctant to do. Had she not intervened, I doubt you would have succeeded in your mission." A pause followed during which no one spoke. "Now," Kim resumed, "The Dragon will rise soon, and I have work to do. I’ve arranged for you both to occupy a bilik adjacent to my own where you can sleep today." He took the lantern from its hook, leading the officers to one of the many doors opening onto the veranda.
The lamplight revealed the softness evident in the man’s Asian face.

"How old are you?" Garth asked suddenly.

"I am thirty-two in local years, or twenty-four by Earth standards."

"Are you married?"

"I have two wives who are sisters, one much older than I. Come, Captain, why do you look at me that way?"

Mudra laughed, rubbing each forearm rhythmically with an opposing hand. "He’s a sentimentalist. Trust me, the Izarians wouldn’t think twice, but Garth has lived too long among paler Earth people."

Kim shrugged. "It is a practical concern. Now, if you will follow me."

Two days later, they set out on a journey around the mountain’s peak. Kim’s aged father-in-law, a tiny wizened man who could outlast any of the others on the trail, had led the previous expedition ten years ago, and so served as guide. One of Kim’s wives, a sturdy middle-aged woman, completed the party. For four days, they climbed obliquely up Mount Kailasa, never seeing the sky except when passing through occasional clearings or plains blanketed with ancient lava flows. At these times, the peak loomed overhead, wreathed in clouds, evoking inevitable personifications from the travelers. Occasionally, beasts stalked the group, but the highlanders always managed to turn them away without bloodshed. Mudra retained his phaser rifle, while Garth carried Tien’s slug thrower. The others carried spears or crossbows.

At one point, Kim asked Garth why he had not brought a phaser rifle as well. "They’re heavy. Also, that phaser will be useless baggage before we’re finished; the ship is the nearest place to recharge it. Besides," he added, "Phasered meat tastes horrible, as Mudra will be the first to admit. If I’d brought a phaser, he would have brought Tien’s rifle instead."

On the third night, they camped not far from a stream fed by the Bekheng. Further down, it widened to a river that forked and ran on either side of the Nai Amphur’s village. Kim headed away from camp in the twilight hours between nocturnal and diurnal hunting, eventually seating himself on a secluded patch of bank. Taking a small bowl, he dipped it in the mist-shrouded stream and brought it back half-filled with green water. With clay from the bank, he molded a small hill in the center of his tiny lake. Fixing a candle in the clay, he ignited it with his sparker and covered the pot with a domed lid. From a hole in the lid’s center, a smoke column rose. The water inside, too, would lie now shrouded in a smoky mist. While morning grew, Kim sat with folded hands before his creation. When he finally rose, dismantling the device, he noticed a trio of carrier bats leaning on the knuckles of their forelimbs,
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watching him intently.

The old man led them to a mountain pass, from which they emerged in the evening to see the city. They looked into the valley while the Dragon and Tiger stood overhead. The buildings shone brilliantly white against the lavender sky. Structures spread out in concentric rings from one focus, the massive domed reactor tower, but the city ended abruptly where a living community would spawn more random additions. One set of shadows fell across the emerald lake stretching kilometers from the city’s edge. Opposing shadows shaded the plain which, surrounded by the uppermost peaks of mountains, lay under lava flows and snow. A cloud front struggled to raise itself over peaks on the far side. "Will that bring a storm tonight?" Garth asked.

Kim consulted the old man. "He says it will be a very bad storm. We should camp here where there is some shelter from the wind."

"Or in the buildings down there," Garth added.

"No!" Kim shouted.

"Won’t the animals pass through here just like us? Look at the tracks and dung on this trail. At least there are doors we might can seal down there."

Kim consulted his elder once more. "All right," he relented. They descended the rocky slope, the old man far in the lead. "You are sure that one is your father, and no demon?" Mudra said.

The woman laughed, replying in broken English. "Sometimes I’m sure, other times not."

They found themselves walking on paved streets. The buildings engulfed them, yet no signs of animal life appeared. Mudra, who was walking point, craned his neck far back to better examine a walkway crossing the street high overhead. His phaser barked, and a bundle of charred flesh hit the ground a few meters in front of them. It had been a carrier bat. Suddenly, the buildings on either side erupted with living things, as did the street before and behind. Slinking from doorways, leaping and flying from all directions, bounding out from alleyways, New Siam visited itself upon Garth and his party with a new terrifying aspect. Mudra drained his phaser while Garth exhausted an entire ammunition clip in efforts to hold back the plague. The woman killed a pack of haghounds one by one, halting the last one’s open-jawed lunge at her husband. Meanwhile, the old man’s spear jabbed octopus-like creatures scrambling up their bodies. Kim led them to a windowless structure sealed off by durasteel doors through which they tumbled, slamming the gates behind them. The battered group collapsed in total darkness.

"Is everyone here?" Garth demanded. The others responded as they all checked themselves for injuries, finding only shallow wounds. Garth put his ear to the door. "I can’t hear anything; it’s too thick." Clicking on a flashlight, he began scanning the area. The room was a fifteen-meter square spottily coated
Landscape murals and portrait paintings decorated the walls. Kim, who had been examining the by-now antique art work, pivoted and pointed a finger at Mudra. "You started this."

"Probably. And we’ll end it, too, before we leave." Mudra showed his teeth as he slammed home the last remaining power pack into the phaser rifle’s chassis.

"They’re animals, Kim," Garth said. "The noise may have startled them into doing something, but it was a matter of time.” Kim grunted.

Suddenly, a dull low roar shook the building. The Star Fleet officers were instantly on their feet, darting glances toward the ceiling. From the shadows, the woman’s father cackled something in his native language. "He says you have guilty nerves and that it is only a storm breaking outside," she translated.

"Nevertheless," Garth said, still scanning the room, "I think it’s time to scout this place. Mudra." He nodded toward doors at the room’s rear which opened onto a stairwell.

"Set that thing on stun this time, if you don’t mind," grumbled Garth as they climbed. Mudra grinned.

The stairs offered access to the next level while also continuing upward. Motioning for his first officer to continue climbing, Garth passed through a door and found himself in an apartment’s living room. An antique clock faced him from the mantel, which stood over a holographic fireplace heating unit. Opening the clock face, Garth idly turned the hands. The clock emitted faint ticking sounds. Low sofas and floor cushions lay strewn across a floor steeped in multi-colored rugs. On the floor before the viewscreen sat a plate of bones, halfway turned to dust. Light shined from beneath a closed door. Cautiously, Garth opened the sliding panel, behind which loomed an enormous red eye regarding him. It was the Tiger, brooding under a brow of purple storm clouds. The long window, which faced the Bekheng, also showed jagged tormented waves. Lightning flashed almost continually across the sky, and the thunder had become a constant undertone. Extinguishing his superfluous light, Garth examined the bedroom. He sank down on the bed to gaze at something small hanging on the wall and lingered there, reaching out with shy fingers to touch the intricately carved lines.

After a night spent on a large apartment’s sofas and beds, they once again gathered around the steel door, weapons readied. At Garth’s tense nod, Kim and his wife threw open the doors, jumping back immediately to allow the Captain and Mudra to cover the opening. Sudden gusts of rain assailed them on a cold wind, but the street was entirely vacant. A tide of dirty water swirled around their ankles as they cautiously emerged, still unconfronted. The old man spoke in awe-filled whispers to no one in particular.
"What’s he saying?" Garth eyed the rooftops suspiciously.

"He says the Tiger has spared us, or has other plans," Kim mused.

"Superstition," Garth growled.

"Religion, Captain. He does not speak of the sun alone."

"It’s daylight, and raining. That’s why they left."

"Perhaps you are right, though I doubt it. Even so, the Tiger has spared us."

"Where are the animals we killed?" the woman wondered.

"Perhaps," Kim smiled, "the rain washed them away."

"Regardless," Garth rejoined, "there’s a goal. Let’s be done with this." He nodded at the reactor tower piercing the low clouds a few kilometers ahead. They slogged through the empty streets for an hour, passing under waterfall skywalks and slipping across frozen conveyors. The rain endured.

At one point, a few tiles clattered to the pavement on their left. Looking up, Garth’s field of vision filled with an enormous falling block of iron scarcely a meter above him. The woman screamed. It crashed with a tremendous jarring sound at the point where Garth had stood in the instant he saw the object.

Kim, rubbing his chin, spoke reflectively in the midst of startled silence. "Isn’t this what you would call a... strong box, or safe?"

"Indeed," Mudra frowned, still scanning the upper cityscape, "Quite an antique. And I suppose the Tiger dropped it from the heavens?" He asked permission to search the buildings.

"We won’t find anything now, the place is a labyrinth. There’s nothing to do but go on and keep a sharp eye."

When the grand piano struck the pavement in discordant surrender half an hour later, Kim stood even more in wonder. "I never thought I would see one," he exclaimed to Garth, who was sitting up after having dived for the pavement. "It’s like Odysseus being visited by the Greek gods!"

Garth’s next comment expressed his lack of intellectual interest. He climbed to his feet, rubbing his shoulder where he landed. Turning to the others, he asked "Did you hear it?" He had nearly to shout above the downpour.

"Yes," Mudra said, "Heavy breathing and running feet."

"where?"

"They echoed. But it would have to be very close, as the rain is making it difficult to hear one another."

"I suspect we’ll find whoever is doing all this spring cleaning right in there." The tall buildings
which had surrounded them abruptly ended to make room for a moat stretching out of sight to either side. A bridge spanned the water, allowing the road to pass between sixty-meter high towers flanking the roadway. Curving back from these towers alternated stacked open galleries and smaller towers housing the secondary generators. Connected to this outer rim by skywalks and platforms rose the reactor itself, a stolid monument rising beyond the eye’s ability to follow. Hydraulic works, powered only by gravity, still pulled water from the Bekheng over huge turbines to fall in pools surrounding the reactor base. It likewise pulsed just beneath the structure’s skin, as could be seen through transparent panels running up its sides. "Where are the crystals stored, Kim?" Garth had to shout in earnest this time over the combined rain and pounding of water through sluice gates and screeching turbines.

Kim motioned with his hand, leading the way down to the area floor. The reactor coolant tanks to either side spilled over the pavement, which now grew moss on which they occasionally slipped. The road sloped downward, running between concrete walls which normally kept the waters parted. They arrived at the reactor base, where a sealed sliding door confronted them. "Normally," Kim informed them, "access was provided by that door. But it is impossible to open without power."

"Well, then how did you get in before?"

"An emergency maintenance hatch lies in the floor of the very room we seek, and it is mechanically operated. Perhaps it’s even still open from ten years ago. But I was a boy then, and could swim better, not to mention hold my breath longer."

"You mean we have to enter from underwater?" Mudra sounded incredulous. He looked up and down the structure, seeking another solution. "I see walks leading in at several points."

"High above, Commander. The crystals lie at the base, and the intervening levels comprise a maze where a man can be lost for a very long time. From experience, I say I do not recommend it."

"All right," Garth said, handing the gun to Mudra. Turning to Kim, he accepted a spear. "You’re coming with me, Kim. You know the place." Without further delay, they leaped onto the tank rim and dove. Two minutes later, they emerged blue and gasping in a stale-smelling chamber echoing with the water’s slap against the hatch. Kim surfaced first, then Garth, both men catching their breath clinging to the hatchway. "I was beginning to think you had gotten us lost, Kim."

"Who, me?" Kim groaned softly with exhaustion, then hauled himself out following Captain Garth. In one hand, Garth still held the highlander’s barbed wooden spear. With the other, he took a flashlight from his belt and broke the utter darkness. The floor lay strewn with corroding pipes and rusted panels, all of which had fallen from the maze of workings which lined the ceiling. One door was open, leading into blackness, while three other doors stood closed around the room’s six sides. Kim opened a
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wall panel, revealing a setting of four dylithium crystals. Walking further, he opened a second panel to reveal another setting which lacked one crystal. Garth leaned his weapon against the wall and had Kim hold the light. Working quickly, the Izarian retracted a setting’s connectors and withdrew several crystals, careful not to scratch their immaculate surfaces. "There are more behind other panels," Kim offered.

"These will be more than enough. I--" His words were cut off as a knife flew past his ear, landing in a bed of wires centimeters from his head. They whirled just in time for Kim’s beam to glimpse a figure disappearing through the open doorway. Grabbing the spear, Garth hurled himself after it.

He pounded down the utterly black corridor to the staccato ring of his heels and the other’s loud, panting breath. The noise echoed deafeningly in the steel passage. Suddenly, Garth’s orientation to the sound changed; the monster had turned. A breathless laugh came from all directions. Not slackening his pace, Garth veered right, narrowly avoiding a wall. The voice grew fainter. Garth reversed his direction, increasing his speed when he discovered another turn-off. His shoulder crashed into the right-hand wall, sending him reeling. Setting off again, he put a hand on the wall, which curved inward. The panting grew louder again as Garth redoubled his efforts. Then it turned again, seeming to climb. Though he had slowed slightly with anticipation, Garth’s foot still jarred against the steps and he nearly lost his balance. As it was, his other leg came forward, boot contacting a sharp corner and, arms spread for balance, he awkwardly lunged up the stairs. It was scarcely a meter away now. Garth was lead through several more sharp turns, growing near and more distant to his quarry by degrees, until at last a faint glimmer exposed his prey’s outlines. It appeared to be a small human child. Nevertheless, as Garth exploded into the gray rainy daylight, he paused to aim. The figure ran up a steeply-curving walk which met a perimeter tower. Garth leaned back, then his arm came forward, body pivoting, sending the spear on a graceful arc that sailed over the tiny shape, impacted the tower’s wall, and fell from view. Though its footing had been sure until then, the runner slipped on the rain-slick bridge and sprawled beneath the tower overhang. Garth sprinted the remaining distance and crouched with fists raised. It might have been a boy of twelve or a three-hundred-year-old man. It had no hair, was naked, and its skin covered the tiny skeleton like loose sack cloth. It met Garth’s gaze steadily with colorless eyes.

"Can you speak?" Garth scowled. His chest heaved with exertion.

"Well enough," the apparition replied in a voice like grinding stones.

"Why did you try to kill me?"

"Because you are here."

"Who tried to kill me on the road?"

"This one did."
"That's impossible. You couldn't move a piano. Who was it?" Then, after receiving no response, "Why attack me at all?" There came the clattering of boots up a metal staircase and Mudra arrived, followed by the old man. "Why was I attacked?" shouted Garth again.

"You built the city. Earth people built the city."

"I'm not an Earth man!"

"You are an Earth man." Though Garth was shouting angrily, the other's voice remained a monotone.

Mudra snickered. "I wouldn't count on that as a point to win your debate, Captain. Let's kill this thing; I hate wordy demons."

The monster gripped Garth's arm like a vice. "I curse you, Earth man. I curse you for intruding on Mount Kailasa one hundred and fifty years ago. You are marked--you, by whom gods destroy, will be destroyed."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Let me kill it, Captain. Then we can go home."

Garth looked around. Mudra gazed with disgust on the creature, but the old man looked into Garth's eyes with an enigmatic black-toothed grin. A long pause followed, silent except for the falling rain and occasional thunder. Garth straightened. His voice grew quiet. "Let him go."

The old man's grin widened. He began dancing lightly from foot to foot. When Mudra opened his mouth to retort, Garth interrupted. "That's an order, Commander. Let the poor creature go."

The thing on the floor spoke again, looking into Garth's eyes. "You have come, but you have gone as well. This one delivers unto you therefore only half a curse."

"Then deliver your curse and go away," Garth snapped. "The mountain god will hold a throne out to you on his palm, and then the fist will close."

Mudra laughed outright. "My grandsire's breeding woman cursed better than that!"

The Captain's face, however, appeared more grave. "In my trade, if one is not destroyed then he is victorious."

The apparition's mouth hung slightly open, revealing rotten gums and discolored tongue. Its mouth seemed not to move at all as it replied. "Not this time, Garth of Izar. Not this time." The eyes never moved from Garth's face, and stared with pupils the size of pinpricks standing out from the hairless skull.

"That's not a curse," Shih interjected, "it's a fortune cookie. It could mean anything!"
The Animal

Garth shrugged and completed his story. "He leaped from the tower, then, and disappeared beneath the choppy surface of the moat. Later, we saw him heading with an amazing stroke into the Bekheng. With Kambu’s help, we found a communications center with enough potential power to cut through the weather and the mountain. Using the power from the phaser, we called Ensign Debussy, who arrived with a shuttlecraft a few hours later. He dropped the highlanders and myself at the mountain village before resuming his survey mission with Mudra taking command. I stayed because there were more things I wanted to know about the whole situation. Unfortunately, I found few answers. Three days ago, I started down the mountain again." Garth’s entire story had been delivered in sketchy details, requiring no more than half an hour to tell.

Shih now spoke. "What your friend said of the planet’s condition is true. We found abandoned technology everywhere. Commander Radyas, however, did restore subspace communications, though judging by what you’ve said I would think it unwise to use it unless in an emergency. The war is over, by the way. The Klingons have begun negotiating a peace. The Farrigate is in the Axanar system now discussing terms. Morale has been extremely high."

"Who’s conducting negotiations?"

"A young commander named James Kirk."

"Who? Don’t tell me the Federation sent some kid." This time it was Shih’s turn to shrug.

the Nai Amphur broke in agitatedly. "Back to the subject, gentlemen, is this Kim Lon Kambu really planning to turn his back on everything the Federation has to offer, starting all over when he could fight to retrieve what his grandfather built?"

"In a word, yes." Garth of Izar clasped his hands behind his head and stretched. "But in fact," he continued, "he hasn’t ignored the Federation, just set it aside."

"And what is he going to construct this civilization with, his imagination?"

"Really, Tien, you answer your own questions. I see the entertainment is beginning." Without further ado, he rose and joined ranks of spectators intent on a dance performance. Loudspeakers broadcast tinny recorded music as three men walked on stage, all rhythmically moving in pace with one another so that they acted almost like each other’s shadows. They glided up to three richly-dressed women whose cheeks glowed with sandalwood. The men bowed. The women appeared frightened, and the three men grew aggressive. Someone in the audience whispered to Nai Amphur Tien, inquiring what was happening.

"It is a dance of the nagga," Tien explained. "The beast attacks the three Siamese princesses." The women finally returned the nagga's bow, hiding their faces behind their lavish fans. They then
extended their fans to brush the nagga’s head-like appendages, causing the nagga to sink to its knees. "Our classical dance is so refined," Tien continued. "Look how their combat is so delicately symbolized. The women fight back, charming the serpent. See how the nagga now lies at their feet, killed by her charms. Now the people come rejoicing and worshipping the princesses." More players took the stage, bowing to the women at whose feet lay the nagga.

Shih leaned close to Garth’s ear, whispering "I think we have another explication, thanks to your narrative."

Garth nodded. "They recite this myth in the mountains. The princesses don’t defeat the nagga, they’re seduced by him. And he gives the women rule over the entire world, humans and beasts." The dance over, Garth and Shih added their applause to the sudden den. "It’s time I changed into my uniform."

"Fleet Captain Garth dons his entire uniform at once for the first time in a month," Shih chuckled. "Yes, the crew will take that as a signal."

An hour later, with the San Francisco’s crew managing somehow not to be quite intoxicated, Garth gathered his possessions and made for the landing site located a kilometer from the village. Shih caught up to him on the way. "Do not think I have forgotten about that bundle which you have held in your hand all day. I am extremely curious as to what it might be and why you overlooked it in your picturesque story."

"Later, Shih."

In a field of scorched grass and withered trees stood the light cruiser U.S.S. San Francisco. It had landed a month ago, crippled almost beyond repair, threatening never to fly again. Now her eighty-person crew lined either side of the gang plank. The ship itself squatted on four fat landing pylons, its warp nacelles stretching high and wide beyond the flattened bullet-shaped hull. As Fleet Captain Garth of Izar entered the clearing, officers and men snapped to attention, black ashy clouds rising around their heals. "It’s a good crew," Garth said quietly.

"All present and awaiting the word, sir!" Mudra stood out front, one hand saluting militarily while its neighbor extended a clenched fist.

"The word is given," Garth rejoined, returning the salute. "Stations and full steam toward home."

Dr. Shih grasped the fine chain drooped over the teacup’s side, withdrawing a dripping metal ball.
"There," he said, setting the cup on a table beside the Captain’s bunk, "This will make you sleep the sleep of the innocent." The corners of Shih’s mouth lifted, disturbing the dangling ends of his gray mustache.

Garth sat up, taking the cup wearily. "What’s this, more of your exotic Chinese herbs, doctor?"

"It’s camomile tea," he explained.

"Ca-mo-mile." Garth tried the word on his tongue before doing the same to his tea. He shook his head and sipped. "I doubt that your tribal medicines are sanctioned by the Star Fleet medical handbook."

Shih smiled again, turning his attention to an object hanging over the Captain’s cluttered desk. "And this is what you liberated from Phnom Kailasa?"

"Yes," Garth sighed. "It bothers me, Shih. Still, I like it, though I can’t say why. I’m not even sure why I took it."

"Perhaps exactly because it bothered you. I have yet to see you react with fear or confusion sufficient to the occasion at hand. Tonight, for instance."

"Don’t remind me."

"But you showed no fear or hasty judgement, even when the alien ship powered its weapons. I believe the aliens saw that, and that is why we are alive. Or, as another example, the joy ride on which you took us during what history now calls the Battle of Axanar."

"Were you scared, Shih?"

"I would have liked to discuss the matter first, before we entered the asteroid field at warp speed."

"Yes, well we got out of that one, too. And now we’re three days from port. Trust in the spirits protecting me, doctor. Even I’m gradually coming to believe in them."

"I believe only in my ancestors, and they have yet to advise me to hurl myself into a wall of flying rocks seven hundred light years from home."

"Are you leaving the ship when we make planetfall?"

"No," Shih replied, stroking his beard. "and neither is anyone else. They’re all choosing to remain under your command." Garth spread his hands wide and raised his eyebrows. "Still," Shih resumed, "I think the ship is leaving us. She’ll never leave port again, Legen tells me."

Garth cupped his hands behind his head and stretched out once more, looking at his sparse cabin’s newest decoration. "Are you familiar with that chunk of wood over there?" he asked, nodding at the wall.

"Yes, I’ve seen it many times. It was originally carved by a man named Albert Duer on Earth during the sixteenth century. This is a good copy," he asked, nodding at the wall. "I thought you would have trouble sleeping after tonight’s events. However, I can see it is me who needs the herb tea, not you. If you will
excuse me, I also have a lot of work tomorrow. During our last extended stop, the men caught every disease I can name, plus a few which I believe they invented expressly to torment me."

"Good night, Shih." When the doors slid shut. Garth drained his cup and sat at his desk. Clicking a button on the computer console, he began to speak.

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 1024.1: Tonight, we made contact with a life form never before encountered by humans. We almost died. Presently, the ship stands six days out from Ras Algethi, a binary system containing the until-now lost Earth colony New Siam, and we are three days from Earth. At twenty-three hundred hours, I was awakened by a red alert. My turbolift temporarily lost power when an energy blast hit the ship. When I arrived on the bridge, the alien spacecraft that had fired on us lay scarcely a hundred thousand kilometers off our bow. It had come out of nowhere, and we had no shields, no weapons, and no subspace. Engineering had offered me warp power or phasers, but not both. I chose warp, thinking to make an escape if the enemy fired again. With only one operational turret, a conflict would be like an animal offering horns against a well-armed hunter. We sweated through two hours of blind anticipation while the saucer-shaped craft circled us. If it had chosen to destroy us, there was nothing we could have done. Then we were hailed. It seems the aliens mistook us for a ship, probably an Orion slave runner, which had attacked it earlier without provocation. We broke contact peacefully, promising further amicable negotiations in the future. Let these records show, if nothing else will, that for over two agonizing hours, I believed I and my entire crew were about to die and I was helpless to prevent it. The fighting chance is something I can always use to my advantage. But this time I was declawed, and I was terrified. I shouldn't have felt fear at all, of course. After all, I haven't won any throne, unless it is my command.

Closing down his terminal, Captain Garth cradled his head and gazed at the Duer wood carving. A medieval lance-bearing armored knight rode with his back to a distant castle. To the knight's left rode a devil, and on his other side trotted a dog. Behind them, on a shaggy pony, rode the grinning cloaked and bearded skeleton, Death.

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The chimes atop the clockmaker's shop begin to toll, ringing flatly like the clattering of pans, a cry at midnight floating off as if in search of something, someone. The notes are borne out across the
town until silence drowns them, held by a wind blowing cool on chimneystood houses and shops on the town square. From Billy’s Brewery now emerge the staggering unconscious feet of a newly-ordained brotherhood who, not withstanding their scattering at the curb without backward glances, consider their lodge with secret comfort as a place of confession and redemption. These are the regulars, known by first names or new names, not seeing through beer and music the cool wind scatter an aging post oak’s leaves across the courthouse lawn. The twelfth chime calls out on the October breeze, echoing among building walls surrounding the town square, from Billy’s Brewery to the United Methodist Church, to other points in the spire’s rotating midnight shadow, all the way to the Ashram’s secluded hilltop yard where, one by one, greasy half-naked figures emerge from a dome of blankets and well-carved sticks; they groan and flop writhing upon the ground like the first fish crawling from primordial oceans. A pause ensues while the prone men and women experience the mud and air with ecstatic upturned faces and outstretched limbs as if they exist in the world tonight for the first time, then the lodge opens itself again, issuing the last pale and shaking body whose knees buckle to the earth. Another man observes his collapse.

Mason Cole possesses the body of a one-time athlete, the ghosts of muscle thickening his arms and torso with flesh that jounces slightly as he leans over a pile of clothes to extract a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles. With the glasses resting on his Roman nose, his features transform, the peaked forehead topped with thin reddish-brown hair being separated by the dividing spectacles from the wide mouth and dimpled chin. His eyes, too, lose their squint as they adjust themselves in this new face while Mason walks over to sit beside the man who emerged last from the lodge. “Get a good nap, Tom?” he drawls, looking vaguely past the swim-suited figure lying face down a few feet away.

“Mud is my friend, Mason,” Tom mumbles, pivoting his head slightly on the curled arm beneath it. “I’m made of mud right now.”

Mason watches the fire placed outside the lodge. There, wind takes smoke into its hands and distributes it skyward like water sprinkled over a field. He watches, too, a breeze-touched hair stir beneath Tom’s extended arm. He cannot smell, nor can anyone else present, the odor of sweet grass burned and rubbed into them in the preceding hours, yet the hint of dying leaves and months still to come fills his nostrils. “You didn’t miss much, I guess.” When Tom lurches to a sitting position, quickly cradling head in hands, he groans and Mason sees the blood threaten to depart. “You don’t look so hot.”

“I passed out,” Tom muses, as if in realization. Tom raises his head again slowly, staring not at Mason but across the clumps of bodies sprawled across the yard talking, and out to the street half-visible above the wooden privacy fence. His gaze does not acknowledge the sinewy form in T-shirt and shorts huddled beneath a Mulberry. The firekeepers now neglect the tentative flames, which lick smoldering
sweetgrass and hot coals, radiating less light than the full moon. With a sense of wonder stirring, he sees the entire scene of pale bodies and dark buildings cast in vividly-etched monochrome. Perhaps he does not even notice the woman still trying to catch his eye, yet his thoughts do, remembering without volition or bias—as thoughts sometimes do when the mind rests—trivial events which sound in memory and then fade.

Four shelf aisles, a rank of freezers lining the walls, one row of softening sweet potatoes, onions, and bananas, plus a butcher’s counter in the back comprised all the town’s oldest food store could offer, that and piled disreputable vegetables such as the tomatoes Tom stood squeezing absently. He cocked his head, listening concentratedly to voices climbing around the meat counter. Barking raucous laughter, holding a strange broken quality like a machine run wild, engulfed the elderly grocer’s conversational attempts.

"Where you boys from?" asked the old woman.

"You know what I want? I want a great big pastrami samich," came a man’s voice.

"state School," said another man. "But they don’t know we’re here."

"With lots of mustard. Can you handle that, or do I have to get rough?"

"Oh, don’t do that," she laughed good-naturedly, "I can handle it."

"Hey," a third male voice began, "I see a knife that’ll help her get it done."

Tom began working his way further down the aisle so as to come inconspicuously within sight of the men. He discovered himself squeezing a milk carton, and looked up to find a woman’s eyes on him. her body and face possessed buoyancy not quite destroyed by middle age, and a childlike care-free expression graced her eyes as she waited for Tom to move out of her way. Was it the girlish smile or the womanly ambiance that attracted him? As if explaining why he lingered, nervously abusing a milk carton, he nodded toward the back of the store. "I’m waiting to see if she’s going to need my help."

She smiled politely, not understanding.

"Yeah, give me that butcher knife. We’ll set her straight," the first man’s voice said, followed by a jumble of the other men’s harsh laughter.

"Grady!" the woman shouted. She kept her voice steady as best she could, knowing that, like animals, her assailants might smell fear.

An old man’s voice drifted back from the cash register. "Yeah?"

The men laughed more. "We’s just kidding," someone said. Tom wondered how an avocado might handle a butcher knife.

"It’s all right, Grady," called the first trickster. "She got out of hand there for awhile," all three
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gethawed, "but we straightened her out."

Reluctantly, Tom stepped aside, torn between wanting to make the woman-girl say something and his protective duty toward the elderly storekeeper. Meanwhile, they continued their harassment. Gambling, she carried the jokes with them, pretending partnership in their mirth. Tension like the knife itself remained, causing her hands to shake, when the men wandered away and Tom approached. He tried to show his admiration with a smile, but her mind was busy replaying the bottled fear. Tom’s own nerves tangled around confused, conflicting visceral emotions, the trickster’s knife and the girl’s smile. The old man appeared then, pushing an empty cart back and forth in sight of his wife, anxiety creasing his brow. Remembering the smell of awakening dust and wet summer leaves which marked his emergence into the drizzling afternoon, he thinks of the cat who, after Tom bustled his sacks into the car and began driving, meandered guilelessly into the street, causing Tom to stomp the break and see the woman-girl walking obliviously at the very instant the sky chose to release itself unrestrainedly, transforming her paper sacks to puddy.

Leaning across, he opened the passenger’s-side door and called out, but the woman was already stretching her lean body through it. She turned to him then, thanking him in a voice rough with cigarettes and an unselfconscious smile framed by fragrant damp stray hair. Remembering, too, the coffee house to which she directed him—its dirty floor and mangy sleeping hound, its open front door framing the barefoot stout bald man who leaned against it smoking—he tries to name something in her voice, her eyes, or manner, something green and unbound which impelled him to sit talking with her for hours while his mind conjured the words to elicit a portrait that would impart color and line to a poised and willing canvas, desire. Perhaps he should write a poem to master the image without naming it, or perhaps she is a mirror and Tom’s poem would fail. Anyway, it hardly matters now.

Sarah, whose name he learned in the car, disappeared within, leaving Tom standing uncertainly on the covered porch, unsure whether to enter or depart. She gave no sign, nor did the round-faced portly man leaning against the door jam. So Tom simply gazed at the rain and waited for something external to move him. The tiny parking lot before him eased gradually into the street, which in turn bordered a stand of trees stretching back to where, barely visible, lay an old chapel, a structure small enough that the older oaks surrounding it reached their expansive branches across part of its roof as if in a vain attempt to conceal it from the sky.

On an unseasonably warm afternoon in early March, Tom’s thoughts had carried him on foot all the way across town to this chapel, wherein he stood for long intervals gazing at each time-worn facet of the dense wooden room. Though he did not know it, he had not reconciled the drives which inhabit him,
the past which continues to mold him unseen, or the good end which will finally carve his features as its magnetic pull draws him. Eventually finding his way up to the choir loft, he lay in the utter silence feeling the weight of the empty church’s roof overhead.

Sunset turned a slow kaleidoscope of color through the small round stained-glass window glowing above him. This light the only sign to the eye, and brushing winter branches the only sound penetrating the defending walls, he grew calm. TOM always sensed a quieting, perhaps even holy presence in empty churches, though the sense vanished, as if crowded out, during actual services. In the cradling pew, HE allowed his thoughts to spawn wild gardens, then he slept.

Tom awoke into complete darkness, the faces and thrusting forms of a thousand malignant demons driving consciousness into his spine, then fading away as his hand felt the hard bench below him, placing him once again within sacred space; hearing the freight train’s distant moan, awake and plunging down the steep narrow stairwell to strike against the heavy doors barred from without, his stumblings echoing through the hall like a population of selves all sharing the same fear, then sinking down to rest comfortably against the door until the red glow far away formed a beckoning word, finally, he broke upon the reverent pre-dawn world.

The night was very cold. An icy hand gripped his body, making him want to drop to the ground and curl beside the door, now sealed without crack or handle. But when he looked across the dormant field to where streetlights shined upon empty streets, he began to revel in the air’s bight. Removing his shoes and socks, he clenched his teeth in a shocked grin and instantly learned to enjoy the freezing sting of dry grass underfoot. Walking seemed to inject new energy into him with every staccato movement as he rounded the side of the chapel and stood by its barred-shut mouth. There was no hint of light in the sky, and Tom had no watch. But the stillness, so like a held anticipatory breath, and a calling dove told him the time. Frigid air moved assertively in and out of his lungs, and cold air brushed against his temples as he progressed, quiet and quiescent, beneath winter-dead maples and post oaks. Inevitably, he donned his shoes prior to setting out in earnest for home. Still, trotting along the deserted thoroughfares, he felt good without knowing why. Assured, essential, virile, he commanded every intersection with a feeling that lingered for two or three days, and then was lost. He had not named this experience, nor attempted to open its doors, so his baptism of silence and darkness left no trace.

"It looks like the boys are going to have to play inside tonight," the man said mildly, staring through the enduring downpour. A constant trickle of water made drum-tapping sounds in a gutter off to the right.

Tom turned to the pallid, flesh-imbued man. "who’s that?"
"Oh, there's a bunch of guys who come down with their guitars, mandolins, and what-not. They play two or three times a week, outside when it's nice. I generally get out my guitar and play along. We're nothing special, you know, but we like it." He flipped the tiny smoldering cigarette butt into a pool collecting by the porch and turned half-way toward the door. "You're welcome to stick around and listen. The music will be starting in an hour or two."

"Thanks, I might do that."

"Well come on in, I'm sure Sarah's got a pot of something on."

Entering behind the man, whose name Tom still did not know, he paused in the middle of the shabby room watching the man's back disappear through another open door. No sooner was he out of sight than Sarah appeared, holding two empty styrofoam cups in one hand and a pot of tea in the other. She poured before sitting down opposite Tom, following which he took the nearest plastic lawn chair and faced her. "On the house," she said, gesturing to his cup with her own.

"Do you run this place?"

"Me and Bill. Bill put up most of the money, and I do most of the work."

The room was empty save for the two, plus a dog sleeping or dead by the interior door. Tom tried to avoid seeing the disease-mottled animal so that he would not have to comment on it. "It must be hard keeping this place open."

"I don't have too many expenses, just coffee, tea, all-natural beverages, and frozen cheese cakes. And my apartment is in the back, so it isn't that bad. It's worth it, anyway. I always dreamed of doing it, ever since I was a teenager."

"I'm not sure I ever heard of anyone dreaming of--" Tom stopped himself from saying "a place like this"--"owning a coffee house."

Her eyes closed as the cup touched her lips, then opened to begin wandering around the room as her limp hand held the tea slightly aloft. "Well," she sighed, "when I was younger, I dropped out of high school and sort of wandered for a while. I never seemed to have many friends, not good ones, anyway. After a time, I didn't have the energy to go out and meet people. So now I have a place where they come to me. I just leave the door open now days." Her brown eyes rested listlessly, gazing out the door where water fell then only from the roof. "It's going to be muddy tonight."

He smiled. "Well, I guess so. Did you have plans?"

"I'm going to the sweat."

"Pardon?"
"It’s an American Indian ritual. You build a tent and pack it with as many people as you can, sitting in a circle, and you share all your sorrows while somebody periodically comes in dumping hot coals into a hole."

"I see. And this does something for you?"

"Well," she sighed, "let me put it this way. When you all come out of the lodge, it feels really, really good. The whole world is just like new. Or you’re new, depending on how you look at it."

"Sounds great," Tom said noncommittally. "Can anyone do it?"

"Sure. All you have to do is come down to the Ashram. We have them in the yard once a month."

While Tom spiralled the conversation inward toward insights into Sarah’s personal situation, a band of T-shirted scraggly-haired social fringe elements in various stages of decay carrying guitar cases accumulated around the plastic tables. Six packs of Shiner Bock appeared and disappeared as the instruments awoke from their coffins and, taken in untrained hands, issued noise. Although no aficionado of music, Tom nonetheless does possess some primal sense which alerts him when more than three distinct pitches originate from a single perceptual object, and this sense did not reach alert status during the hour spent semi-hearing smiling Bill and his brotherhood. At last bidding Sarah Snow good night, with her image still restlessly avoiding its necessary categorization, Tom passed back through the open coffee house door.

Chanting voices, unified in a strange language, drew characters in the stifling dark. Tom’s only remaining sensation which he could clearly identify was that of the sweat pouring from every part of his body, streaming from his hair, down his back, even wetting the clothes which lay in a rolled bundle behind his back. Everything else melted into the drum-like rhythm assaulting him from all points in the cramped lodge. But there was no drum, making Tom aware that his senses spiralled off in some dizzying way. The language was Lacota Sioux, they said, leaving him to wonder if all those present knew the hymns they chanted. Tom distinguished a woman’s voice immediately to his left which stammered frequently, losing the thread of syllables and remaining silent until it hesitantly rejoined at a further point.

Last light had seen Tom driving aimlessly, a more abstract maze than streets catching him up, carrying him until, swallowed in traffic, he judged himself lost. Seeing no familiar landmarks, Tom paused, wondering how his own town could lose him. There seemed to be so many cars on the roads, so many lighted buildings leading off crazily-angled corners, that no sense of place could lead him back again. Only an ordinary printed sign pointed him to the town square, and a road discovered after several
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minutes wanderings. Even so, moving accidentally past the Ashram started Tom to believe in higher harmonies than painted signs, and since coincidence was not for Tom to overlook, he had stopped, arriving in time for the ceremony.

He didn’t feel well. Sitting immobile for what seemed like an eternity, he lost sense of his hands and legs. In utter darkness, full of meaningless sound, smelling vaguely the sweet grass which gradually became no smell, Tom felt only the need to breathe. His chest consumed him, as did sound, binding the two so that he came to fill the entire darkness, chest devouring all the individual voices; two strong arms weighing ready at his sides, his legs pushed him upward, making the head with its mouthful of voices break from the small space toward the cool open night.

A fresh breeze from the open flap brought a firekeeper who shovelled more hot coals into the central pit. The second of three rounds here ended. The flap closed again, following which a man’s smooth voice asked “Who would like to pray?”

"I would like to get rid of my jealousy for my wife Claudia." Tom pictured a meekly-built man with close-cropped black hair and glasses which would be slipping down his sweat-slick grimy nose. "I asked earlier tonight for health and prosperity for her lover, who I can’t name, as I’ve said. My wife and I love each other very much, and I want her to be happy."

"I want," said a woman’s voice close by the man’s, "to give Dan my strength and support in any way I can to help him do what he said."

"I want to get rid of my hatred for my father. He can’t help coming home like he does, I guess." Tom thought of a teenage boy huddled in the darkness somewhere along the circle.

"Hatred," began the smooth voice, "contains purely bad energy. We should all pray in order to help you. I want you to feel the heat seeping into your body and dissolving the hatred within you."

"I’ll try."

"I pray to give away my fear of trusting people," spoke the throaty voice of a young woman. "I should believe you when you say that people will love me if I show them love, but I’m afraid to trust my feelings to them." Tom pictured a small, wide-eyed girl who was scared by some experience. Then he remembered the quiet, hunched woman whose obesity had made it almost impossible for her to enter the lodge. The Master of Ceremonies, or whatever he was called, spoke gently to her, and the communion proceeded around the circle. Tom remained quiet, as did Sarah Snow.

He saw a pale light bathing the footprint-rutted dirt yard, and was wrapped in a cool, benevolent breath. It took Tom several cramped minutes to work his greasy body into his street close before crawling
outside. Following a broad, masculine silhouette, He worked his way among the pressing bodies to break upon the world. The man, Wearing only cut-off jeans, walked bare-footed to a Mulberry tree from which hung a towel, T-shirt, and a pair of tennis shoes tied at the laces. A few others emerged naked, calmly collecting their clothes from the ground and dressing in the open. Tom stood awkwardly near the Mulberry tree until Buddy, the group’s focus, approached him. Buddy had a young owl’s face, a pony’s tail like black flaccid peacock’s plumes, and a straw man’s body.

"How do you feel, Tom?" asked the Master of Ceremonies.

"How am I supposed to feel?"

"Relaxed, spiritually at peace, and bodily purified."

"You know, that’s exactly how I feel."

"Good, then we can count on seeing you next month?"

"Sure. Say, I was wondering, how do you know what those chants mean?"

"I’m part Indian. My great grandfather was a Cherokee. I’ve always felt a great sense of kinship and familiarity with the ways of my ancestors, so naturally I studied the language."

"But does everyone here know the language?"

"Most of us have learned the chants to become closer to the spirits. When you feel ready, I will loan you the book I used."

"Thanks, I’ll let you know."

"And how do you feel, Mason?"

"Oh, I guess I feel just like this guy."

The MC drifted down among his flock, eventually producing a ring of jangling keys which he played with while descending the path to his car. "So wha’d’ya think?" Mason asked, fishing out a cigarette.

"About him or the ritual?"

"Both, I guess."

"I don’t know."

"Don’t know about which?"

"Both, I guess." They both chuckled. "What about you," Tom asked.

"Oh, it didn’t hurt anything, I reckon. It’s a damned sight more healthy than what I used to do. I will say that."

"And what about Buddy?"

"I just ignore him. He’s full of shit."
"Mason, you seem to be a little out of place here."
"I reckon you’re right." He grinned.

"Roll one of your own," Mason had complained, filling his lungs once more until the air inside him was animal and the air around his face was like warm skin pressing close.

"That is one of mine, dim wit." But Maegan extended an arm into her purse for the plastic baggie and cigarette papers.

"No, wait," Mason said, leaning over her and placing the joint between her poised lips. "If you got more, we’ll need’em."

Instead of lying down again, Mason opened two more bottles of Shiner and offered one to Maegan. Then both sat Indian style on the hilltop, passing joints, drinking, Maegan looking at the stars, Mason looking at her. "Why’d you call me a dim wit while ago?"

"Because you’re not one."

"Well what does that mean?"

"You’re the smartest man I know, you know how to do more things than anybody, but you still talk like a hick all set to shag sheep or shoot your fucking twelve-gage at somebody all the time. You’re a dimwit, but you’re not one, too."

"Maggie, I didn’t know you cared." He watched her put her beer aside and stretch each long denim leg down slope. Her arms, too, extended with fingertips straining, waiting to be touched by something, as if she felt the same galloping animal he felt in the blue smoke. Her T-shirt fit tightly, enunciating the softness below and firmness above the discernable line of her lowest rib. Arms yet extended, she slowly leaned back from the hips until she rested in that position on the grass. He touched her hair, which dropped negligently to shoulder length, his hand allowing the backs of his knuckles to occasionally graze her cheek. She turned her head toward him suddenly, so that his hand lay palm-up by her mouth, from which she took the reefer and tapped the ash into his hand before he could withdraw. Ignoring his ensuing curse, she closed her eyes, expelling enunciated choked gouts of smoke as she continued. "Why did you drop out of college, Mas?"

"Jesus, Maggie, I’m flying here. Don’t ask me about that right now. You should know, anyway. You were there. You’ve always been there. And here.. And right over there. You have always been right over there."

"What, in the lake?"

"No," he said carefully, "beside it."

"The log?"
"Yeah. You’re a log. Metaphysically speaking, of course. I mean, if I were a piscologer, Sycleanalyst. Because you’re always there and you..." The warm skin smell pressed his belly, making him want to press hers. If he said anything, or if she did, he didn’t later remember it, but only the warmth beneath the cotton where he rubbed, moving up until all of him seemed to be in the palm cupping the firm rising and falling breast where emerged a small hardness wanting even more to be touched. "I want to make love to you," he whispered, and "Maggie, I’ve never had anybody I liked before, not like how I feel for you" with his eyes closed like a man praying, all himself in the palm and responding nipple rising and falling under the cotton shirt.

She didn’t try to remove his hand. She mussed his hair, and Mason opened his eyes to see her smiling indulgently at him. "I love you, too, Mason. But no cigar, if you take my meaning."

"I know. I know. But I can do what they do just like them. It could feel good, couldn’t it? And more than that with you and me. I’ve never had anybody I loved before. If only..."

She sat up, brushing his hand away and patting his abdomen affectionately. "Dear heart, maybe I would if I was as drunk as you or if I were a little more stoned. It might even feel good, physically, but it just isn’t what I want for myself. Sweety, you just ain’t got the right equipage."

Mason turned away from her.

He twisted the cap off another beer, chucking the empty. "I know," he repeated, "I know. If only..." Despite his frustration, the bottle appeared lazy in its tumbling track against the midnight-blue dome. He wanted it to break against the rocks, or the log, but it flew further than he expected, plunking unbroken into the shallows. Mason’s outburst would have been awkward, but neither had been particularly surprised. That happened four years ago, four more years of unbroken friendship beginning when they left the lake behind them.

It was still there, of course, lurking, grey and implacable except for a single John boat sitting placidly like the pupil of an eye. A man fished from the bow, and another shape huddled in the stem might have been a child. It was August, meaning that not a single bird song penetrated the world, which might have been frozen in time but for the invisible cicada tide and Mason’s boots crunching up the gravel road to the crest of a rise. He set a small ice chest by the roadside and sat down next to it, lighting a cigarette as he looked down at his car. In time, a tiny dot appeared on the horizon, crawling slowly closer. Igniting the second cigarette from the first, he marked the instant when the dot became Maegan, feet crunching gravel, jogging steadily toward him, slowing to a walk when she neared the hill. Maegan’s body no longer appeared soft anywhere. Muscles taut and slippery with exertion stood out from her florid gasping face, craning neck and close-cropped hair, to the arm swept across the brow, to the legs which
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pivoted the rail-thin body arching to meet the ground in one fluid gratuitous collapse.

"God damn you, Mas!" she panted. "Why did you have to pick the highest fucking point for miles around?"

Mason grinned maliciously and pulled a bottle from the ice chest. "Beer?" She shielded her grimacing face using crossed fingers. "It was worth a try," Mason laughed, handing her a can of Gaderade instead. "You can have it later."

"No go, dear. I’m in training. No smokes, no alcohol, no Co-Co Puffs. What else do you have in that thing, anyway?"

"Lunch!"

"Mas, I’d hurl anything I tried to eat right now!"

"Well then, shut my mouth, it looks like you’ll have to sit and talk to me."

To Mason Maegan seemed almost a stranger, always in motion away from him, always gritting her teeth in determination that her body would not slow. Muscle, and the will to force it, formed this new woman’s wellspring, whose placid mind vectored cleanly away from the past. Mason rarely saw her at all anymore, yet he watched the meaningless movements of her speaking jaws and wondered why he bothered to find her now. With Maegan, the new woman, all gave forth onto the bright eyes and taut skin, a life story explicated by her very form. She never spoke of her problems, yet things plagued her during the earlier years of their acquaintance, times when they sat together in a hazy forgetful underworld. Yet, whatever her problems were, they constituted experiences which bodily experience could remedy.

Mason had played football in high school. He knew how to free anger into a vector rushing headlong toward an opposing wall of yielding, equally angered flesh. The sport led him away physically to a new community where his past lay in scores and visible triumphs or failures. Descending from the field inevitably allowed his mental storm to collect again, since the football player had no past, no identity, and so disappeared when the uniform was removed. Mason had done drugs in college plus for a time thereafter. Excess annihilated every part of the identity temporarily save one unknown voice, demanding self-preservation, irrepressible despite a continuous fiery witch hunt. Something belonging to himself was indisputable, but the rest of the man in process between his nature and experiences eluded him. He attended New Age sweat rituals, even when the small owl-eyed creature began leading them, forbidding the pipe-smoking round. Mason had little faith in the promise of spirits or visions, but he continued going once a month, perhaps linking the small faith with the irrepressible voice. Spirits, entering the dark place by whatever machinations, might connect Mason to that centered being and give him the key to his own wellspring, like the power source obvious in Maegan’s profile as she craned her neck to gaze down the
hill already once more consumed by the rapturous exertion of pounding feet.

Two dilapidated frame houses wallowed in a dirt field, separated by perhaps fifty yards and a railroad track, a boundary still symbolizing something in the minds of some living along it. Both aging houses possessed front porches facing the gravel road which ran perpendicular to the track, one lone street light the intersection’s sole sentinel. One porch stood empty, its bulb and all the house’s windows dark, while the other thronged with people overflowing into the yard. Mason Cole was one of only two non-Mexican or Mexican Americans at Arturo Morenes’ house. Sighting down the neck of an acoustic guitar, he half-sat, half-leaned against the porch railing, his back pressing the house. Another man sat on the open window sill playing bongo drums, and Arturo soon emerged from the open door holding a trumpet to his lips. All three attacked a number of Latin jazz pieces like the professional musicians they were, eliciting round applause, raised bottles, and cries for more.

A dog chained behind the other house would not stop barking, aroused either by the noise or the barbecue smell rising in clouds above the grill. Everyone was sweaty, from the cooking fire, from the August night, and from the house’s stifling oven-heated interior. Yet, while Mason found himself agitated by the dog, the heat, and crowding, the others seemed oblivious to anything but one another’s companionship and the laughter they made. Mason himself could only keep to his corner, submerged between the strings, searching for a breeze to touch his face. He saw a light go on in the other house, then a man poked his sagging hairy breasts out the window. Mason recognized him, but no one else seemed in a position to notice him or hear his yelling. He ignored him until, the song complete, an ensuing silence brought everyone’s attention to the man.

"God Damn it, I mean it! I’m calling the police!"

"Calvin, you just fucking do that!" yelled Mason, "And I’ll tell them to go have a look at what you got stashed over there. You get me, Calvin?"

Arturo was beside Mason, raising his hands in a placating gesture. "We’re sorry about the noise. I didn’t think you were home. We’ll GO inside."

"You damn well better!"

"Listen, you butt-ugly tub a’lard, it ain’t even eleven o’clock and I know you’re not sleeping. How’d business go today, Cal? Don’t you be threatening folks or your girls will be looking for a new boss. Get me?"

"Mason," Arturo hissed, "his brother is a cop. Now shut up and go inside, man." He slapped Mason good-naturedly on the shoulder and disappeared in a wave of guests piling into the cramped, hot
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living room. On the pretense of going in last, Mason managed to stand gazing in the front window as Arturo’s wife appeared from the kitchen, followed by several other wives, all bearing trays of Mexican food. Then paper cups with tiny amounts of champaign circulated among the guests. Not knowing a word of Spanish, Mason could only watch a handful of men and women standing one by one to deliver a speech or toast. Then Mason quietly stepped off the porch.

Without any clear idea of why he did it, he started walking toward the other house. Once more, the windows appeared dark, but after a few steps Mason saw a blue television glow through the window where the man earlier appeared. He found an evilly-twisted hunk of iron lying near the track. It felt heavy in his hand. Walking a few yards onto Calvin’s property, he stood gazing at the window, hefting the railroad spike. He still held a nearly-empty bottle of Dos Equis which he drained on the cracked earth.

Glass shattering glass created duel fountains of glittering falling sparks. The light did not go on, but Mason felt the man’s eyes.

Perhaps Mason expected the older man to charge like an enraged bull onto the dusty field, able to be maneuvered and slain by Mason’s own coolly-veiled passions. In any case, the screen door, swinging on one hinge, creaked open and Calvin stepped slowly out, still buttoning his fly. "What the hell d’you do that for?" he asked quietly, staring down at Mason without expression. When Mason remained silent, he sighed without opening his mouth and came down to meet him. "I'm gonna kill you," he said, still quietly, scratching his bare chest, "and then go back inside and finish watching my show."

The two men half-crouched, Mason focussing his eyes on the huge, cyclopean navel subsumed in rolls of fat spilling over Calvin’s trousers. He began to feel like the football player again facing off his opposite.

"Say, I think I recognize you now. Shit, you’re one of Cullan Cole’s boys, aren’t you?"

Mason sent his one hundred ninety pounds into a jab rising from the earth all the way to his hand in one iron spring of force aimed just below that third eye.

When one of them was in trouble, the entire community came out to help. When a birth occurred, the child was born with not two parents, but twenty, blood reaching further than any mansion’s roof. These were the Mexicans, the ones who came to build something in their neighborhood or in their lives, bringing their culture and language, carrying these things as naturally and openly as their clothes. When one of them said goodbye, they all bid him farewell with a party, and he toasted his good friends. Arturo, in a dark button-down shirt and white slacks, portioned out the champagne, pouring as much into my cup
as that of his beautiful fat wife standing next to me. They spoke mainly Spanish, of which I understood only a few words, but neither this fact nor the room’s oppressive heat made me want to leave; here was a gathering of warmth, even toward the American, a gathering centered around friendship and community rather than the isolated drive for sex or oblivion customary at American parties. Most fortunate of all, I had no responsibilities, except when spoken to directly in English, which allowed me simply to rest, supported within a benevolent cloud of international good relations. "What did we just toast?" I asked Illiana, Arturo’s wife.

"Jose has just earned his Ph.D. in computer science and is returning to Mexico," she said. "Are you bored? We are all espeaking Spanish."

"Not at all. But I wonder what happened to the guy with the guitar."

"Eh, you mean Mason? Ah, he is in the bathroom."

"Kind of volatile, isn’t he? What’s his problem?"

"Mason has many problems, I think. Most of them are from his brother. You know, Arturo was once a friend of Mason’s brother Nathan. He met Mason when he was breaking into their house one night." She laughed pleasantly. "But he was just getting back his trumpet that Nathan had stolen. It was a very interesting night." Shoulder-length curls framed her round, brown, radiant face, whose bright eyes and full mouth expressed only kind or lovable emotions. She was a wonderful cook, a good housekeeper, and never seemed overcome by anything in life. Depths, thoughts held private, lay behind those eyes; even at that moment, her gaze drifted to follow her husband and she bit her lower lip contemplatively.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Ah, nothing," she sighed and smiled. "I am just watching Arturo and his girlfriend." Without seeming to move her eyes, she responded to something in mine. "Yes, he has one. Or at least he wants to. But I am here, and so he cannot do anything"

Arturo sat on the arm of a chair occupied by a woman who smiled pleasantly at us when she saw our attention. Thinner than Illiana, although still large by American standards, she sprawled in a chair with a confidently demanding gleam in her eyes. Enthroned, Arturo poised like a courtier on the chair arm, she exuded sex. Mexican culture does far more than promote family values, for they inhabit Mexicans like the heart. But this heart fails to change the man who owns it.

I looked earnestly at Illiana and smiled. "I’m very jealous of Arturo because he has you."

I worked my way through the tiny house searching for Mason. The man interested me even then, presenting himself as a talent without direction, which he was. Looking into every room took only a few minutes, during which Mason failed to appear. Squeezing through the tight boisterous circle of foreign
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smells and language, I found myself alone, breathing the palpable summer evening, seeing the neglected guitar leaning against the porch railing and watching, too, sparrows thrashing in a cloud of wings around the street light. Dying smoke tendrils hovered over the barbecue pit, its heat carrying characteristic outdoor cooking smells, incongruous to the vision of Mason and Calvin circling one another in the orange dimness.

Violence bears a smell all its own, one I already began identifying as the patent of Mason’s internal conflict. Even from a distance, I discerned Mason’s shadowy form. I could make out the line of his glasses and the thick muscular arms whose definitions have only recently begun to fade, and the black T-shirt and jeans poised to summon power. The other man, visible only in silhouette, was a pear-shaped clay golem rising from the earth.

Mason’s arm swung from knee-level toward Calvin’s stomach. He held something club-fashion which the golem was too slow to deflect, and so staggered back with an audible grunt. At the same time, Mason’s other fist slammed upward, connecting with his jaw. Calvin rocked backward but didn’t fall. He stepped back, spitting something onto the ground between them, and pulled something from the back pocket of his trousers. Perhaps I shouted to the people inside. If so, no one listened. Though he must have seen the knife, Mason gave no sign. Calvin simply crouched, waiting, until Mason’s arm once more lashed out, this time aiming for the head. Like a lizard’s tongue, the golem’s knife darted out, and the object in Mason’s hand dropped. He rasped incoherent words and attempted a quick lunge to retrieve the fallen object, but his side suddenly gushed blood when the other man attacked. This time yelling fiercely into the house, I leaped from the porch at a run, not registering the growing ground-shaking thunder until a piercing whistle blew mere yards from me. On the ground, Mason still reached for the iron spike, only to be kicked viciously in the head. I was caught momentarily in blinding lights as I launched myself across the trembling ground, over the track, deafened by another prolonged frantic whistle blast, I not even hearing now the roar of its passage behind me, but almost knocked down by the sudden gusts of the engine’s wake. Mason lay crumpled on the ground, his bedsheet face rolling to one side and weakly nodding against the dirt, his side issuing great gouts of blood in a spreading pool. It ran between my fingers when I clamped my hands on the wound. Flying dust sandblasted my face. "What do I do!" I screamed. The man was backing away, eyeing me, pausing, lips forming words I couldn’t hear. He ran the back of one hand tenderly over his fat, bruised, whiskered chin and looked down at us dubiously. "God damn it! What do I do!" Railroad cars flowed by endlessly, dividing the world belonging to the three of us from Arturo’s house. I wadded up the folds of Mason’s shirt over the wound, but the blood kept coming. With a look almost of embarrassment, Calvin turned and, casting many backward glances,
walked back toward his house. I squatted alone with the unconscious Mason and the freight train's rhythmic clatter emerging finally from my ears' dizzying whine. I listened to the sound, staring in slack-jawed confusion alternately at the man's retreating back and the ebbing life in my hands. Time became a chain of freight cars, one following another, following another, meaningless orange rusted events appearing and disappearing in a clatter of pumping blood.

There, suddenly, were a dozen men pounding over the track, the house at their backs, a rapid-fire barrage of Spanish sending a few figures racing to the cars parked along the street while others crowded around Mason. "Help me!" I cried, "I don't know what to do." On his knees beside me, Arturo ripped his shirt tail to bandage Mason's hand. Someone else brushed my hands away and pressed something against his side, just as a Volkswagen bug bumped over the tracks and Mason's body disappeared in a swarm of chattering people. Ignored for the moment, I remained seated on the ground while the crowd apparently debated what to do about Calvin. I picked up the spike which lay nearby, my bloody hands weighing it much as Mason must have done. They could easily kill Calvin. Some of the men looked and sounded ready to do so. Arturo stood above me, braced against the more violent members of the group, seeming just as angry in his tone and the gestures directed at the house. Yet, no one moved on the house, all of whose windows now burned behind closed blinds. Everyone gravitated around Arturo, who's verbal energy held them until it drew the rage from them, at least containing it within reason. I rose stiffly to my feet, allowing the railroad spike to drop for the second time that evening. The newspaper would not carry Calvin's name in the obituary the next day, nor would he disappear. No one pressed charges against him, since Mason provoked the fight. Dust soon obscured the stained ground, and Calvin continued living behind his windows, except when he emerged for the business of selling drugs or pimping, as he had done since when Mason was a boy.

Expelling a cloud of smoke toward the sky, he rests his gaze on the full moon, which shines more brightly than he has seen in a long time.

"Mason," Tom begins.

"Yeah?" he replies, not lowering his eyes.

"I had the weirdest experience in there."

Mason crushes out his cigarette in the mud and looks at Tom, who sits Indian style, his head resting in his propped hands. "You mean passing out?"

"I mean what I saw while I was going under. I saw something, or went somewhere. A dream, I guess, but it wasn't like any of my usual dreams. I don't know what to call it."
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"A vision?" Mason can't resist a note of sarcasm, but regrets the remark upon glimpsing ears pricking up and several heads turning their way. Tom's dough-like cheeks flush, visible even in the monochrome moonlight.

"I didn't say that. I don't know what to call it. I was somewhere else, New Mexico, maybe. I've been there, once when I was a kid. And I was running across the desert, close to the ground, on four legs. I was a wolf, or coyote, and I felt hungry. I don't feel things like hunger in my dreams, Mason. I don't turn into animals, either."

"Wait a minute. What's this about turning into animals?" Buddy suddenly appears, squatting down to form the triangle's third point. He blinks through his huge round lenses, first at Tom, then Mason, then Tom again. "Tom, what did you see? Was it during the chants?"

"I suppose it was. I remember that, then losing the feeling in my limbs, and sense of smell, just like the other time. Then I just forgot I had a body at all, also like that first time, and I felt dizzy, slipping, with a ringing in my ears. And yeah, it was while everybody was yelling."

"Well, it isn't yelling. But then what happened?"

Tom seems on the point of dismissing the matter, his eyes searching the ground for a hole in which to hide, so Mason, casting Tom a half-lidded smile, says casually "He was a coyote."

"You mean a coyote visited you," Buddy says firmly, "or you were with the coyote as he took you to meet someone else."

"Well, there was an owl, too, I think. And a child on top of the roof."

Murmurs sprinkle the night air as all who remain crowd around, instinctively forming a spectators' ring. "An owl," they whisper, and "Oh, my spirit animal is a coyote, too. Or, no, it's a wolf." Curious, skeptical, greedy, enraptured, vapid, the faces orient themselves like compass needles toward their newfound magnetic North, Thomas Church. Mason has seen their faces hold or hide a variety of emotions, such as the darting questions in their eyes when coming out of the lodge, each glance anxious for news of the main event. Now, they have the pinnacle, and Mason thinks their faces have found their ultimate expression regarding these gatherings. They want spirits, but knowing none for themselves, they watch one another month after month in expectation, and here it is. Poor Tom, he feels it too. Neither of them came expecting visions, really. It was just a word to them, not something they grew up knowing. Still, any community of faith promises something. The pudgy middle-aged accountant with his perennially teetering marriage; the lost teenager, experimenting with more than just facial hair; one truly awe-inspiring young woman oblivious to most of her body's messages yet led by them; along with all the others reaching for meanings they haven't found in their own world all gather at the Ashram in hopes that
another people, wise because they are foreign, can provide the answers with an imitated ritual. They fasten to Tom's reluctant tale, blindly forcing all its figures into line, finding their own promises in it, inventing it. They are a community possessing faith in the prophet Tom and a messiah named Buddy. Looking away, Mason thinks of the dying sweet grass smoke that will be behind him when he retreats down the hill.

Sarah didn't stay when all the others crowded around Tom. She didn't want to be in that collage of faces, but wanted even less to be listening timorously behind them. Instead, Sarah went home, faintly realizing the gold and red leaf smell blowing through the car's open window. The moon shone so brightly that when she parked in the vacant space before the shop, she could plainly see its darkened windows, even though someone had broken the street light long ago. Fumbling to unlock the front door, she heard a short, surprised bark from within and realized she forgot to feed the dog before she left. Both the store and apartment were empty, Bill being away for at least two more days driving a truck all the way North to Chicago. The dog's cold nose nuzzled her palm as she crossed the darkened room, moving into the apartment where she fed the dog some cooked ground beef discovered in the refrigerator. She showered without turning on the light, enjoying the warm mystery pouring over her as she scrubbed off the sweaty, sweet-smelling mixture applied by Buddy's hands before the sweat began.

Only now, lying naked on her bed with her knees tucked against her chest, does an image come to ripple Sarah's placid mind, and even that fades rather quickly.

Tom was fifteen years younger than Sarah, yet he had said that didn't matter. "Every time I talk to you," she told him late that summer, "I learn something. But you don't make me feel bad for not knowing things already."

After their first encounter, she began looking forward to the next time he would appear. Watching her, his tender dark eyes and innocent smile reminded her of boys she knew very long ago, not seen since. Soon she expected his visits, and they saw each other not only in her shop, but they walked in the park and, once, heard a band at a crowded night club. He knew the guitarist, whose name was Mason, but walked to greet him by the stage during the break instead of bringing him to meet Sarah. She invited him to dinner at restaurants and to see movies, but he always had prior engagements. When he kissed her the first time, her mouth was passionately explored by his, her slight frame engulfed by his encircling arms and broad, soft chest. She breathed hard afterward, closing her eyes while a few stars spun behind her eyes. When this would happen, many times after the first, she didn't think about Bill. Once, she entered the shop to find him having coffee with Mason and a pretty, athletic woman. Bending down in front of him, she took his face in her hands and kissed him, finding his lips warm from coffee but unresponsive.
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Though it happened a month ago, she saw him again yesterday for the first time since. He simply appeared in the doorway, rapping on the frame with quick, embarrassed movements even though he opened the door uninvited. "You could have knocked before you came in," she said without much concern. Lying fully clothed on the disheveled bed, she allowed him to sit by her, even remaining motionless when she felt his hand squeeze her knee.

"Why are you lying down, are you sick?"

She smelled the rain on his windbreaker and saw the dampness in his hair, but she didn’t brush it into place. "I’m tired, that’s all. Bill is away and I’m having to do everything myself."

"Yeah, the chippy out front said so."

"The what? Oh, you mean Anna, I suppose. She’s a doll, helping out like she does." Her arm reached out to fish among the night stand debris until she retrieved Bill’s tobacco pouch and cigarette papers. "I guess you’ve been busy. That’s why you haven’t been by."

Staring down at her hands and their industry, she felt his hand withdraw. The bed creaked and Tom moved to gaze out the window at something, though from her position, Sarah could see only sky, rippled by watery streaks. He didn’t turn his head, but she heard his voice saying "Very busy. I’m here now, though." Sarah watched him for more than a minute, during which he finally turned, meeting her stare with a question in his eyes. Her hand lifted to find a match, then fell slowly, task forgotten, feeling the soft creased bedclothes under her fingertips and palm. Closing her eyes, she was met by a million pinpoint yellow flares jiggling aimlessly behind her lids. Someone told her once it was the brain’s reflection on her eyes. "Wouldn’t that be odd," she thought, captured by the tiny things, which whirled and darted like minnows in a pond.

College students with their back packs and umbrellas hurried down the sidewalk to and from the campus, visible from Sarah’s window. Blowing sideways on fitful gusts of North wind, the drizzle spotted the glass, the window rattling in its pane and a cool breath occasionally crawling from the corners to touch Tom’s face. With the tormented bleat of a beast in pain or rut, an orange garbage truck backed up to huff beside an overflowing dumpster, arms extending from the truck’s side to grasp either side of the slightly open mouth, as if preparing to devour or have coitus with it. He felt her eyes on his back, and so turned to stare at her. A dreamy quality in Sarah’s eyes stirred him, as did the way her head tilted back, exposing the entire stretch of throat from chin to collar bone. The skin below her chin was slightly loose, and the beginnings of wrinkles fractured her mouth and eyes, but only slightly. She lay on her back, an unlit cigarette grasped loosely in her left hand, that arm draping lazily across her thigh. The other hand gently caressed the bed beside her. She closed her eyes. Inside him, he consciously worked air in and
out of his lungs. Opening his mouth, he searched for words, but had none, so he stepped around the bed, quietly closing the door as he left.

On the last day of their acquaintance, like the first day, water spilled off the roof to create a puddle near the door. The dog, however, rather than the man looked after him with a vacant expression. Likewise, parallel to that other day two months ago, Tom found himself that night huddling in the dome of sticks and blankets. To go into the dark, to enter the circle of anonymous prayer, imagined faces unleashing tides of unconditional acceptance, Tom required no reason. No reason at all, but only a feeling that in the naked, smelling swell of voices and bodies he would experience the bond. Even Sarah, though they could say nothing in the light, even she touched him in the omnivorous heat. He would pray tonight, he decided, though he hadn’t during the two previous sweats. As the vocal thunder made by those around him rose toward its crescendo, he suddenly thought of Illiana. He would ask for something for her, but it was impossible to think. Soon, the flap would raise, admitting the firekeeper with her pitch fork and coals; then it would be quiet. Almost everyone now knew the songs, and their singing kept up amazingly from one chant to the next, unflagging. For the second time in his life, Tom felt his spirit break free and sensed with its senses, not smell or heat or the sweat in his eyes, but only life, the sense of other spirits. When he broke from the chapel, so he felt now, except where his body awoke before, now it was something more essential. He would make a prayer for Illiana. Then a hissing pulse of green fire drew him like a moth and he felt only a rhythmic "thump-thump, thump-thump."

"Thump-thump."

The two-beat lope kicked up dust clouds carrying dry, stony odor. From the high places, sequoia and parched ravines, animal vigor pounding down slope, the jackal approached lower regions, tree-shrouded valleys where men lived. "Where is it?" Nose high, testing, affirming the course, wheeling black wings making it doubly-certain, an excited dance brought him yapping gleefully upon the carrion. He fought the flies. He snarled and gnashed his teeth when vultures waddled closer like old soar-footed men, and gorged himself on discarded guts, finding a cold grey scorched-tasting bullet while the sun grew huge and dropped. Nose high, testing, discovering cooked smoke, the jackal licked back saliva and loped into a clearing where a cabin stood.

Elbows crooked, hands dangling before him, a man scratching his back against a tree growled with pleasure. A woman, frightened by the cavorting jackal, pulled her children inside their log house. Only a boy saw the jackal’s magic eyes. The boy sat pensively on the roof, watching the jackal, who circled the clearing and its fragrant fatty smoke. To run like a jackal, to not feel the cold on his bare face and stiff fingers pressed into his pockets, the boy would leave everything he knew. Overhead soared a hawk,
and he imagined spying the ground between layered branches rushing beneath him. The woods themselves conveyed consciousness to the boy. There must be a presence or a colony of beings beckoning him. "Embrace me," he pleaded, "I don't want to be alone." Though the woodsmoke promised and the cabin was warm, he wanted to see the trees' faces, hear their voices, join the mystical calling forest. The encroaching gloom gave him shivers, but the boy slid from gable to ground, landing in piled snow. "Thump-thump." The jackal's Teeth bit the boy's ankle deeply, the snow stained, and the jackal laughed near the boy's ear before cavorting away to a safe distance. Howling with pain, the boy crawled, dragging his bitten foot, to the door. A blast of heat drenched his brow with sweat when the door swung inward, revealing not his mother, but an enormous owl spreading her wings forbiddingly in the doorway. 

Her feathers formed bark-like patterns from wingtip to wingtip. Dimly visible by the firelight behind her, the boy found himself staring into faintly glowing eyes which moved slightly like animals themselves trapped in glassy lenses. Alien intelligence regarded him hotly, life imbuing her eyes with the gateway quality which attracted the boy's mind, but also with an agenda having no place for him. The eyes isolated him. "Thump-thump." The jackal danced in the snow behind him, laughing, barring Tom's retreat. The lodge's heat melted the snow and Tom lay drenched in sweat, becoming aware of the empty dome around him and cold air like water on his face.

He groaned and the sound found no ears. Carefully pouring himself into the swim suit crumpled behind him, Tom crawled toward the opening. Not seeing those outside, he stumbled a few yards, then collapsed onto the damp earth. From the corner of his eye, he perceived Mason ambling over to squat nearby. "Mud is my friend," he muttered. Eventually raising himself dizzily to a sitting position, eventually seeing rather than unseeing his surroundings, he began despite himself to recall the dream. In low tones, he tried explaining to Mason sensations which surprised him more than he could express. "Mason, it's as though something not me had entered my head. I became something else, or went somewhere." Buddy, the gadfly, was apparently listening, for suddenly he began prying details from Tom who, embarrassed by his own words, only half-attended.

"Who were they," quietly asked the master of ceremonies.

"Who were who?" Tom frowned.

"The spirits that came to you in the lodge."

"I really don't think that's what they were."

Buddy chuckled indulgently. "Come on, Tom, do you think I don't know what I'm talking about?"

"OK, sure. Spirits." Sighing, Tom hurriedly tied his shoes and stood to follow Mason, who was
already on his feet.

From the clockmaker’s shop, a song arises. The church bells are quiet at this hour, and the courthouse bells have not kept time for many years. A spindly, unpresumptuous creation, however, presses out its tinny voice past the shops all closed, the courthouse, the Ashram, even reaching the chimneyed houses where no one listens, but finding first a window which stands ajar on an old house’s second floor, out of which I lean to catch the solitary note which spells the primary hour. I am the journeymen clock maker. I built that time piece when I was eighteen years old, thus proving my right to my trade. Those seeing only its face find hands moving in a circle, but I know its gears, though they grind back one on another, produce a waning force in one constant direction. Occasionally, a human hand is required to revive it.

The moon’s aggressive glare shining down through parted curtains brought me from sleep to the window to see displayed a day-like landscape, all monochrome. I face something new tonight. When I built the clock, almost ten years ago, I had time for such concentration. I had a home, one of the town’s first houses, a frame house whose boards rise from foundation to roof. An old man and woman lived here once, occupying the rooms below my attic nitch. I cared for their lawn, their house, their need for telling stories, but I know they cared for me through these rituals in more important ways. Tonight, too late, I realize how they fed me, even when I cooked their food; and clothed me, though I often washed their clothes; and above all, how their frail bodies kept me warm. I buried them yesterday, both of them, and all the rooms stand empty now but mine. Where do I go when the center is gone? Who answers all our questions when the old people die?

I remember Mason’s life ebbing between by fingers, and relate to the man I imagine him to be. I think of my friend Tom and wonder if he could understand if I tried to explain. Bit by bit, I begin learning their stories while details, perhaps more, I imagine. From a more orderly perspective, in times when home lay with the living, I begin another journey. Chaos, the shattered directionless road, must somewhere have its own logic, mustn’t it? Organic, painful, nothing like the simple hidden mechanical spring, my feelings bargain with the moon. Though cold and too precise for me now, the clock still reaches out one idea to which I cling; I am proving something still which only understanding, not acceptance, can resolve. Like the tiny hidden spring, my new logic cries out “forward, forward.”
Yesterday’s Fantasies

Jazz Fiction

Introduction

I woke up this morning where three and two made four. It was in Louisiana, where the muddy river runs, where the nights are sweaty, where I heard the story of a man who took the train north while the land was dark. Nobody saw them go but one man who stays nights out at the station selling tickets when anyone comes along wanting one. The town sat so far back in the woods that the sun never made it to the ground, and the way he describes it, I feel like I’m there, where three and two do make four, at least when I play my piano.

One arm of buildings stretched out from the town proper, shops and even houses trailing back along Satin Street where they grew up after the two speak easies suddenly and quite arbitrarily became legal taverns. The first bar to appear was King’s, owned and operated by the man who gave it his name. In 1924, this shack had lain concealed by Sycamores so that you couldn’t see it from more than a few yards away, unless you heard the noise. Not long after, however, this sleepy Louisiana backwater spawned a second entrepreneur who followed the muddy track to the same place, deciding to build his own establishment scarcely six yards from King’s called Ferdinand’s after the musician who, despite signs to the contrary, never set foot therein. Each succeeding rainy season deepened the track a little more, with everybody in town swearing the club wasn’t there by day, then putting their money down at night. A fierce competition continued for three years, until one night a certain party walked from Ferdinand’s across to King’s for a high-stakes card game, thinking he would make some more cash using what he just collected. It does not take long to make the trip between these places’ front doors, yet scarcely had the man set his first silver dollar on the table when a policeman, whose pants pockets felt considerably depleted to the wearer, burst in and arrested the entire assembly for gambling. Of course, he had to confiscate the evidence, especially every single penny that ambitious card shark had. Naturally, Archy King’s business flagged and soon the sagging log structure was abandoned to frogs and cicadas. Rumors had Archy King in business up river, where his fortunes would change as he left the river behind. Ferdinand’s flourished until the end of Prohibition, at which point the town hurried to embrace its secret heart openly. Buildings rose in a thin line on either side of the track, which quickly saw itself laid with gravel and given a name, Satin Street. Birds and children, both held by the narrower branches, might have seen the strip as a claw reaching all the way from the church to the forest, where its last grasp dug into the dark mud with wooden poles and a sign post announcing the best jazz outside New Orleans.

The first musicians to play the speak easies were the sons and grandsons of slaves, as were most
of those listening. But they were not slaves themselves, not in the original sense, though they did feel ghosts in one another’s eyes, and they knew, too, that their world, if not their bodies, wore shackles. They no longer spoke the language of their parents’ drum; they had only its instinct. Like a ghost, they felt the music without seeing it. Like shamans, they tried to be possessed by it and relate its words, divided like subjects and their objects or like the love of one thing for another that is the strain toward becoming impossibly one. The trumpet was a voice, the voice imitated the trumpet, the drum and bass played melodies that were voices of these voices. Most who listened first were black, but not all. Why would only a Black man feel divided? But when does a White’s world cut so deep, and when is it so empty, uncluttered, that he can see a plain truth like his soul? There was no segregation at King’s or Ferdinand’s, not at first. All who came were black in the darkness. But then Prohibition ended. Color showed in the daylight. Ferdinand’s raised the price of drinks, and the patrons paled. Whites, more affluent than Blacks, wanted to watch them and uplift them by admiring "jungle music." A few knew, however. A few played. Mostly, the whites danced to outrageous rhythms, felt the noise in their limbs, and swung.

**Tradition**

George Washington carried his clarinet case up the familiar steps of the town’s best and brightest night club. The instrument swung at his side unconsciously, his feet likewise moving in a sequence of gestures they performed every night. Pausing on the top step, he lowered his instrument case and fished out a cigarette, striking the match on the soul of his polished shoe. He stood smoking, observing the jarring congested traffic and the electric sunrise which marched swiftly up the street in yellow windows and orange lamplight while a lavender band narrowed above the westward rooftops. A car stopped below the steps and issued a torrent of grinning young men with their dates, all dressed to the nines or as close as each individual could come to it. A boy of around twenty wearing a grey five-dollar suit revealed a shaved head by waving his hat in enthusiastic greeting. On his arm was a truly immense woman dressed like a fire engine. "It’s George! Georgy boy! And he gonna chop this place down with his axe, ain’t that right, George?"

George simply smiled nicely and waved, turning this into a motion to check his watch with a graceful movement of his slender wrist.

"Evening, George," bellowed the date, adding to the fire engine analogy.
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"Evenin, L'Dawn. Hello, boys, come to see the show?"

"Well naturally, boss. None a us would miss it. I told my boys here about you. I says 'that George, now, that nigger can play!' And they all come down to see it." The boy finally replaced his hat and stood looking up at Washington from the curb. His followers shuffled disconcertedly around in the street, kicking pebbles. One boy, extraordinarily tall though his ears made this detail trivial, spoke up hesitantly.

"We heard you's a real hot jazz band. Is'sat true?"

"Nothing sweet about me and the boys," George agreed. He dropped the smoldering cigarette from his long delicate fingers and crushed it underfoot. He looked down as he did this, cutting his eyes upward to squint beneath his hat brim at Willie, a childhood friend. "Do you boys have enough money for the cover charge?"

"Sure we do," said the first boy emphatically. "We got enough. Course, we can't do nothing after that, I mean drink and all."

Washington picked up his case and turned to the doors behind him. "All right, Willie, drinks are on me. But next time, bring a smaller car, OK?"

George gazed up at the chandeliers or out into the velvet-curtained room while he played. Other band members closed their eyes while soloing, then watched one another's motions so that every note matched something the others played. But George watched the room crammed with people stuffing cigarettes and highball glasses into their faces as he added dissonances, inverted melodies, and other tricks no one but musicians would notice. He leaned far back under the influence of a note which slid into the highest register, thus ending his solo through an unarranged signal telling the others to rejoin. "Give the drummer some," he shouted, grinning and waving his arm.

When the progression resolved, everyone rested, allowing the drummer free reign to beat the audience senseless how ever he saw fit.

His exertions caused a pair of glasses to frequently slip down his sweaty nose. Several of the musicians laughed at his attempts to keep four drum sticks moving, plus two feet, plus attempting periodically to push them up again. His mouth uttered skat syllables, subconsciously providing counterpoint for the melody, or vice versa. They conversed as he carried the melody through several transformations, the now-forgotten spectacles slipping neglected down his nose. His dexterity elicited resounding cheers and sympathetic fist-pounding. Everyone moved their bodies despite themselves.
Instruments slid back into velvet-lined cases, the snicking of clasps echoing across the empty room at three a.m. Stale smoke still hung over a smell of spilled jin and perfume saturating the chairs. George Washington once again surveyed Satin Street, saying goodnight to the other musicians beneath Ferdinand’s garishly-lit sign. Once again, the crowd of young couples surrounded their car and jabbered enthusiastically about all they had seen and heard during their night up town.

"Hey George! George, how’s about going riding with us out to the river," Willie yelled. "We got a jug." George’s eyes slowly raked the party, a slight meaningful smile conveying his sentiments. His hand absently patted the wallet in his pants pocket. "No, I don’t think so, boys. Just go on along now."

L’Dawn looked at him rather coldly and tried to pull her man into the car. Meanwhile, the tall youth stood slack-mouthed, breathing whiskey-fetted gas and gazing in puzzlement up at Washington.

"Get off me, L’Dawn!" Willie knocked his girlfriend aside, or attempted to, and shouted up to George. "That’s just fine, Mr. Uptown. I guess we all know how it is." Mutterings rose as the group piled into the car which backfired before jolting away from the curb.

The lights winked out behind him and soon a man appeared, locking the doors. The man was huge, with a basketball-sized head resting on a neck which resembled a smooth ebony tree trunk disappearing beneath his open shirt collar. His stomach and chest looked as heavy and solid as a sandbag or a brick oven. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he removed his white straw hat to reveal his bald forehead, a river-beaten stone.

"George," he said mildly, replacing the hat and handkerchief before shaking Washington’s hand. "Care to go for a ride?" They got into an expensive automobile which materialized in front of the club. "You drive," the big man said.

Three men sat in the back seat, one of which had moved there after driving the car to that point. "Where am I going," asked Washington.

"Oh, we’ll just go up the road a piece. There’s nothing like driving out of town on a nice evening like this, I always say. Have a drink?" He pulled a flask from his coat pocket, taking a swig and then offering it to Washington. When George had taken a few swallows, the big man told him to pass it back to the others. A chorus of "Thanks Mr. Verdun" arose from the back seat as sweaty hands grasped the bottle.

The commercial quarter of town ended abruptly at Ferdinand’s. The road turned from pavement to gravel and the trees closed darkly overhead. Occasional sleeping lonely houses, all shacks, really, formed shadows slightly more black than the surrounding woods, which were quiet except for the usual
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waves of cicadas and treefrogs droning somewhere in the void, plus the car’s tires upsetting the gravel.

"How was the show, George?"
"It went off all right. It’s New Orleans jazz; it always goes about the same."
"You make it sound like something’s wrong with the music." His voice sounded sepulchral in the darkness, and A match gestured wildly as he lit a cigar. "That’s our music. We down here belong to it."

George grunted noncommittally. "My birthright. But I don’t know as I want it anymore. I’m thinking maybe I’ll go up North. There’s a new scene where a man can play his own way and didn’t have to sound like he was born in a swamp, and didn’t have to hire a room full of half-trained musicians who can’t keep up with him." "Georgie boy up North!" Verdun’s neck muscles bulged as he threw his head back to laugh. "Come on, son, we give you a good home down here. You’re good, and you got an audience. Haven’t I took care of you?"

"I’ve got no complaints."
"Good, good. That’s the way I like things. I’s looken in my book the other day, George. You been with me since nineteen thirty-four. Six years. That’s quite a while. But I’m not ready to let you go just yet. No sir, you’re not goin’ anywhere."

George glanced at the darkness beneath the straw hat. "What if I do?"
"Son, I seen a lot of you boys talk about runnen off, but I ain’t never seen one do it, ’cept one or two. Take these boys here." He gestured at the back seat, where his lackeys had drained the bottle and now gazed meekly ahead when mentioned. "They all one time or another said they’d rather die than be a sharecropper." George frowned but made no reply. He turned onto an even more rugged trail which led eventually into cotton and sugarcane.

"I’m heading for home. You gonna tell me what I’m on this joy ride for?"
"Oh," rumbled Verdun, "I almost clean forgot. I saw you bothering my girl the other day, just like I’ve told you not to. Now, George, I don’t want to hear about you so much as looking at her from now on. You understand me?" At last, Verdun’s voice accrued definite emotion, slow smoldering rage.

"What if I do," repeated George angrily.
"Then you gonna die, nigga!"
"Help me get to Chicago or New York. Then I won’t bother her."
"Listen to me, boy. You are gonna stay right here, and play our music in my club, and you ain’t touching my daughter no how."
Washington found himself standing alone on the road bordering a familiar cotton field as the car made dust and disappeared. The sun rose.

He walked a narrow trail separating two high fields until he approached the falling-down shack he called home. Far behind the shack stood the main house, small against the eastern horizon. Nearer by, a young girl in a faded gingham dress worked her way down a cotton row. George approached her, squatting on his heels to watch her wrench the sticky bowls from their stalks and push them into the canvas sack draped across her round belly like a kangaroo pouch. The sun stared at them at almost eye level, but its heat already beaded Washington’s brow. He mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, then slapped at a fat plaguesome mosquito. Washington had a long ovular head with delicate features and a narrow chin which now rested in his palm as he stared at the girl.

"Dulcinia, why are you out here picking cotton? Why aren’t your daddy and brothers out here instead?"

"They all gone fishing. Mamma said I best get on out here so that something gets done today."

"Mmmm," George said. "Your daddy ain’t gone fishing, I just left him." Receiving no response, he continued. "How long’s it been since you saw him, your pa?"

"I don’ know. Couple of days."

His eyes followed the contractions and stretchings of her back, legs, and rear. "Dulcy, I’m goin’ to marry you one of these days."

Dulcinia did not stop work or look around. "Pa say you ain’t goin to."

George glanced eastward, but the intervening plants shielded them from the house. "You said yourself he’s not around. He’s liven in town with a lady friend, Dulcy. He don’t care about you out here, cept keeping you away from no-good musicians. He’s goin’ to sell this place, and then what you plannen on doin’?"

"Pa owns all this. He say he the only one to own his own place."

"The only Colored man, you mean. But the next man to own it’s goin’ to be White. Where you plannen to go then?"

"I don’ know."

"You’ll have to go somewheres else."

"No," she said.

"Dulcinia, he runs a night club now. He don’t have to farm. You think he’ll let you stay here?"

"I don’ know."

"So I heard. You come with me, and you won’t have to pick cotton for nobody. We’ll keep that
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round bottom of yours nice and soft."

Dulcinia said nothing, but merely worked further down the row without straightening her back. The stalks bent themselves towards her with a rustle, then leaned back into the unbroken blue dome when she passed. Dry grass cracked under George's shoes as he stood. "All right, Dulcy. All right. One of these mornings, though. You're Fourteen years old. Did you know that? And one of these mornings, Dulcy, I'm coming for you. But don't you worry, I'm not goin' to let anything hurt you 'til then" He began walking toward the shack, fanning himself with his hat. An electrical cable ran from George's one-room shed to the main house, the cable powering a single light bulb, which was not currently turned on, and a small oscillating fan which blew heat from the open window onto George's sleeping body.

Deep In The Shed

George let the clarinet fall from his lips and rest in his lap. He listened for the knock to come again, hearing the night reborn across the land and sky. Watching the door, feeling tense, he waited and the knock came.

The fan turned its face slowly around and was slightly seen by the moon. In the dark he put a cigarette between his lips and struck fire. The matchbox fell on the bed beside him and he looked at the light switch. George breathed smoke shakily, hearing things outside the room—rustling, murmuring, voices, muffled beyond the walls. The pounding on the door grew more insistent.

The fan blades gradually slowed and sighed to a stop, his hand remaining there while his breath likewise grew silent to hear. Something very heavy slammed against the door, which shook before his eyes and burst apart. Widened eyes saw the massive frame break the hanging splinters; it was Verdun. Others, toadies, framed him with faces barely seen around his bulk.

"Georgie." The voice was low, cajoling, and full of death. "I come to see you, George." Whiskey saturated his breath as he muttered incoherently. "Ah, George. I asked you nice. I asked you nice at first. Why didn't you listen? Why couldn't you have done what I said. I was your friend and now I got to take care of you for good. George! I don't like to do this." Verdun had stepped inside the doorway and two cronies entered, one on either side. His speech lapsed into more almost inaudible mumblings which gradually fell into a rasping cough.

The two men stripped the coarse blanket from Washington's bed and threw it over him, holding him with their arms so he could not move as Verdun raised the stick of black jack in his hand. Washington's voice came from beneath the blanket, calling everything a misunderstanding. His words
tried to strike deals until the methodical blows from the blackjack crumbled his words into cries which grew more pained and urgent by the blow. The cries broke into sobs, then assembled words which begged.

Still shrouded in the blanket, huddled on the floor, George ceased his cries and sensed that his tormenters, now through the door, had gone away. Painfully George writhed out of the bed clothes and tore at the moonlight with his eyes. The light discovered nothing but a single hinge straining to support the door; voices, footsteps, a cough, told George the men had not entirely left.

Air came harshly into his tortured lungs, but he felt better for a while just to feel himself alone inside the shed despite the presences beyond. Then he felt the damp pool against his face and saw it staining darkly from gashes along his face and torso. "Claude," he called faintly. "You got me, Claude. You made your point so don't leave me here like this. Get me a doctor, Claude." There came no response but the gradual retreating crunch of boots on the gravel road. "Claude! I'm dying! Don't leave me here like this!" Washington's voice rang around the narrow walls and into the field. Now a laugh returned on the wind, sounding from naked decaying gums somewhere under the moon.

"Listen to you now." The voice belonged to one of Verdun's men. "The smart nigger too high to work the field. Play all night and sleep. Don't worry, George, we'll send someone out for you." jeers drifted back from the throat as it retreated.

Blood stretched itself darkly across the floor. In time the short breaths grew more ragged and regular, the eyes closing after the car retreated. To the hum of night birds and frogs and bugs was added now the neglected screech of metal in the hinge. Swaying, straining, holding, the hinge let in the night and blocked it again with the broken door.

An hour's slow procession passed within the shed. Wings lifted off the roof and carried a mockingbird song toward the river.

When smoke and ash drifting down to touch his face finally opened the prone man's eyes, he came around to the vision of dancing flames caught among the rafters. A chorus seemed to stand there, swaying and talking in low tones. In the instant before he was able to move, George began to make sense of the flames and distinguished their slow dance from the words which came from all-too familiar throats. Willie was out there, as was the extraordinarily tall boy who drooled, whatever his name was, plus all the others George had stood drinks for just the night before. Fire crept down the walls now, almost grasping the floor in its embrace. Even the flames dimmed under a thickness of smoke which sat in Washington's
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chest like a burrowing animal. He rolled himself in the blanket still near at hand, putting out the clinging
smolders in his eyebrows and hair, then crawled to a window. Dimly, he made out faces peering in,
though they could not have seen anything. He cast about him with his eyes from where he crouched on
the plank floor and saw one wall, engulfed by fire, which contained no window. The rafters on this side
stood threads away from collapse, yet the flames talked on every other side. Taking up his shroud for a
short time, he threw his injured shoulder against the wood until the weakened boards and roof beams gave.
He found himself lying outside, still scorched by the needles which sucked the oxygen from his body.
Dimly conscious, he crawled into the cotton field a dozen yards behind his shed, there collapsing on his
back in the presence of sky and growing things.

"Ya- y- y- you think he’s dead yet?" It was the tall boy, stooping above Willie who gazed at the
conflagration with calmly folded arms. "Shaw he must be suffocated by now, right? He shaw played
good music. I never heard anything like it. Ah, I ain’t frettin’ nothing, Willie, don’t say that. I ain’t
turning on nobody. I likes having the five dollars just like you. I just wished he hadn’t gone and upset
Mister Verdun like he done. Cause Mister Verdun, he gonna take caure of things with or without us, ain’t
that right, Willie?"

The final standing timbers fell. The men encircled a bonfire, not a dwelling place. Still on his
back in the weeds and stalks, George could faintly hear their words above the roar and could discern their
shapes moving, casting ludicrous shadows behind them, when another voice and shape ambled from
behind the fire. It was a fleshy hill of a man whose countenance might in daylight appear stupid and
friendly, but which now seemed stupid and mirthless, its features carved in distorted flickering shadows.

"That fire sure is hot. I don’t believe I ever felt so hot in my life. Well, it looks like old George
Washington should have stuck to playing gospels. That’d serve him a lot better now." He yawned
expansively. "You know I am plum wore out. I’m goin home and I tell you fellas, this here was all a
dream, and I hope you understand that." The fire popped, burning hands shielding him from George’s
view.

"What am I goin to do," George muttered. "God damn, that shack went up like a matchbox. Built
up from the ground, now burned back down to it, and I guess I never knew how long I’d been there until
I looked up and saw the roof on fire." Now Willie alone still watched the blaze, as calmly as ever.
"What the hell did you have against me, you sorry ass nigger? Was it because I don’t wear patched up
overalls the whole year round, or was it because you were beholden to me?" All this George asked
himself vaguely in his head. "Burned to the ground again. Nothing holding me now." His battered lips
curved upward slightly as he repeated this thought softly aloud. "Nothin here but me on the ground just
almost as stark naked as the ground was before that shack stood up out of the dirt."

"A shame about that nice clarinet a-your’n," Willie said to the fire. "I might’a taken me some music lessons. Taught myself down by the riva." The young man went so far as to poke at the crackling heap of flaming timbers with a board, idly searching for the instrument. The yellow dancers swayed in a shifting chorus oblivious both to Willie and, deep in the darkness, Washington. Finally, Willie dropped the two by four into the fire and walked off. Slowly, the roar died and the dancers bowed to the earth.

**Summertime**

"Dulcy! Dulcy!" George stood barefoot on the dry grass, clinging to the open window. There was no car parked outside. "Dulcy!" He could just make out her sleeping form lying atop the bed clothes. "Dulcy, are you deaf?" Still receiving no responding motion, George’s impatience made him unscrew the screen from its frame and climb clumsily into her bedroom followed by the moonlight. Taking the warm damp flesh of her arm and shaking her lightly, he called her name again in a voice which would not awaken others in the house. Her eyes flew open, as did her mouth, poised in a scream which Washington aborted with the palm of his hand. "Don’t scream, Dulcy. It’s just me, George. You going to scream if I take my hand away?" She nodded, wide-eyed. "No you ain’t. I got to have your help, Dulcy. They came for me tonight—your pa, I mean. They almost killed me, and I got to go now."

No sooner had he removed his hand to allow her to speak than she loosed her tongue and hands simultaneously, as if her brain, fists, and mouth operated as a single unit.

"What you breaken into my house fo in da middle a da night!" George tried in vain to shield his face from her meaty hands which pummelled him as she scolded him in a voice instinctively too soft to carry out of the room. "All you got on’s a pair a shorts and you all indecent and bleeding all over my room, what you breaken in here fo? Get out!"

Finally, Washington caught her wrists in his hands. He perched now close to her on the edge of her bed, the two gazing open-mouthed at one another. Again, with the cessation of her physical assault, her words halted, too. "I don’t plan on hurting you, Dulcy," he repeated. Then he suddenly laughed. "I don’t believe I ever touched you before. You’re a pretty little girl, all right, in a pretty little nighty... EVERYBODY ASLEEP?" She nodded slowly, still staring open-mouthed at him. George got up and reached for the door. "Your brother Sammy is out cat housing, I reckon. I’ll be right back."

Dulcinia did not move at all while he was gone, not a muscle except to breathe. The door opened momentarily and George stepped quietly in wearing her brother’s pants, shirt, and brogans, all sizes too
large. He smiled, seeing her laugh at him behind her hand. "I never saw you wear nothin but a suit
before. Hey, now what you doin'?$"

From her wardrobe he pulled the few clothes she possessed other than her field clothes and threw
them on the bed. A canvas sack landed beside them. "Get dressed, and put the rest of your things in
there. We got to go." Before her open mouth could begin yelling, he continued. "You want to pick
cotton the rest of your life? You want to stoop over when you’re old because you can’t stand up, and be
uglier than a prune from the sun and have hands all scabbed over 'til you’re and old woman? Now come
on."

Zombie-like, she followed. They emerged from the front door into the free, expansive night.
Stealing a mule from the barn, they moved to a slow rhythm, she pressing tight against his back. The
moon was down when the animal’s plodding feet halted behind the train station, having swung its head
dumbly across half a dozen miles of engulfing wood and smooth cotton field horizons.

Dulcinia sat, dumbly hanging her legs over the platform’s edge, watching a toad squat by a clump
of grass, seeming to sing to her. Washington’s noise attempting to wake the attendant shocked the frog,
and it disappeared.

George produced a wad of bills and a handful of coins he had taken from Verdun’s bedroom. The
attendant sleepily exchanged them for two tickets while saying with a yawn that the train would arrive
in half an hour. When George returned to Dulcinia, he found her crying.

"Hush, Dulcy, hush." Awkwardly, he put his arm around her shaking shoulder. "Don’t you cry."

"Hey nigger," called the attendant, leaning out his window. Washington scowled at him. What
are you doing with that kid, anyhow?" His eyes glowered suspiciously down at them.

"We’re going to see a sick relative. She’s my baby sister."

"That true, kid?"

Washington looked at her. She nodded without raising her eyes.

There came a low moan from the far distance, sounding at first like two voices but merging at
last into one. Dulcinia shuddered, glancing around in fear, peering into the black trees which stopped a
few yards beyond the track. Thunder rumbled faintly through the ground, though the stars were
unconcealed. She settled herself to wait for it to come.

A light flickered while the wailing came again, its sound seeming to separate into self and other
with the landscape’s whim, then the light shone unbroken as the train rounded the last bend and charged
toward the platform. Immense, faceless, cyclopean, it somehow spurred Verdun’s image in George’s
mind. They got to their feet, George slinging the canvas bag over his shoulder and taking Dulcinia by
the elbow while they watched the cars roll past, slowing, squealing, grinding to a stop.

They waited several minutes while yawning, stretching men drifted into the train station from the front of the train, disappearing within the building to return later holding cups of coffee and still exchanging a few meaningless sounds with the attendant. One man glanced at George and Dulcinia, nodded, then climbed up between two cars and entered the train. A light came on, doors in the side of the car opening to reveal the man gesturing to the pair on the platform. "Come on, Dulcy, we're going."

"Where to?"

The silent conductor watched them uninterestedly as they stepped past him into the vacant and unswept car. George replied, "We're going off. We're going somewhere new where you won't have to ruin yourself doing men's work and I... I won't have any Claude Verdun to own me. And I won't live in no shed."

"What's gonna happen to me?"

The train began to move, pulling reluctantly forward as if it were a human tired of its load and the circular road. The attendant sat at his desk, resting his head on a crooked arm and staring out the window. An engineer who had gotten off the train was talking, but the attendant barely heard his words. He was watching the two lights receding on the back of the train, a red light and a blue one like mismatched eyes. They always did something to the attendant, but he could never, so long as he had sat and watched the trains depart, never figure out just what the eyes were saying to him. The next man to occupy his chair arrived, footsteps creaking across the warped floorboards as the newcomer poured a cup of coffee and came to stand behind him. The attendant said good morning, left the building, and drove home before sunrise.

Concierto

The sun rose over the Mississippi River, arms of shadow stretching across the muddy still water while the train blew its whistle and moved up the bank. She watched him watching the window as, following a few minutes of crisp dawn sunlight, clouds swept in bringing rain which bent toward them and streaked the glass barrier. As the car filled with people through the morning, she continued to stare at the contours of George's face, questioning. At each stop, passengers created a random tide flowing rearward into and out of the car as the train began pulling forward once more. They moved all around them, jostling them inadvertently, but no one spoke to them or seemed to notice the girl and man staring blankly across at one another. On the rim of the Great Plains, George watched a field on fire, smoke
drifting up from an anonymous point on the horizon. He slapped a palm on the rattling window and cursed the unseen fire.

The long, dully-glinting rusted metallic shell pulled itself steadily across America’s endless summer field, its internal human current shifting and circulating like the body’s blood while cities fell behind. George dozed during the hottest hours, his eyes closed and envisioning where the train would finally deposit him, imagining it to be the very end of the train’s journey. He imagined the city which saw so many faces approaching out of their dark pasts, faces floating inland from the water and turned upward to the Lady, faces entering the labyrinth where the shed could be forgotten, New York City in the early 1940’s. His drowsing reverted head could not see the future dingy apartment, lit by one low-powered naked bulb, switched on constantly because windows stood against high-bricked lightless alleys. He will stand in a pawn shop buying a new clarinet while Dulcinia leaves the apartment in search of a better promise, hunting a memory which never touched her deep enough at the time though she will want badly to find it. It will not matter, though; naturally, eternally, the memory will not return.

George’s head turned slightly back and forth with the rocking car. Half-wakeful, he hummed a string of notes, keeping subconscious time to the clicking wheels. Awake, he would try in vain to remember this dreamed song; Dulcinia would not have heard or paid attention to it, and all his efforts to reach inward toward it with theory would fail. Meanwhile, Dulcinia stared out the window as the train rose into low foothills covered with woodland, not entirely unlike the land around her father’s farm. Those trees stood elsewhere, alive still. She couldn’t see them, but they were there as her mind drifted back, darkening into sleep.

Vicarity

I boarded a southbound monorail in the Dallas district, stepping from the thronged concrete slab which was the platform into the passenger car’s silver box-like midsection. The conductor had already cried “All aboard,” and the train began vibrating with motion as I passed forward to stow my suitcase. The train was crowded, almost every seat being occupied by screaming children, impoverished ethnic parents, and the Great Unwashed. Disposing of my bag, I decided to try finding a seat on the second level, and felt better immediately on emerging from the cramped stairwell. It was quieter here, less congested, dotted with passengers who seemed more the type who, like myself, felt a need to rise out of the crowd. My eyes picked their way from seat to seat, observing first a pair of college students seated
across the aisle from one another, talking animatedly as if they had just met, their sleeping bags and back
packs strewn over adjacent seats. Lone women with their young seemed to dominate the next rearward
area, women of all kinds. Such a one, a short, slightly squat domestic, begged my pardon as she bumped
me with her weeping, squalling bundle. Then came an island of almost complete calm, where hissing
air vents and the train's slight rumble played to rows all empty, save one.

Lighting on a tall, gaunt blonde woman reading a magazine, my eyes ceased their wanderings.
Her age I placed at that peak where blossoming maturation levelled off while decline still waited several
years in the future. The crossed legs below a dark, knee-length skirt filled out their form, as did the
quietly self-evident shape beneath skirt and blouse. Approaching, I saw a boy, perhaps eight, curled in
his seat with his close-cropped brown hair resting against her shoulder. There were other seats more
isolated, but noticing the magazine she held was the New Yorker, the scales of my interest tipped and I
took a seat across the aisle. Beyond my window, rising concrete and glass buildings gradually gave way
to lower, more widely-spaced chain stores and apartments. Encroaching on these areas were more sky
scrapers, describing a cycle which would continue all the way to the Houston district, my destination.

"That's a magazine I've never enjoyed as much as I thought I was supposed to," I said when she
finally removed her glasses and focussed on the blurring scenery. She started slightly, turning to
blink at me. Her eyes were blue, over high cheekbones like loving cups sitting on a mantel. Pale but full
lips parted slightly, then decided to smile as she looked at my face. "To be honest," she said without
putting away the smile, "I was just comparing some of the poems in here to a few scraps of paper I found
in my dresser drawer and threw away. The articles are well-written, though."

She wrote poetry. "My name is Diver, by the way." She told me hers, but my mind was busy
naming many other beasts, some of them in pairs, to grasp what she had called herself. "Are you a
teacher by any chance?" I inquired.

"Of sorts." The child, awake now, asked his mother for money, then disappeared. The woman
and I kept up a steady conversation. She turned out to be a horseback riding instructor. I turned out to
be the English teacher. She was surprised, saying I looked like I had a more active lifestyle than that.

"I have a question for you," I said. "It's been bothering me ever since I arrived at the station that
there seem to be a lot of lone women with their children. No men. Far more than on most planes, maybe
because this way is less expensive. But I can't help wondering if all these people, it must be half the
passengers, are all single mothers, or if they're meeting someone. I mean, I've been out of the mainstream
for a while, but is the divorce rate that high?"

"Yep," she sighed, "it is." I looked at her hands, long and slender, smooth-skinned, devoid of
"I'm still surprised. I always think of women as re-marrying or at least being with someone."

"Sometimes it's by choice. And sometimes we're just picky." But the smile was back, and it brought a pair of friends in her brimming loving cup eyes. "And you?"

I looked down at my right hand protruding from the gray wool cuff of my sports coat. It lay on one leg of my slacks, large, tan, sporting a large and extravagant wedding ring. "Separated," I said, realizing then that it was probably true. "I'm visiting my sister in Houston for a while to think some things through."

"We were in the Tulsa district visiting my parents. I live in Houston." She waited for me to suggest something like "let's get together for lunch sometime" and ask for her phone number. Just then, scampering up the aisle came the other half of "we," his hand grasping a half-gone ice cream bar, the other half being spread across his cherubic face. While they exchanged words, I turned and felt a slight coldness edging in through the window. The train's shadow lay on the semi-frosted ground. Otherwise, the view consisted of rank after rank of windmills, all turning with the synchronous, urgent precision of an immense drum line. Following Don Quixote's example, I tried to make them look like giants. In fact, as the columns shot by, each one stretching back to some immobile distance, they did cease to be windmills and became ranks of gargantuan humanity, all exerting their arms to a rhythm giving power to entire cities—"ra-ta-ta-ta-ta." Something else, though, loomed into view, dwelling near the distant horizon. I tried to place it within this new perception, but every shifting angle jarred it somehow. It was an alien from an H. G. Wells classic, or an elephant whose trunk touched the ground. It was a rusted metallic hulk, a long abandoned oil rig left to stand idle for more than fifty years. I could not decide what this structure would be in my personified image.

The woman introduced her son, who fixed me with timid, slightly widened eyes that made me feel very large, very foreign, possibly threatening. I smiled. "I'm going down to the lounge car. Anybody want something?" I left my seat and hid in the snack bar for the rest of the trip.

When I stepped down onto another crowded concrete slab, lit by florescent glare, I looked around and saw my sister's friend wave. In something besides a torn leather jacket with an oddly bulging right pocket, with a hair cut and a shave, with eyes that didn't look quite so much like those of a subterranean rat, the man might have looked like someone who wouldn't steal your children and sell them to buy drugs. Tossing my luggage into the back seat, he started the softly-humming electric motor as I settled myself. "Fine," I replied to his greeting, "What are you up to these days?"

"Just things here and there. I'm living lean for a while with some friends. We got a warehouse
downtown we’re staying in. If you got friends, you always got a place to lay for a while, you know? We squeeze a little power off the public juice line now and then and do all right. Nobody knows the dif."

"How’s my sister doing?"

"Walker? Oh, she’s great, of course. She’s like me. She always gets along. She’s got friends."

To access the highway, we had to cross over a track just beyond the station. The gate was down and the warning light flashing, the bell ringing, but the gate extended across the road only part-way. He craned his neck to look down the track and accelerated as he continued talking. "There’s always the stuff ready for you to get along with; you just got to be ready to use it. Something’s always happening for people like Walker and me." A train hit us.

1

He becomes aware of the dry ridged cavern and the porous blind animal reaching into it, tied to his will. It traces the clammy dome, the new mind within it finding nothing familiar, either in soft palette or the angled fence of spears which suddenly close upon it, opening vague streams and the echoing yellow-white wall called pain. The mind extends outward to become this cave, then upward further until the creature finds eyes, which he opens. Variegated white shade like curtains back a woman’s water-stained picture face. He works the eyes open and closed, finding also another mechanism to push and pull sight so that the woman’s face approaches focus. He bights the tongue once more as incorrect muscles strain to see if it is Walker. The image, however, remains shrouded in unclarity and stands at the end of twin tunnels. More muscles twitch awake between the eyes and mouth. She wears a strange expression, pre-verbal relief parting lips while eyes somehow mirror his own questions. His mouth opens and closes while awareness creeps down to master the neck.

"Sis." Echoes from a tin can vibrate in his skull, feeling its outlines. "Sis am I going to be all right?"

"Yes you are," Walker explodes, hysterically tittering and eyes wide with something. He tries to find his hand from within. "Thank God you’re alive Diver." Her voice sounds different, too.

Another voice, disembodied, sounds even more distant to him. Roaming eyes discover a window through which he discerns the dim figure of a woman, her hair caught under a nurse’s cap. "Awake, are we? How are we feeling?" As she speaks, he hears a machine emitting electronic beeps which must match the rhythm in his chest. "Fuck we, lady. When will this anaesthetic wear off? I feel like I’m on remote control."
Vicar  ity

"Please watch your language. I'll get Dr. Fatima."

The voice vanishes with an electric click. Walker asks how he feels. He tries to tell her. "How bad is my condition? I'm starting to feel things."

"That's good," she replies, but doesn't answer more. He explores the cottony mass which he believes is his right arm. An unwarming sunlight disperses the fog there as he feels fingers flexing. Working, he detects weight building near his hand and knows the elbow is lifting it. "Why are you looking at me like that, Sis?" A hand swims across his view, dropping with his sudden surprise. "Walker! Walker, was that my hand?" He struggles to say this, taming the strange gross thing like clay in the distorted mouth until he finally hears his own tinny, fearful growl. His neck turns so that he beholds a long, sinewy, hairy stick the end of which sprouts a shaking wrinkled hand as grey and flabby as a tuna.

"Hello, Diver. It's good to see you coming around at last." A small man sits, rolling silently close to Diver's head.

Ignoring the doctor, he tries to move his other arm. When it doesn't respond, the muscles in the front of his neck contract, raising the skull so the eyes discern another grey limb strapped down and penetrated by an I.V.

"You should feel very lucky, Diver. It took several days of intense surgery, much of which was under the hands of the world's foremost neurologist Dr. James Beam before we could even hazard the hope that you would survive."

"What has happened to me, Doc? Why does my voice sound so strange, and what the hell have you done to my arms?"

After a pause, the doctor sighs. "Diver, as I said, you're lucky to be alive. Your body was entirely crushed when the train hit your side of the car. It's no small miracle that we could get to you before your brain cells had become seriously depolarized. As it stood, we had only one alternative, a procedure never tried before. It's a truly remarkable concept—revolutionary, to say the least. Diver, there was another man in our hospital who died of asphyxiation. He drowned, perhaps he intended it, and his family rushed him here when they discovered him. However, it was much too late. You had an intact brain without a viable body while he possessed the converse. We cannot perform brain transplants, of course, but researchers have been proposing an astounding new approach to cases such as yours involving extensive cooperation with computers and computerized microscopic probes. We were able to induce polarization into the inactive brain, then further establish electrochemical patterns entirely identical to those in your brain, neuron for neuron, synapse for synapse, down to the edge of the subcortex. There, in the
so-called 'lizard brain,' the cells had not yet decayed, which is why the procedure could be a success. After all, we could not begin to superimpose the mental processes for kinesthetic control or organ operation from your old body onto an entirely new canvas, the body your thoughts now occupy. In short, we made you a whole new man. The other occupant of the car, by the way, was slightly luckier. The train pushed you a great distance before it halted, and the other gentleman suffered several broken ribs and--"

He wants to scream. Even more, he desires to feel his hands shattering the doctor’s windpipe. Even Walker must suffer, and the patronizing bitch behind the glass. Yet, he does not move. After all, he constitutes merely one dead man’s remains within reach of three living humans, within a world of many more. His scream emerges as a semi-verbal moan, and his lashing out forms itself into an endlessly shaking head and palms softly beating his bed sheet. The doctor’s hand now holds an emptied syringe.

"I’m sorry, Diver. This must be too much for any person to bear right now. Sleep for a while and we’ll talk more later."

Small eyes, red and watery, regard him from their cavernous sockets wreathed in loose skin. His forehead overhangs the rest of his face, cheeks sinking inward below the eye sockets until they meet a jowly mouth now half-open in disbelief. A bony hand appears, touches the chin hesitantly, then scratches dry dead skin cells from his jaw. Diver watches them peel away and the skin underneath grow raw. "Frankenstein’s monster," he says. "That’s what I look like. Take the damned thing away." The nurse lowers the hand mirror, her browse wrinkling like two puppies bumping one another beneath a blanket.

"The doctor says you should begin trying to walk today."

"Walk? Nurse, I’m still so pumped full of drugs I can’t see straight or hear or touch or anything else. When is all this going to wear off? When will I start feeling like a human being again?"

"Dr. Fatima thinks you should try walking."

He sighs. "All right. Will you help me up?"

"Of course."

He waits. "Well?"

She approaches, hesitantly placing a hand in the space between them. "See if you can sit up first."

It is an hour before he achieves, without help, an upright posture leaning heavily on the bedpost. Two more hours pass before he can orchestrate his body into a crude shambling walk to the bathroom, following which he collapses into bed, sweating and exhausted. The nurse brings him a tray of food, then leaves as Walker arrives.
Vicinity

Eating is slow. He requires more than a minute to manipulate each bight, for the plate slides evasively under his pressure, and there is always the difficulty of chewing the food without it spilling out again. "Walker, how is all this being paid for?"

"Oh, they're in contact with your insurance people."

"The school district health plan isn't going to pay for all this."

"They'll work it out. Did you see your flowers?" She crosses to a vase of roses. "Your wife was here. She came down as soon as the hospital called her. She had to leave, though."

"Does she know what they did? Does she know I'm awake?"

"Yes and I think so. You should call her soon. It was quite a shock for her. Diver. When she got here, you were already... it was already done."

His hand brushes over his skull and face. "I'm horrible. No, shut up. Don't contradict me. This body is old. I was thirty-two years old; he must be nearly fifty. The corpse, I mean."

"Look, Diver. Your old body was, well, great. I envied you because you were always so popular without even trying. You could always get the right job or win the game, and you had a gorgeous wife, although I'll admit your marriage has looked shaky the last few years. Okay, so you're not an Adonis anymore, I'll level with you. But get over it. You had an accident and you lived. You can still walk, speak, read, and all the other things that are important to you."

"Why didn't my wife stay?"

"I don't know. She said something about it, but I can't remember what it was."

"You know I was coming to see you so I could have time to think things through about her and me. I guess whatever I thought doesn't matter now. But you, Sis, how can you still think of me as your brother?"

"Why the hell wouldn't I? As far as I'm concerned, you're the same. What does it matter to me what you look like?"

Although he does not hear the door, he now watches from a great distance as the blonde nurse gathers up the messy tray. "How was it?" she asks.

"I couldn't taste it at all. Hospital food is bad, but I mean this had no taste at all. I don't think my nose is working. I WANT to talk to Fatima as soon as possible to see when the drugs will wear off."

The nurse bights down on her lower lip as she pauses, still holding the tray. "I checked your chart. You're not on any anaesthetic." She vaguely notices her front teeth pinching her pink lower lip in trepidation. "I'll get Dr. Fatima."

The doctor's mustache twitches below thick, horn-rimmed spectacles like an epileptic caterpillar. "We
did not transplant your brain. We induced its patterns electrochemically. Nor were any other organs
tampered with, so no potential for rejection existed. The liver, however, was in severely damaged
condition due to alcohol overconsumption. We did what we could, but you will need to care for it, and
it may give you pain from time to time. However, neither in this case or any other part of your procedure
warranted use of anaesthetic. After all, until your brain began functioning in its new environment, the
subject was a cadaver. So, you see, there was no necessity for drugs in your system at the time you
awoke. Far from it, we wanted your experiences to be unclouded."

"They’re not unclouded. They are and have been continuously cloudy since yesterday, or
whenever it was I came out of it. I am not IN this body at all. I can move it, but these eyes are like
vidphones halfway out of focus, everything I hear seems to be filtered through a fish bowl, and touching
something feels like trying to feel one fingertip with another. The sensations cancel and all you feel is
pressure. Only, in my case, it's not that the sensations get mixed, it's that they don't reach me in the first
place. And what about my sense of smell? I can’t smell or taste anything at all!"

"No sense of smell," the doctor muses, recording something on his note pad. "Yes, that is too bad.
But you must keep in mind that this is a highly complex procedure. The region of the subcortex which
controls smell is rather small in modern humans, and at least some mistakes in pattern induction were
inevitable." The doctor frowns at his notebook, the caterpillar below his nose going limp with exhaustion.

"Doctor, when will my OTHER senses become fully functional?"

The other looks up. "Sir, they are as fully functional now as they are likely to become. I'm
extremely sorry that these compatibility problems occurred, I truly am. I will let you talk to our
rehabilitation counsellor, if you like. However, you must come to grips with the fact that this is who you
are now, and this is how you will remain."

A pretty young woman, a rehabilitation counsellor, takes Diver for a walk through a garden of the
infirm. Like pilot lights, a score of beaming do-goods walk or roll along the tended paths before their
charges, who walk or limp or hop or roll behind them. Disfigured faces and bandage masks, mangled
and missing limbs, chests tortured by breath, and eyes daunted by experience shuffle behind the images of
wellness urging them on to overcome. Diver passes an old man with no legs staring glumly at the
enormous woman, also in a wheelchair, who emphasizes the dietary needs for reducing his sedentary
weight. There comes a riot of screeching electric noises from somewhere on the path ahead. "That music
makes me feel like dancing. Do you dance, Diver?"

He stares down at her. "Is that music? I can’t make it out." Rounding a tree-lined turn, he sees
a pale woman touching her hand to a speaker. Her other hand plus one foot jerkily attempt to keep time. Her perky beacon smiles and nods. "Don't the flowers smell beautiful?"

Diver turns his eyes until his counsellor floats blurrily into view. She lifts her beaming face, gingerly grasping a flower stalk which she sniffs and bends toward him. His hand goes out, snapping the stalk from its plant. He grins, shoves the flower into his mouth, swallows, and ambles further into the carnival of sorrows.

In the early evening, Walker arrives to take him home with her. He has not needed to stay in the hospital long because he is not sick. Observation will continue, but certain ambiguities in Diver's insurance make his payment of hospital bills questionable. On Walker's arm, he steps through the front doors, emerging onto a street where he is blinded by a sunset reflected from hundreds of glass windows in buildings and cars. With every motion now introducing new obstacles, he clings to her and wishes momentarily for a return to the cavernous hospital and its sheltered degraded garden, but instead he treads the blinding course, mind piercing sensation's filmy swarm.

He lives best in the past, travels in those woods discovering animals that, like his dreams now, speak more to him than the present. Diver's memories, echoed deeds fastened on to make them seem more real, achieve full extension via his natural body; he remembers doing things, his hands' sense of touch, musical sounds, shielding his eyes to look down a cliff face at the sea, and smells. Dreams recall ghosts to his mind; that his newborn grave commends him to a heavenward climb, they touch Diver with ectoplasmic fingers, tempting his emotions like a specter from a bottle, like a loved one from a scent. "I keep dreaming about the times when I was a cliff diver. I can still feel the fall, arching myself--my old self--above the waterfall spray. And I can remember being underwater, my hand breaking the surface. But my dreams never include both. I jump, but wake up in the instant I would hit the water, and this monster I've become rocks the bed when I bolt awake. Even worse are the submerged dreams, disoriented and full of living things. I can't remember, and my dreams don't ever touch, the moment of hitting the water--that instant where each part of my body goes below, or when I move across it."

The room is a dark collage of flickering shadows cast by a lone orange flame. Diver sees the shadows only, not their antecedents, but if Walker exists only as a region of warmer blackness possessing motion independent of the flame, then perhaps he might be a voice devoid of its disproportionate body, an unrelated voice whose words can stand against the dark in the same way that words on a page struggle
to evoke being from nothingness. "I was in awe of you," Walker says softly. "We kids would all stop swimming, look up, and there you were. I’m sure you stood there posturing until you were damn sure all us girls saw you, but it didn’t matter. You were like a demi-god, and you were my big brother. It’s too bad we all had to grow up."

He recollects her with more clarity than his present senses can provide. He knows thick black shoulder-length hair framing a heart-shaped pale face, large grey eyes and full lips; a white blouse around a waist incredibly narrow but flaring out to wide bust and hips; large square hands protruding from the sleeves, embarrassed at the ends of their tiny wrists; her favorite knee-length skirt stopping just short of her boots. He knew the girl splashing around the cliff base, knew her first-time broken heart, and the woman broken into by lessons that bread was made from no better than wheat, or earth no better than mud. "Always searching, always finding, never stopping; You and yours, the too-close victims of a kiss. She springs many-folded from her box to be Unfurled by a Digger’s promise And a gift of roses, cherished in their season." His voice sounds internally like a garbage disposal.

"What poem was that?" Walker asks. Diver cannot hear any inflection in the tone, which is usual now.

"I wrote that for you almost ten years ago right after your relationship with what’s his name ended."

"Hmm. I don’t remember it. You should start writing again, you know?"

"I despise writing."

"Then why did you used to write poetry?"

"I sweated all day over a blank screen, locked in a darkened room, trying to put down in print what took five minutes to experience. And all this in the name of remembering what it means to be alive. It doesn’t work. Not for me, at least. Why did I do it, you ask? That’s the scary part; I felt like it."

"Fine, then don’t write. Start swimming again instead. Isn’t that counsellor from the hospital helping you learn how again?"

"Yeah, that’s right, he is. The good news is, I can’t feel the water stinging my eyes. All I feel is cold when I fall in, then numb, then even colder after I climb out." He runs the fingers of one hand across the ridged back of the other. "Maybe I will start writing."

The city constitutes itself before Diver as a seamless terrain of faint, background roar and obstacles where his previous self would have found none. Vague shapes move in the distance, beings which Diver’s sight or touch or hearing cannot comprehend any more than through a fog, except the sudden gaps or
stumps which crack his feet or shins or head. He remains more victim to the world than actor on it. "I’m a writer, too," says the counsellor. "I drive racecars sometimes, and I write about that. Racing novels. It’s easy to write about what you know. Thank the lord your interests aren’t going to be hampered by your impairments. What do you write?"

"Poetry, mainly." He navigates by mysterious means, counting steps to judge time, peering into the fog to turn random structures into landmarks. He picks through the flat multi-colored canvas of noise to find his fellows, and finds avenues as into them he stumbles. "Olympic Tower." Diver reads the words aloud, squinting at the enormous blocked characters above a building’s entrance.

"Very good, Diver. You made a couple of wrong turns and stepped too soon into the street once or twice, though, as well as a few other minor things. We’ll have to keep working until you can do routes like this one as easily as before your accident."

"What do you mean, 'as easily'? It isn’t going to become easy, friend, because I’m not the same person as previously. Look, I got us here. Maybe not smoothly, but I’m playing by different rules now."

"That’s defeatist talk. You’ll have to get over that if you want to overcome your challenges. When you have a destination, you should be able to proceed directly to the point without misstep. You have a goal, perhaps one you’ve never even seen before, and you determine a route to get there, then follow it. It’s a clear and distinct method that I’m here to teach you. Now, how do we get back to the car?"

"What? Didn’t we come here for something?" Diver growls, beginning to feel as crabby as his corpse’s age.

"Yes, Diver, it was an exercise. A learning experience. Find the car and we’ll go swimming."

Late spring snow banked the cabin walls. Ice cicles dripped with glacial slowness from the eves and boughs of trees growing close around its windows. Pine and woodsmoke smells and flickering firelight extended their fragile tongues into the bed where she and I met bodily, her skin dancing with night and fire like her scent with the smoke. Water ran in all the gutters, snow turned to rain which drove the panes while I moved with her in season, day breaking hot over woods green in climactic bloom."Honey, don’t hang up! It’s me, your husband!" The curve under breast and out to hips, the closed cabin room where I saw her smile glow against the pillow--

"I’m sorry, you must have the wrong number."

Diver leans in toward the screen, as if proximity can spur recognition. His hand comes up, scratching at his cheek in a gesture like removing a mask. "It’s Diver! Walker said you were there.

Vicarity
Didn't you even see me after the operation?"

"Diver?"

"Yes." Cavorting naked in our secret river, it was cold only when we clambered out to lay beside its warm summer current. Her thick black hair clamped her head and shoulders, and I reached over to brush a few loose strands away from her face. The dark places from which she grew, the history and pre-history read in eyes, in body, even in words--why has it taken so long to see her like this? "I'm glad to see you're all... all right. How do you feel?" Their bedroom is dark, his wife visible only by the vidphone's camera light. She wears a night gown. Diver tries in vain to pick out gloomy familiar shapes behind her. "Never mind how I feel, and I'm sorry if I woke you up. But I had to talk to you. Look, I can understand why you wouldn't call me here, and even why you didn't stay waiting for me to come out of it. After all, when I started this trip, we thought we were getting separated. Now, though, I see things differently." His words tumble HASTILY over one another, racing to lay himself bare. "Everything is so flat now, like I'm watching it on TV. Only people stand out against it, and then it isn't their words or the way they look, but something else built on that. I see you this way now, too. I'm sorry my voice scratches like sand paper, baby; try to hear the words in spite of it when I say how beautiful you are. Let me be with you again." He leans in close once more, this time as if he might somehow touch her in emphasis or smell her perfume. "The distractions are gone, honey. I see you the way I should have when I spoke my vows." Brittle leaves fell from their stems, breaking under foot during hand-holding walks further and further away from the cabin. It grew cold at night. How had it been so easily begun? That all this world's uses should float above an incautious word seemed too inhuman. And while the snow packed against the doorstep, I awoke to a white-washed morning in a bed alone. Strange springs buoyed up the absent home, calling me back, and I woke alone. Why couldn't I write poetry for my lover while we shared the secret space, and why have I written this now to her instead of to my wife? "I want to come home now. I want to get back together."

"Diver, I don't think that's such a good idea right now."

"What! God damn it, I had an accident! I'm physically different but that's all. Why wouldn't you want me to come home?"

"It's just going to take me some time to get used to. You don't look anything like my husband."

"Well, it's me! I'm the man you married, no matter what the packaging."

"No you aren't!" Angrily, she pulls at a curl of hair in a nervous gesture. "You look out your eyes, Diver. The rest of us look at that so-called packaging. If you had to look at yourself in the mirror all day long, would you want to do that? If you didn't feel your hand move whenever you saw it move,
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would you think it was yours? I married a man who looked a certain way as well as acted a certain way. And you don’t fit either category now, the way I see it.”

"So get used to it," he snarls. "I didn’t ask to be this way!"

"Really? Where are you now, Diver?"

"At my sister’s."

"You don’t have a sister!"

"She’s almost as much my sister as if we had the same parents. We grew up together, damn it."

"What else did you do together?" Her face appears to shrink slightly as she leans back with a sigh. "Let’s not get into that right this instant. I don’t want you to come home just yet because I have to think some things through. I’m very happy you’ve got in touch with your emotions, or whatever. But you left me, remember? And whatever story it was you handed me about needing to find yourself so you could be a better husband--wasn’t that it?--anyway, it didn’t go very far with me. I’ll give you a call when I decide what I’m going to do. By the way, the school called. They’d rather you didn’t go back to work this semester, considering how much difficulty students would have in adjusting in mid-stride. Good night, Diver."

He stares blankly for a long time after his wife cuts the connection. Finally, he realizes his gaze has wandered away from the darkened screen, and he focusses his mind as well as eyes to read the last lines of a journal entry, written months ago. Pulling the book toward him, he completes the reading begun before placing the call. The procession of days drags by so slowly, I failing to recapture the revelation which was the only moment in my life when the woman who is my wife was ever really real to me. Why do I sit here crowded by my books and things, safe in my study and neglecting piles of students’ papers, dreaming of Walker? Winter’s pearl, gathered up from the center of that experience is here, my wife. Insincere, I stand first on one bank and then the other, always looking across. I think I will have to leave her, too, and find a place in the middle, feeling the dive into the river and keeping that love in words. Impassioned and reflective, this ground and no other will allow me to be fully present, dwelling in my home and watching from outside it. What kind of place is this middle ground?

Walker’s apartment, too, is dark at three in the morning. Diver hauls himself to his feet and begins methodically igniting all the room’s lights. By a wall lamp hang assorted photos of Walker with various combinations of family and men. Beneath these lie numerous anonymous small articles of the kind gathered from trips or frivolity. Pulling a tiny silver chain lights a banker’s lamp resting on the night stand. A large brass bed piled high with pillows dominates the remaining space. Diver moves clumsily into the next room, upsetting an ironing board before finding the overhead light’s switch. Like the
bedroom, this space is a simple square of sheetrock walls, though here the kitchenette sink and cabinets
divide one end in two. The kitchen bulb reflects off a dozen metallic shining appliances, objects over
which he runs his hands. The cabinets are a highly-varnished, new pressed wood matching the table and
chairs, leading him to believe they came with the apartment. The stereo, a mismatched collection of
components of all sizes, perches precariously atop a pair of speakers. Albums are piled nearby. Again,
the walls here bare photos telling Walker’s history. Diver stands in the middle of the room, trying to find
Walker in this world of her belongings.

The front door opens and Diver turns to find Walker, huddled against the hesitant rain, hurrying
to close it behind her. "God, it's miserable out there." He stands watching her take off her raincoat and
drape it over a chair. "I thought I'd never get to come home."

"I thought you never would come home. Where have you been?"

"With a friend. Say is it bright enough in here for you? I'm going to turn these off, if you don't
mind. I'm used to it being a lot dimmer in here."

"Is he in any of these pictures?"

"Um, yeah, I think so." She waves a pointing finger before the wall of photos like a divining rod
until, "Ah ha."

SHE HANDS HIM A snapshot TAKEN DURING a theater performance. Two actresses can be
partially seen in the corners, but the picture taken by Walker centers on a man BOWING
DRAMATICALLY for the camera. Slightly built, but with long powerful arms, his face radiates charisma
just as his head radiates a great fuzzy cloud of hair. "I met him in a bar where I was working. It was
my first day, and when I walked in, this guy was literally swinging from the rafters. I'd never seen
anyone do that before. With one arm, no less. All the while, he had this look on his face, staring up at
the ceiling with a huge grin, like he didn't care at all who was watching.

I started calling to him. I don't know what I was doing, but he let himself drop to the floor and
picked me up off the ground like I didn't weigh anything. I'm not a small person in any sense of the
term, either. He jumped onto the bar and we started dancing. I lost my job, of course, but I've never
been swept away like that before. With one arm, no less. All the while, he had this look on his face, staring up at
the ceiling with a huge grin, like he didn't care at all who was watching.

Digger stands, hands on hips and feet braced wide atop Olympic Tower. There is a fountain, but
all the pipes have burst; still the water pours out, water jetting from cracked walls and fountain heads.
Surrounding buildings, still alive, now rise higher than this, and their lights bathe this Digger's face, his
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clothes, the spray, and Walker where she stands before him. Looking at Walker through soft, cloudless eyes, he invites her with a wide, innocent grin. His hand moves aside the folds of cloth at his waist, revealing himself, ready and warm. After a moment, Walker’s eyes and lips are mirrors, and she steps forward to take his hand.

Diver clears his throat, issuing the sound of a grinding stone pestle. He sits at the table, unable to see anything in the now cave-like darkness. "You have a very nice place here, Sis. I’m amazed at how many nice things you have. My kitchen isn’t half as well set up as yours. Secretaries must make considerably more than English teachers. Of course, I’m not surprised." A flickering light bobs toward the table while Walker confirms Diver’s suspicion.

Everything in the apartment belongs or belonged to someone else, the merchandise making its way into the two small rooms as gifts or the remnants of old relations. "In fact," she continues, setting the flickering object on the table before him, "I think the only thing of my own in this whole place is this candle here and the jar it’s stuck in."

He stretches out the long, flesh covered bones of his arms while bending from the waist until the pivot between standing and falling rests solely in a thought. His feeble eyes focus on the aged shaking body still only half his own. He sees, too, the pale blue image-absorbing water waiting to take him under just as the man beside him urges him to "let yourself fall forward. It will all come back to you after that." His weight shifts forward and his toes lose the tiles beneath them. In all, Diver knows his grace as that of a stone, a dropped self-knowing stone.

3

Pinching jaws take hold and begin to twist some organ deep within him. Diver cannot name the pain, the inside of his body being more alien and unknowable than alien objects over which he can pass his hands. He begins thrashing his arms, attempting to climb a ladder of water up the featureless depths. The fiery pain searing behind his eyes, he opens his mouth, admitting air rather than water, and emits a involuntary loud groan. Flinging his body forward, leading first with one arm then the other, he lunges until his feet scrape bottom. He stands waist-deep in the pool, the pain in his organs subsiding so that sight can replace fire, and hearing can replace heartbeat.

"Are you all right, sir?" It is the middle of the night. Lamps by each apartment door illumine front steps and window boxes, plus sparkle on the swimming pool’s upset surface, but leave darker regions
undisturbed where Diver stands. Key in hand, she peers concernedly into the pool over a sack of groceries.

"I hit my head while underwater," he says. He stares at her, wanting to move closer to make her features out more clearly, but then she would see him as well. Yet, though voice and appearance both give themselves to Diver without much distinction, he eventually recognizes her.

"Should I call for help?"

"No, I'll be all right."

"Good night, then."

"Wait, please. Excuse me, but didn't we meet a couple of weeks ago on a train? I'm Diver."

"Diver! I didn't recognize your voice. How are you? Come over this way into the light."

Setting down the sack, she approaches so that only a few yards separate them. Still, he remains hidden.

Diver notices her hesitation as she wonders whether and how to speak her mind. "You have some explaining to do, you know. I thought we were getting along very well, and then you ran off like you were escaping something."

Body below and mouth above the waterline, with the intervening point as evasive as feeling two hands touching at once, Diver gazes from night into lamplight and speaks. "I meant nothing against you, my dear. Leaving you, I found myself looking out the back window of the train. It was the view. I couldn't help it, I stood looking back through one hundred eighty degrees of window and saw the past, my past."

"We could have watched it with you, Diver."

"When I was younger, I used to plunge off a certain cliff lying hard by a spewing waterfall. From its height, I could see every rock, every sun-glinting speck of foam. I could see a knot of younger girls who I was trying to impress, all of them in the water."

She listens, gazing dreamily beyond apartment roofs to the sky. "I would have been impressed, too, I suppose."

"That's the view from the train window, at least on the top level. It reminded me, and I stood drifting into my early days. I lost track of time. All the work of perfecting the dive aims at one thing, union with the waters below. And you know what I always found at the bottom?"

"What?"

"Murk."

"So bitter about a recreational sport," she laughs.

"One thing I will say for it, though. When I dive, I feel and know unconsciously that every
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muscle moves together. It takes years of work, straining every day to become a natural master of falling forms. But in the end, as with any virtuoso, I call forth shapes from my body in the air while will and action are one."

She looks no longer at the sky, but into the water.

"And when the water takes me, I am in a place of very little sound, very little light, but a great deal of motion. If you open your eyes, or listen, or even breathe, you discover nothing good. But if you feel, there are tides all around pushing and pulling you down." He causes the arms at his sides to ripple the surface, carrying him back still further from the lights. Though Diver cannot even make out her face, and she cannot possibly see him, invisible light flashes when their eyes seem to meet intensely. "You are beautiful both as woman and mother. A quiet but passionate woman wanting good things for her child and herself. Believe me, I never meant to offend. But in the present, the water feels very good. I want good things for you, too. Consider this more than a simple invitation. I want it to be an understanding. Come into the pool with me."

"Someone might see us!"

"It's dark where I am."

She clutches at the jangling ring of keys and looks around quickly. Apparently spying the sack of frozen pizzas and cheap beer, she hisses "just a minute" before unlocking the door and disappearing with the groceries. In the same instant, Diver raises himself with the sound of water from his body splashing the cement. Soaking wet, he crams himself into his piled clothes and, still carrying his shoes, shambles away on feet bitten by the sharp pebbles in the street, all so that the beautiful, lonely woman should not find the strange, grotesque body and debilitated condition of a man whose memory or words bear no likeness to what she would touch in the pool.

Pausing, he leans on the brick wall while donning his shoes. He straightens, looking briefly back at a corridor of black yawning in the wall. It is a mouth from which emerges the woman's voice, calling Diver's name.

cold and clammy within the corpse's hand-me-down clothes, he shoves his hands into the pockets of the tattered jacket, wondering why he plots a course away from Walker's apartment complex. *This city is not my city; I am in a strange place. The room behind me is not my room, and all the odds and ends deposited there once upon a time belong now to no one. My sister is not my sister, my wife is not my wife, my body is not my body. I have reached out to inhabit this corpse, stretching over it like the fog crawling through these concrete city veins, but it is insubstantial. Yet, only this can I appropriate for myself alone, holding it up when all else has been stripped. I am this shambling man. Because it is*
honest, this birth is non-reversible, but only while my will carries me forward, until I, like the fog, appropriate more streets and merchandise and lives against an inevitable dissipating light. I am this shambling man.

The adjacent warehouse district, alleys twisting among shadowy hulking buildings, appears deserted until a volley of bright lights reveals Diver’s shape in black caricature, twenty feet long, walking in front of him. Silently, the lights fan out to either side, creating a breeze and destroying Diver’s familiar. He shields his eyes as half a dozen motorcycle headlights surround him.

"Hey, it’s Frankenstein!"

Silhouettes approach from all sides. They might be rejects from a Bernstein musical, but he doubts they can sing, much less all snap their fingers in tempo. Something strikes his head and he sprawls on the street. They beat him. "Where’s your money! Is this all you got?" They beat him. "The watch! Hey, Open up his mouth. I see something shining at me." They beat him. "What else you got, Frankenstein? Watch out, or we might decide to break both your arms."

"Break them, fuckers," he thinks, sliding over the blood wave behind his eyes, arching, roaring, "Chop them off. The legs, too. I can’t god damn use them right anyway. I am a ghost of being human," sickening, a sound like hamburger meat, blows to head and genitals, "still whole in nothing but words. I’ll write with a stick between my jaws or a computer microphone strapped to my chest," retching, filling his face already lying against the pavement, "three words to every one I speak, mechanical mind narrowing frame by frame into a single picture of words which frame the ghost, and I would still be no more or less than this shambling man."

They are gone. When he can rise, he weaves through a torrent of stars, stumbling at last against a building. His crushed nose spews a hot river. Diver’s hands grope along the wall, finding a cold metal drain pipe to which he presses his neck, soon stopping the blood. Another wound in his skull will continue to bleed, but slowly. Motion in the street catches his attention. Are they doves? Diver’s mouth forms a quiet "oh" of astonishment at the doves which have landed all around him. Small fluttering white things on the pavement, one near his foot—they are not doves, he realizes, but scattered papers. His mind struggles. Papers should be in his jacket pocket with the wallet. He touches the inside of his jacket, finding only a torn seam. The slight wind dies, as do the pages' animated motions which Diver momentarily mistook for life signs. He scoops a stack together and looks around at the rest, visible by dim orange lamplight. Diver waits for a breeze to snatch them away, but the air remains still, so that he must leave them by conscious decision. What he has already retrieved he folds and shoves into the back pocket of his pants.
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A familiar pain eventually becomes king of the mountain as Diver continues to walk. Having no money, he rummages through several dumpsters, emerging at last with a bundle of anonymous meat wrapped in wet newspaper. Diver raises the mass to his nose and attempts to smell before remembering he cannot. Poking the fatty tissue, he reasons that it cannot be very old, since the dumpster lid was open and dogs had not taken it. With the package under his arm, Diver peers up at the dark structure ahead, Olympic Tower—no missteps, no detours.

Inside, Diver encounters an invisible world. Abandoned, condemned, the structure has no power, and has been looted of everything small enough to remove. Even in this state, however, all structures have arteries. There are always, for instance, holes in every floor’s roof wound with staircases. A pattern, ergonomic as well as architectural, lies in the invisibility upon which Diver strains to fasten. Groping hands and cautious feet finally move Diver into the space of one such artery, which he climbs first on tired, awkward feet and then on hands and knees. This is not the conventional way for humans to ascend, but the gallery is empty; even if full, Diver will climb how he can. He crawls out onto the roof.

What does he expect to find? He expects Digger, of course, hand extended to Walker, who takes or leaves as she desires. He once paradoxically both to hold Walker aloof, stealing back his long-ago verses, and to become Digger, the innocent sensualist. Is Digger here? A higher rooftop’s walls exude broken water pipes, their edifice laid bare. Like the plumbing, several portions of the roof and walls are losing their bricks, Diver’s every inquiring movement dislodging more. He is near the building’s edge, where surrounding buildings, some lit and some abandoned, rise imposingly overhead. Digger is everywhere.

He is hungry. Casting about, he discovers near the brink a railing’s fragmented remains, its brittle boards snapping in his hands. However, when he fishes out a book of only slightly-damp matches, the wood refuses to catch. The newspaper enclosing his dinner, tightly buttoned inside his jacket, is soaked with blood. Withdrawing the wad of paper from his pocket, he begins crumpling the sheets and piling them amidst the wood. He has carried his journal with him because it is, perhaps, more his own than anything else. But words do not embody being, they only speak about it. They cannot be touched, and the writing on these pale pages cannot extend anything to meet his hands except, now, heat; it is vicarious, and no match for the pains in Diver’s stomach. The meat cooks hanging from his insensitive fingers. The fire dies quickly, but his offering includes no more than bones wrapped in fat which Diver, in any case, cannot taste. Afterward, to the pains of his beating and his liver’s re-awakened agony, he lies down on a pillow of bricks and eventually falls asleep.

*Not knowing the tide will rise, children below the cliff etch characters in the sand. One body,*
toward the waves, a harmony of wind, instant, and vector. I never seeing myself dive, no one else feeling it, a long smooth symbol free-falling to meet the moment--

He bolts upright as he wakes. The roar is not only in his ears; the earth trembles. Smoke clouds rise beyond the rim; he can barely keep his feet although he braces himself against the wall. Horrified, he observes the adjacent building sinking foot by foot. Sinking, not he rising, because the other rooftops remain in place. Approaching the edge, he looks down into a hell of smoke and fire until the wall begins giving way between his fingers. Two and three at a time, he falls down the stairwell, catching a brief glimpse of a man outside one window smashing the glass with an axe. Stumbling through an exit door, he finds himself on a side not facing the crumbling structure. The noise is still deafening. Someone in a hard hat screams at him and points. There are workmen on ladders ascending and descending the building like a swarm of roaches. Here as well, they are preparing to set off explosives. He wants to escape, but a rope barricade almost trips him. The eyes find a space between two buildings where the earth will not shake. He topples the barricade, and his plaster-blanketed ghost slips into the alley.

Quieter, the earth and Diver gradually regain their more usual acquaintance. Brushing himself off for appearance’s sake, he continues walking. He finds one crowded thorofare which seems to stretch away endlessly, and he stays on it. Perhaps the street leads all the way to the Gulf. Would he keep walking then? It doesn’t matter, for Diver squints into the sun, which tells him he is going North, away from the Gulf. Asian eyes regard him from a Thai grocery’s doorway. Everyone stares at him. The arms brush passing pedestrians, and the ears, despite themselves, separate conversational threads from the tapestry when he hears the words "that man" or "look at that man." Past an Indian restaurant, past a thronging roller rink, struggling ever more up the inclining street, a sudden desire boils up in Diver to run. Mentally, he projects himself forward at an incredible speed; light posts, intersections, blaring music from neon-lit shop fronts, families--Diver accelerates past everything to reach the top of the hill. What then? He knows he would tire quickly. Even more, a suspicion glues Diver’s gaze to the horizon, where the rise crests and dips away unseen. He does not run. In due course, the feet touch this point, the gaze still focussing ahead on more buildings, more endless processions of people. Yet, he still burns to run, with a yell and a violent attack, as his feet continue their hesitant shuffle down this slope and up the next.