

WILLIAM DIREEN

Brakeman

END OF THE PRESENT

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WILLIAM DIREEN

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FICTION

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OTHER

Versions Translations. Poetry. Paper edition Kilmog 2014

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The quotation on the facing page is from *The House of Life*, (Canto XC
'Retro me, Sathana!') by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

BRAKEMAN—END OF THE PRESENT

*as the void car, hurled
Abroad by reinless steeds, even so the world*

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BRAKEMAN—END OF THE PRESENT

The Yard

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I was clipping alligators on the vital nodes when that scent of forgotten moments, embedded, recoverable, tickled my blind spot. She drew near me, bringmaking, inspeaking, like a fever or a fear:

*Within the earth, the seed unleashed
In the darkness before, time*

Nicotine and almond abroad in the cranial sinuses, my head filled with the breath of her exploding flower:

*In the night of flames which is all flame
You wore the shadow from my heart*

Pearls flung in the love-god's ocean, we were logiclost and plummeting.

Chip rolled in late from the gamblers' bar and went straight for the screen. The same flaming cinema, the same reporters drawling like they had it cracked.

'What kind of killer, Brakeman? The palace of our dreams!'

'A sick one, Chip. Coke?'

The coin struck. He kicked the vending machine where it mattered. A sign went up: Ambush on the Stolen Gate. We'd been willed! Chip and I were ready to cruise when Ex-P's low headlamps cut through the fog. He stepped from his Quadrofolgio louring a twin leer—one was disgusted with his lot in life, the other called you a lever-pusher lower than putrefaction. I already had a damaged spinal column.

We hit the highway in convoy, Ex-P's convertible coughing specks of bad mix into the dim trail of his tail-lights. At the site he tapped his brim, Dee-style, lit a cigarillo and screwed his eyes into his own smoke-cloud seeking that offender signature. He had the attention of a rat-loving toad, you didn't want to warrant his attention, and his thoughts were heading my way.

'You diagnosed that Pontiac free of glass invaders.'

'So it was. Sure. Sweet model. Antique!'

'She was one slick agent, Brakeman. You had the pleasure?'

'I checked it blind.'

'Where's the rest of her?'

‘Blown to pieces.’

‘Taken any nances to the dance lately?’

Did he know? Could he? ‘Only Betty, sir, my one and only.’

The words reminded him of something. It was brief and barely noticeable, but to a brakeman looking to keep his hangman at bay it gave me the second I needed. He snapped out of it: ‘She keep good time?’

‘A fine dancer, sir.’

‘You’re planning a family, I’ll bet.’

‘Soon as our account hits the target.’

He bought it. I was again that numbskull who lay on his back under state wagons.

‘Given your files up?’

‘Chip sent them down The Hole. What you want ‘em for, anyways?’

‘It’s bigger than both of us, Brakeman.’

I hit the number pad and screamed at the console. Towaways’ voice was gnarled and metallic: ‘*It had better be worth it!*’

‘A Coupe needs handling! Stolen Gate.’

‘Just what I need — the Brakeman! Goddam!’ We heard another voice moaning at him while he cussed. We had interrupted sexual connection. I persevered: ‘Ex-P’s out here, you know—’ The line cut. I redialed. No reply.

‘He’s out cold, sir. Towaways plays hard.’

Ex-P scowled, ‘Cut them segments for me.’

‘That’s an order, sir? I wouldn’t want to jump his call.’

‘I want that blue box.’

Chip rolled out the arcing gun and in less than an hour we had the keyhole ready for him. Ex-P inserted the key and Enola’s message hit him where it hurts:

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*Your stack will crumble
man born to die
without exception*

*come
to extinction*

Poetry of that kidney ruined what was left of his day. He sniffed over every last speck and bone chip. He wanted clues, he wanted them so bad. Towaways screamed in mean and jealous, hitched up the fragments and hauled the wreck to the auto-morgue. He was mad at me. He would have his show-down.

The following week the mood was testy. One false tic and I'd be slammed in the bad eye. I played safe. No turkey gabble in the optic: pH7. A no-sir yes-man. None of Chip's best-pal bogus, the fraternity bonding tentative. This was concrete, venal, emotion my carver. I couldn't get her off my mind. I yearned for a rendezvous but all our meetings were unplanned — that was the first rule.

Chip's mind was on the ball game, he was thinking small, Red Sox to bat, when the call came. Aryan malfunction. He rolled out the yard Ford. I drove so he could finish the match on the internal viewer. As we were crossing a land-bridge the copper-toned cloud cleared and I had a view of magnificent, polluted water stretching away for miles, yellow fumes descending like a pot lid. Towaways was there when we arrived, making like Do right, Hang loose, Keep it soft, *My patch*. Mercedes Maybach remake. Chip remembered the model. 'Nothing skew with that metal! I ran her through myself!' The intact pieces of the agent's body didn't add up. Galveston had taken the tastiest bits. No one would be

putting this agent together again. Ex-P was moved to words.

‘It ain’t pretty.’

‘Waste!’

‘Where’s the rest of him?’

‘Of who, sir? We don’t have his identity.’

‘Which one of you ran it through?’

‘Chip did sir. He told me it was clean as a whistle.’

‘Cut ’er open!’

Towaways split the metal and prepared the blue box:

Command

your weapons humiliate

your wish will defeat you

your method destroy

Build

no city protect you

no machine deliver

no power defend

Come

where no road will lead you

Come

to extinction

Hatred was bulging an orbital vein down Ex-P’s forehead. Enola’s voice had my blood pressed for space. He stared towards the silent voice, mean as a puritan with a land ethic. His voice was an agony of frustrated killing-reflex: ‘Cadeba wants a report, Brakeman. I mean re-port.’

‘He wants it to say, sir?’

I knew it before he said the words: 'Auto-erase!
'I'll take care of it, sir!
'Now tell me this, Brakeman—who auto-erased that agent?'
'It wasn't Cadeba?'
'It wasn't Cadeba, Brakeman. Any ideas?'
'I'm a technician, sir, but if you want my opinion —'
'Sure! Forget it!'

He took a snapshot, kooked the whimpering poodle, claimed the agent's shades for his collection and burned off in a cloud of bad compression. Ex-P was a skunk, but you did what he said, mythic to the lower cages. Surgeons' hands shook when they saw his call-out card. If he said couple, you towed.

Enola's lava was witching my deeper panels. My heart and sac were flexing. I couldn't relax and Chip sensed it.

'Get real, Brakeman. Forget that chick.'

'What chick?'

'There's always a chick, bud. Beer?'

He was right but he was Chip. He scored on Saturday and woke with his wallet empty. They were all Miss September to him. You was loop for brooding. Feed that gland. Patch the hole in your heart. For Chip a man was the sum of his alloys. He played by the rules — that would be the death of him — there was no poison at the heart of the woolball.

'She's a wild one, Chip.'

Galveston was a cannibal and Buck O'Beau was the cruellest of the crew. They were handy with the airwaves and had already leaked police frequencies to hams so that the press could gatecrash the demolitions parties. Their kind of killing needed documentation. Journalists were on their way from

their cities, those left on high ground after the continents caved in. They dribbled in, mumbling adages, thirsting for fresh underworld gaglines. The land-bridges and overpasses were in rough shape. It was hard enough for us on the cruise, watching out for cracks and fissures in that dense atmosphere, part-fog, part-cloud, without watching out for jittery journalists in their electric buggies. One of them was always first on the scene, sniffing around after Towaways had diced up the wreck. He interpreted everything but the poem. His name was Mirch. Diploma of Press Lane. Wiry type. Twigs for arms. Beats me how he beat that keyboard.

‘You from the Big Country?’

‘Up Plains way.’

The Inferior Plains had imploded and filled up with ocean ten years past. Nobody called them The Plains any more — not unless they really grew up there.

‘They say the Inferiors’ lake is bigger than Texas now.’

‘That ain’t false, sir. My father’s father lies in that lake bed.’

‘That’s too bad. You settling in here?’

‘That ain’t wrong. My boss wants stories.’

We picked through the wreckage. No flesh on the crash-guard, just those slalom marks long and telltale. Buck O’Beau had toyed with him for a while, copycat flawless. Galveston had finished him off. Soon Cadeba wouldn’t have an agent this side of Maurolico, and our ablest ally was standing right next to me. A paper war would serve us.

‘My boss wants stories, too. You tried the cops?’

‘The cops don’t know shit. Got a theory? I can smell cannibalism.’

‘Not me. I’m a simple Brakeman. No talent for musin’.’

‘Not even a whisper? You know what I mean? Rumors.’

‘Follow me! I know a bar where everyone’s got a theory.’

I arced down to the city followed by Mirch in his electric beans tin. The city lights loomed suddenly out of the twilight murk—they always took me by surprise. I introduced Mirch to the barman at the gambling bar known since licenses were issued as The Alhambra. Mirch's credit would be good and he was a big tipper. He soon had his own bar stool and became a part of the place. As soon as he arrived he tipped the boy who sold the papers and flicked through his own column, groaning at every slipped comma. How he hated those spell-checkers. He fell for the paper-boys one after the other, his love-life was nothing but a string of pipe lassies and Vealboys, lower case fidelity, but his trade came first. He made like he'd lost four-fifths of his line parts but he kept his ears open.

I made the reports up like Ex-P wanted, pure fiction most of it, and fed theories to Mirch over cocktails. In a few weeks he had a hundred stories cooking for the Mystery weeklies. Cadeba wasn't their only reader. My job was to reduce Mirch's risk of dying. That wasn't easy with Chip around. Mirch was downing Danziger Goldwassers. A fight was rearing. Chip slammed his wages on the Samoan, long odds.

'Mismatch, bud. Five hundred on the Bog Boy.'

The bookie was a gloater with poached eggs for eyes. He pumped Chip's hand as if he'd already lost and yarled fat at me and Mirch, 'Guys! Guys! Snapshots!'

It was a motor with immune plates on a Guadalcanal jetty.

'It revs and bolts, bucks and brakes and this body falls out, see? No nose, flies open. Lookie! Dangle-hacked.'

'Give us a close-up.'

'Sho!' The file scratched, he reverted to words. 'Jap eyeliner, airline perfume. You ever sidle the overslabs? There's

fucked-up glamdams up there, and all manner of fundamentalists. Sho! Disqualify the witness. Fuck the habit.'

That bar was the only source Mirch needed. A gold mine of horny men who couldn't hold their tongues. He had his notebook out and got sponging. The shortest of the contract bluewriters had an ulcered mouth and Mirch was all attention. The Belgian Scandals were on him.

I tried to rile him, 'You don't swallow that horse-pucky, do you, Mirch?'

'Don't swallow nothing. How ya spell Guadalcanal?'

'Autobahn glams! Old shocks! No one cares about them any more!'

'Do I tell you how to run your tune-up yard?'

I ordered a Coma Sapiens while he talked it through. It would be on the trash page, Last Edition.

Everybody had a story, and in the weeks that followed most of them made it to small print through Mirch's text encoder. Cadeba wasn't making more than fiction himself. He had satellites scouring the land-bridges. He had suspects and protégés. He had leads on a Country & Western killer duo, but he was missing the key words. He didn't have more than the trash dailies.

The barman upped the volume. The bell sounded.

'Whoa!'

'Hell!'

'Yech!'

'Killoch!'

Then it happened. One punch. The Samoan was still standing. Two of the bookies' slubs claimed fake cuts and the bank was bust. Chip was a bad loser.

'You were giving fifteen to two when I placed it.'

The bookie backed off. He shrugged, 'Bust!'

His slubs took the high ground. 'Bust spells bust, dick-licker!'

The barman rolled up his sleeves. A slub hit Chip where it hurt: 'Y'ain't nothin' but a spigot-greaser!'

The dam burst. Chip busted the screen with his barstool and the console imploded in a cloud of nuclear dust mites. Endstation. If I didn't do something Chip's brain and the front of the whole resistance was heading for hemorrhage. I staved off a slub of my own. Mirch caught a shot-glass in the left eye. The Samoan was the only one smiling, safe in Hawaii. The barman gripped a gym bar and swung over boots first knocking the slubs in the direction of the doors. He concussed the cowering bookie while I carried Chip out the deliveries bay to a lounge at Karanga. He called once for Miss September, then he passed out.

A pair of blood ravens entered, interrogation rings on their strangulation fingers, sloping like actors, quasi-casual. They hooked their lips over their straws and sucked silently while I iced Chip's bruises. I made like I'd been dominioned deeper than Dixie. They leaned on the redwood, insinuating, gloating, taking no notice. They had flunked cadet-school and ravening had become their sole means of expression. Their specialty was 'facelift downers'. One lifted you up by the cheeks, the other pummeled you down to size. No one came out of their inquisitions with their former dimensions. It was information or Intensive Care, no middle metal. They sneered. The barman too. He wanted my big change. I was quivering inside, twisting in the half-mix. I gave him a sign, pushed my silver over the low table and threw back the medicine. He covered for me: 'Shell-shocked ol' Brakeman. Too much water in his rum-dandy!'

They toasted scum like Ex-P and got to blabbering about

their next safari. They were going to ball and chain Enola's best assassins as soon as the moon was right. The taller of them crowed:

'Shee-hit! A black Futura and a Zephyr — parsley 'n buff.'

'No she-males?'

'Sho! A tee-orist in a alum tube.'

'I bags that one.'

Unclean killers. Cadeba was stooping low.

'There's bin sightin's. One of them Vealboys see'd a Futura at a drive-ee-in.'

'That cain't be, Dwight, I woulda see'd h'ecit.'

The big raven brought his Bourbon down and laughed slow, a dentist's Eden.

'Haaaaaar! What we need — a halluc-neatin' Vealboy!'

They looked my way. I closed my eyes and drooped, but a second later a hand was squeezing the veins of my shoulder. 'Wake up, soldier. Scorpion?'

This was being friendly, a battle between rotten breath and rye. I blinked, opened and swallowed. They threw theirs back in unison. I guess I was the first to drop, for real. When I came to they were gone. The cable screen was dead. Chip was still breathing. The barman was treating himself to a drink. We toasted freedom and the return of the Auto Age. He fizzed the lights and helped me drag Chip to the Ford. I drove to the yard in slow-waltz time. On the way I stopped at a road-side café with an anonymous booth and sent a description through to Galveston of those rubber-tongued ravens. It was dawn. Dawn and ochroid smog. Dawn and still no rain. Dawn on graduation day.

The latest recruits were as doomed as their predecessors. The likes of Towaways had taught them every trick they

would ever know. They were well-informed about out-moded reactors and I knew them backwards. Their ambush was in the planning folio. Cadeba, wearing his generalissimo hat, was going to speak at the ceremony. Every year he took the podium bloated, blood-red and edgy to deliver the same keynote speech, but this year he was late and I knew why. The ravens had turned up face-down in a lay-by. I was cleared. That barman was a priest of forgetfulness. Chip and I set up our own bar and the alcohol hit quick. They dressed sexy but the new recruits had no guard to drop. They could pass a tribesman on a lit stage and they would hold the door open for him. The bar-take was heavy, and I soon had a pouch full of their passwords, but the fun was about to go out of the party. Cadeba's Blackhawk growled in, shaded windows, perfect timing.

Skin-tight moleskins was the first thing you saw. He had a way of moving in them that was like rancor against gravity. Everything about him was tight, too tight. You could see what his body was thinking. He was one unwieldy bull. Greased curls licked out from under his Stetson. Here was a man empowered with greater rights of degradation than Ex-P, but he was carrying more than his weight. Cadeba, some people said, was carrying a conscience. He didn't like the look of his graduates with their knees in the air. He glared at Chip like he would dissect him. I tried to rescue the situation, pouring him liquid euphonious ruby.

'Just making a buck on the side, sir.'

Buck-making, buck-raking, all Cadeba-commendable. He nearly smiled, no eye contact. We were off the hook but he mangled the cadets, lifting them up till their lobes were bleeding. Their corpses would be identified by their ears, screwed up like dried-up cephalopods.

In the long evenings before his ban was lifted at the Alhambra, Chip mixed cyclotrons for therapy and I grooved to the rhythm of my upstairs dancer neighbor. She was of ancient Etiquette stock. It was in her legs and in her blood. Her family had had power before the upheavals and the disposition rested in her posture. Proud, no curvature, aquiline nose, head perfectly poised, you could have balanced a marble on her fontanel. They voyaged south when their ranch disappeared down a canyon and kept up their ancient house-network. The men were the stuff chiefs are made of, the dancers were virgins. At first, the virgins married chief stock and hoped for 'heirs', they still called the sons that though there was nothing to inherit. Lately they'd been beating time just to make a living. The chiefs were losing their pride and the dancers were increasingly barren. My dancer's minuets were numbered. Her poise and perfect chin would save her skin if not her mind.

When she asked me for ink I couldn't refuse, though I knew the danger. Anyone who used that stuff was regarded as an enemy of the state. I perfected the mix that would be the cause of her arrest, a crimson viscous concoction thickened with carbon from the incineration pits. You could do anything with it, old conning peasant dark drivel, government poetry, South Sea journals, delta discoveries, but that monkey bile would darken her manuscript best of all.

*Circle the rim see
yourself up ahead
laboring*

She gave them to me. Not the texts. The words. Three-line stanzas. This one was unfinished when they grabbed her.

The day of the municipal vote Chip and I rolled down to City Hall to exercise our rights. We were redirected to a wooden building charred on the outside, with a statue of John Logie Baird in the entrance. Its reception area had statues from bygone eras, a double interlacing staircase like a DNA spiral and a trade delivery entrance ramp leading to double glass doors. The cashier didn't look up. He pointed to the guest-book.

Occupation: Brakeman.

I signed. The voter before me was a Beauty Showman, retired. The cashier spoke: 'You got to come back.'

'What do you mean? This has cost us half a day!'

He raised his eyes — bleeding a dark yellow mucous: 'We've run out of bullets. You pay the fees now, an' you come back when you's got time.'

As Chip was paying, a deliveryman tapped at one of the glass doors. The cashier gave me a sticky wink and climbed down off his stool. The deliveryman was wearing a Roman soldier-type skirt, Venetian tights and a sailor's cap, and from the way he was looking at me he thought I was the one who couldn't be trusted.

The cashier asked him, 'No problems, Brash?'

'The mayor checked the proofs himself.'

Chip signed and we were handed bulletins with the names of the candidates. The surnames were the same as the last time we voted, only some of the first names were different. The new candidates were cousins or sons and daughters of the outgoing councilors. The same names were in the Real Estate business.

Within a few days the same cretins were back in City Hall

and the world's wealth carried on losing its relative value. Finance houses were trading kitsch as silver. Supermarkets were selling carrion at the price of caviar. The disk, the film, the chip and quasi-commodities were supporting a phony order. Nursery rhymes were making sense. Teenagers were humming the hits of fuck spice epics and twice-told thrash happenings. Story-architects had the theatres wired. On show nights the bored were treated to thirty-seven scenes of termitic plot-windings and cheap-fill erotics for their deeply fractured minds. Earth was two-dimensional, real estate acres. Air was thick with suspended muck, and getting thicker. The lakes were becoming more concentrated, stinking higher and higher. Man was heading for extinction but blissful before the canon-barrel. City Hall was a stock yard. They behaved as if this cess-pool was a viewer's paradise, this dim poisonous lair yet another opportunity for sex and success. You could hardly see your hand in front of you but legislation wasn't going to solve that—gaining office was achievement enough. Chip couldn't hide his disillusionment:

‘What happened to fair elections, Brakeman?’

‘Heck, Chip. That went out with democracy.’

Mirch got home safe the night of the fight. He woke up with a blue-print of a shot-glass in his eye socket and sported a patch for six weeks. His designer's airbrush spat vainglory overtime. Even written with one eye, his column was gaining readers. I doubled my efforts, feeding lines to Mirch and enough codes to keep Galveston and Buck O'Beau busy, but I was missing my lioness. The desire was mounting.

I took a drive over the Ornicco Ridge. The road was wide and flat, the land stable. The yard Ford's suspension held, but as I approached the last toll booth of the 53rd the air condi-

tioning cracked. It's hard, the stench of gangrene. You become it. The gases at this latitude were more viscous than in the city. The sweat was pouring off me and visibility was low. The snoop in the toll-booth was happy to explain:

'Sho! Y'kin feel it, cain't ya feel it? It's heavy up here. Yo wouldn't want that rain to fall, mister! It's hangin', see it? Tha's th' end of the worlrd up there. It ain't natural!'

A guy who'd had more cockroach than human contact in the last year and who looked more brontosaurus than *homo sapiens* was talking to me about natural. We admired the suspended globules in a dense, brown cloud. There was a lot of water up there, sure, and none down here. In the city we had a green fog that looked a lot like his clouds but I didn't rightly know what he meant by rain. I remembered stories about rain, about a time when it rained. Water falling from the sky, what an idea! Perhaps he could actually remember it — rain. He was proud of his view — the sea stretching west from us the color of rotten oranges. He knew I wasn't going where I said I was and he assumed it was for kicks. For him everything was kicks too low to describe. 'If you're after degradation I got tickets to the candy shows.'

That's the way it is. Old snoops in peep towers see a world full of snoops and peeps. I told him I had my candy tickets.

At Katabiru I caught a profile in the periphery and she was gone. I lingered too long on an elevated route above a seething market. Could that be her? Spit! Some hooch gal making Macao in 7/8 time. I tongued the last mouthful of tepid suds in a roadside roach-hutch. Out the window a colonial French bell-tower with portholes in its tomb wall, rigged for surveillance. Where was I? Another sandy plain stretching to another former archipelago — they called it Bismarck once.

Another deserted roadside café with reflecting milk-bar booths. A half-blind trembling heir of his parents' diseases served me the house choice of Irian tea and a saucer full of cookies enclosing mystic musings. There was something familiar about them:

*Wanderwanger
esperant
you who are one with nature*

refuse to die

Enola was near. A reflection in the café door, headscarf and an almond breeze. An aroma of rain forest. My brake fluid was boiling. The only hope for our wet-breath plague sump, that tallow sepulchre grease trap we knew as Earth was sitting right behind me.

*Walk from the caravan without aid of space
Mouth full of stones, hear the lyric of necessity*

We were back to back, whispering to invisible refractions. The moment was wide like a palm, slow and flat between the shoulder blades; you might say reflective, where the light of giving meets the shine of pleasure returned:

Birth stone Magnesita

We were destined. We would go through that damned brooding profundity and live on. Sure, we were jammed, no out but in. I turned and nearly snapped with the love-bite. Breath caught. Souls coupled among the colloids and our

bodies too. The last couple at the dance found the first enclosed cubicle and traded secrets. We waited for the signal and felt it coming on while we were jack-knifed like that. Our greatest role.

When my vision returned I slid her the file on the latest recruits and let her go. Like they say, If she can't beat it, it ain't love. On the drive back, the tollbooth pimp was surprised. He hadn't expected to see me alive again. He double-checked my ID, as if I might not be the same guy.

Alone at the garage the encounter with Enola haunted me. I was mixing up all the senses, no tool adjustable. My punch slipped—my punch never slips! I had driven a spike clean through my fist. Chip ripped it out and took me for tetanus.

The nurse knew my hand. All hands.

'The pain is greatest along those lines sucker. The spike will return when you got no hand to jerk with.'

His candor almost won me but I had no firm ground. Love was nowhere near and I sank low. I went through the brothels showing the color of my greenbacks. Boys, girls, baby-love, the fetish intention. In a room cluttered with stupor I chanced upon a mercenary, perished eye sockets in a bankrupt oily face. I kept my footing. I told him how the Daimler got its name. I told him where the last of the Boeings lay. I showed him a snap of my dancer neighbor in a samite slip.

'She keep good time?'

'She writes it:

*mirage of mirages
create and consume
who enters remains'*

It meant something to him. His eyes glassed over. His breath caught. He remembered when the highways were full of cars, when the skies were full of airplanes, when there was water in the taps. He drew breath — this freak was more gone than I was:

‘It’s the month of the partial eclipse. I’ve lost everything and I’m walking along where my house used to be, looking for anything, a dog collar, a plank of wood painted cosy green. Among those fjords that used to be my suburb there it is, docked between two rocks, a trimaran on stilts. A light is shining from the observation window. I climbs a rock and sees a lean figure, scarlet, part-man, part-woman, piece shining like a diamond. She opens her blouse to another, a two-way him-her, who draws a fiber from her heart and eats it neat. He grows, slow and painful like there’s a weight inside him. They mock each other on the slippery decking, spitting in the face, you know, and twining like it ain’t, y’know, love, like eels on heat. You seen that?’

The mercenary’s rendition was corn porn, but his trade was his will and testament. He had seen a tribeswoman donating to save one of our boys who, like me, was less than tribal. Galveston had him as beefsteak before World Independence Day.

The next partial eclipse drew near and Cadeba was leaning on Ex-P. A freshman cadet had been dredged up with blasted eye sockets—a South City mayor’s oldest son. The moon was always full for Buck O’Beau, he was hot for taunting. As for Galveston, cannibalism had hully-gullied his wiring. He lacked relativity if not creativity, and he could detect a mercenary with a hair of evidence. One showed by the barrel fires, poultice wriggling under a bandage. He drew out some red sloe but never finished it. Galveston scored him and flayed him alive. Mirch’s columns were full of his exploits and he didn’t need to exaggerate. They were calling Galveston The Virago, because he slit the appendage of the male drivers. The daintiest are also the tastiest tidbits. He was some revenging sultana. Mirch was at the bar.

‘What kind of monster, Brakeman!’

‘You shouldn’t believe everything you write, Mirch.’

The scent of head-reader fluid in the adenoids, Buck O’s music was getting freakier. He massacred an agent on his way to see his kid play Jesus in a history play. Mirch was attracted like a smoker to the cancer warning. He followed the lines where they left the road and returned, where they crossed the center-markers, where they weaved and wavered, kilometer after kilobyte. That agent had been bumpered and sideswiped from Leda to Bakunin. He should have given way

to Buck O. His poodle had guts. Mirch was happy with the usual sap:

ALIEN POOCH'S BUM STEER

Punch-drunk from the kick of his profession he concocted the headlines and concluded with the thrill-seeking verdict. This job had been the work of “gay-cutters”, “illegal loaders”, and “revenging woogies”. He didn’t take a hint like he used to but you had to hand it to him, Mirch was our surest ally. He got a raise and joined the gambling table.

I had mail. Prey beyond the last of the cloverleaf passovers. The murk was worse than usual and I was slow arriving. As I drew close to the smoking wreck I made out Buck O’Beau’s unpredictable thrust in the bitumen. He knew the meaning of a sporting chance.

Towaways was charging his grillers. He was never what you would call pleased to see me, but this time he was displeased in a special way. Ex-P wouldn’t be coming out this time and the wreck had to go to the police bay called The Hole as soon as he had welded it into haulable pieces. This was the perfect set-up for free candy and now he would have to cut me in. I listened in to the latest blue box.

Hope against hope, sucker

*You got the dollars
but we got the extract
money no money can buy*

*come
to extinction*

If Buck O'Beau had laid the siege, Galveston sacked the city. All that was left of the target was pooch-fur and human toes in a lay-by called Nether. Enola remained in the body of the text. Thanks to Towaways her enigmas were being traded in bars, and some had found their way into the most secret rooms of the planet. Towaways still had to write his report. His hand was shaking.

Now Towaways and me, we go way back. We did carb college together. He couldn't lie, not to me. I took a closer look. Seat-sponge already plagued with tropical gumbugs—that's to say mites that hang around Nether clinging to colloidal gas spheres; if anything organic opens up they swarm. A strong box with its lid hanging. Empty. Not so much as a lucky charm to pilfer. Towaways was race-calling. He sounded off about a meshed-up lynch mob and a pay-back for a go-between. He was trying to divert my attention.

'Mob killin?'

'Pure vendetta.'

'Don't look like it. Looks to me like the agent was holding.'

Turn the rocks and the scuttle crabs skaddle. He square-eyed me, 'Y' losin' y' gray matter?'

'Whaddya say we split the take?'

Direct hit. It was a healthy sum. I figured from his behavior he had pilfered two or three grand in unnumbered currency and Colombian snow from the auto-panels. He had a griller wand in each hand. The chargers drifted close. A neon arc reminded me of their potential.

'Just like old times, eh, Brakeman?'

I was a green apprentice, hotting marine motors overtime, when a call came on the CB: << Clear logger jetty >>. Initiation never came crueler. We learned the dirty way that

truth is written in correction fluid. It started as a Pinch and Jury racket and ended with a Reebok redeal gone yellow. Towaways took the bribe and covered for a Chief Justice set up. The first thing the judge did when he was cleared was promote his nephew in the force. That nephew was Cadeba—he owed us one. I cleared the mess and we split the lottery. Towaways was a man of many small abilities and pilfering was the greatest of them.

‘You ain’t changed none, Brakeman.’

‘If I reach the wreck I’ll cut you in.’

‘You bet you will, Brakeman! And it won’t be long. These killers are multiple hitters.’

Cadeba was running out of innocents to cripple. He had turned the eye closer to base, running psycho-pulse tests on his own forces. He tried random sampling, he tried the face in a million, anything to trigger a rogue pulse. As for offender signatures, there were Buck O’s aberrant prologues and tell-tale jabs lethal as a toreador’s, there was Galveston’s taste in tender parts, and Enola’s enigmas, but as for when or where they would strike, you needed a gift for prophecy.

Which of the sectors was Enola poised to laser-gammy? In which beach hotel would Galveston section his latest carcass? Tomorrow, in some dusky bungalow, Buck O’Beau would light a taper and let the dice decide how many seconds of chase to allow his next victim. There was no way of knowing, not when nor where nor how. Cadeba couldn’t see the future because he couldn’t see the past.

The ancient roads went north by peasantry, south by serfdom and into the discovered continent by slavery or indenture. Interlocking, guild-grained, hereditary, the taint of the centuries was in Cadeba’s methods. Cadeba sent agents

along the old roads, agents with a historical predilection for raping and burning. No class or frontier type was spared. They swore by the whip and obedience. Landowners, burghers, peons, polite society, all had suffered under Cadeba's inquisition. Hoarders, captors, traders of fur, rubber, sugar, lovers of gold, silver, indigo, language-learning, runners of rum and guns, sect monkeys, amputee acrobats, straight or twisted, none were spared unfounded accusation and torture! Ex-P's superstitious cadets were bringing up the rear, spanning Russ to Okhost, Yank to Alaska. Bandeira families in remote Brave World valleys were forced to curtsy to the devil eye. Lines of bones marked the dirt tracks on plateaus near the southern pole. Vortrekkers went pale at the feared cylinder-rumble of renovated automobiles, the very Pontiacs and Oldsmobiles that Chip and I had restored for the last witch-hunt of history. The hunt was ageless. Cossacks, pampas, gauchos, *coureurs de bois* brought out their daughters when the wide deserted auto-routes trembled. Wherever there were roads they feared the arrival of the 'saviors'. Persian and Parthian, all paid the wages of fear, all except the Tribe. They had retreated where no automobile could ever go. There were no roads to the hidden city of those who could tolerate no servitude.

Chip's duty to addiction had called him to the gambling bar. Another televised fight. Another Samoan on long odds, and I had another rendezvous: if Cadeba was looking for Enola, she was back at the Yard. The fight was long, we heard it on the monitor — Enola and I — as we grappled with our desperate likenesses, exploding like stars where the compression is greatest. For we took on each other's tactile form. She was there. I was there. She was me, I her. My shoulder-skin

was hers, the nape of her neck mine. She was upon me without warning or waiting, all moments before her arrival enclosed in the presence of an embrace without beat. Here was neither entrance nor admission, forbiddance and transgression had become obsolete terms which would never be restored to their former uses. Rhythm too died, or no longer existed. I could say that time was suspended, how many times have you heard that? But we were not high above a turning world, we were not relieved of turning time, there was no turning, no passage, there was no world! This was not happening in the mind nor in the body. This was esperance realized, anticipation and suspicion confirmed, no thought nor act taken for granted. This was the identification of a disappearance and the disappearance of identification, a journey without departure and departure without a journey, a return like no other, a visitation from inside by another who wakes within you, an annunciation without consequence for woman- or mankind, of significance pure and eternal for Enola and me.

We boarded each other's ships. Light itself and sound lost their space. We lay as still as silver prints blind to the dust and grease, deaf to the fight. We sensed another luminescence, heard another murmur, as if our bodies were thinking and our minds touching. Our beings had been rendered into new organs, hypersensitive purveyors of pleasure on the frontier of damage.

The pleasure complete, she hit me with it—we were losing the struggle. She said it with indifference and I believe it did not matter to her, that we would not be victorious. Her role was to fight. She and Galveston and Buck O'Beau, they were only putting off the inevitable. The Tribe had chosen. Their extinction was certain. The rest of humankind would follow.

After she left, beside myself with anger, I blew up the local network. There were a lot of disappointed punters at the Alhambra.

Knowing that the fight could never be won in the traditional sense brought me down, way down. By the oil-drum fires, in an open place near the giant legs of fractured motorways, I found Galveston and Buck O'Beau roasting chops. We talked some. If a stranger drawing near the fire was a snoop or a rag-and-bone plant they reaped death. But if a true dead soul came close, spreading fingers towards the spit and hiss of spirit and human fat, and if he, or she, touched the right spot in the intuition of the killers, the three of them were soon swapping stories, threading their narratives through the eye all over again.

No one knows the trouble we bear. Buck O'Beau had been a slave in the services. He used to sing at nights around the campfire. The soldier boys liked him. All of them knew him in one way or another. He passed the exams, completed the toughest courses, but he could never win his way to higher ground. He knew the power base. He bent the knee and took the scorn for five years, slipping out on weekends to learn theory and history. His first hit was from the interior. He seduced his instructor, mutilated him beyond recognition and left his own tags on the pieces. From that day Buck-O was officially dead. His instructor was wanted for desertion and cannibalism.

Only ravage creates a killer like Galveston. Eliminators passed and dropped an obsidian pebble outside his father's door. He was in a sack on his mother's back when she returned to the nest to find her children kebabbed. He and

his ma survived a full generation before they came for his brood. It was in one of the southern cities of the last continent to cave in. He was earning simple money and you could say he knew some comfort when one of his kids slipped on the ice at school and went to infirmary. The next day medocs took him and his two sisters out of class for their hearts. Maybe they willed themselves to death in time but kids don't have the same recoil before slavery. When Galveston came home from work the kids hadn't returned from school and his wife had gone to find them. They got her as well, but it's sure that she didn't give them satisfaction. Galveston read her note and walked out the back door. He drove his Zephyr into the suburbs before the medocs busted in his front door. He would have his revenge. He followed the elephant ankles of elevated auto-routes and killed a zero for his diseased ear-warmers. He met Buck-O at ground zero and together they fed the flames.

There was plenty of killing in them. Untamed energy suffers its own violence, you live by it, you die by it, but for them this was nothing to be feared, for them the pleasure of drowning in the blood of their enemies awaited them. The Tribe and conventional humanity were on the scaffold, but for the moment Buck-O and Galveston had made it. They made it with each hit. This was no chance meeting of derelicts or thieves, no gang of zeroes toasting poodle flesh. These were the artists. In the flickering light of oil-drums who could have told if their robes were stained with petroleum scum or agent blood, poodle flesh or human liver? Carnivore and sacrificial, Galveston was some same-eater. Cadets were bound with their own intestines to carving tables, their fingers frozen in hopeless deaf-mute signals of the living consumed. If they weren't torn alive they were

roasted in underground ovens, emasculated for their hormone, bled dry for their corpuscles. In one way or another they were mulligatawny by sun-up—more nutritious for the hatred of their aggressors than casserole.

Cadeba had nothing to fear from Galveston but violence. He would have his play-off and they would all lose. The same hate ran in all their veins.

They took me out back to see ‘theory’, lying sideways on a heap of trash. Buck O’Beau was all politeness.

‘Myra, you awake, confidante?’

A rustling inside. An odorless calm. Her head appeared, white dry hair, long where it was still growing, chalk-dry scalp where the root-balls had shriveled. Her eyes were exhausted, bulging with cataracts, but retaining a yen for the dialectic. She stared at me, eyelids closing over with fatigue. The sight of a new face was almost too much information for her. Buck-O shouted to bring her round.

‘It’s the Brakeman, Myra. Anything he should know?’

She drawled slow and dreamy, not to him nor to me, but to someone in a fable in her mind:

*If winning is the object, you are afraid of death.
Learn what you know. Forget who you are.*

Buck-O heard her talking but he wasn’t listening. He never listened. He took her hand, ‘Go ahead. Tell the Brakeman a thing or two, Myra.’

She gripped my unhappy mitt with all her force and it hardly made an impression on the skin. Her eyes brightened like she was remembering a revolution, then as if she was recalling its failure her irises turned black and she cried out—a tonality neither beast nor human, a plea from the pit

of human suffering—: *Ink!*

Buck-O turned to me, ‘She ain’t so proud today.’

‘She needs ink? I got some at the yard. I cooked it up for my neighbor dancer.’

Her weak eyes shined at me the moment she heard that. Buck O-Beau was full of caution, ‘You live dangerous, Brakeman! Get rid of it!’

But I was all right by Myra. She had found the guardian of her testament.

‘We’ll be back, Myra. The Brakeman’s one of us now. We gonna change the world, ain’t it?’

She looked straight through Buck-O. As she retreated into the alum tube, Buck-O bemoaned, ‘She’s all used up. Fantasizin’ delirious. She thinks those kids in the ghettos are gonna read again. She don’t make sense no more.’

‘Sure. How can she? She ain’t got no ink.’

‘You think that would help?’

‘I’m gonna bring over a phial.’

‘She’s used up! Why risk it? Next stop ga-ga. The same theory over and over. We already reduced it to a speck and stored it inside a bullet head! What more can we do?’

‘She might come up with a way out of this mess. Or maybe it’ll make her feel better. Anything says I can’t do that for her?’

‘You do what you choose. You’re the Brakeman.’

When I returned with the ink Buck O told me Myra had designated me to carry her theory into the next epoch. The fat pod of my right hip would be the living pouch for humanity’s only hope.

Espouse the grace of unease
Avenging son of self-law
Revolt be the revenant

Agent ambushes, cadet lynchings, overpass snares, enigmas in the hook lines of the most pop of songs, Cadeba was seething. His mood scared you sacred. He was one with the hunted. He, too, was calorific, ambiguous, one of the intersexed, and I had never seen him so sour. Enola was his invisible, his match, queen of the Tribe, of all those he was under orders to capture without killing.

It disgusted him to take them alive, and it showed. He was fixed worse than I was, in his sack and in his power drive. His eyes scoped the horizon like needle lasers. How he hated that white whale! Galveston was the ripper of the boardways. He had a hundred toll booths east of the division cased. Buck O'Beau was a master of sabotage. Few had seen his face and lived. Even he, the great Cadeba had to regularly check his undercarriage. There were pools of sweat around newspaper stands. History had dialed wipeout. But Enola, Enola had a grip on him where it counts.

Planners wheezed as blueprints vanished from their networks. Councilors vowed new foundations, scientists promised rain, mayors laid the foundations of new buildings. Cops

picked on their enemies and arrested scapegoats. Commissioners deplored, swore by stronger measures. Byway towers went up. Charges were raised. Cables were laid. Gun-training was offered gratis. Landscapes were designated, valleys were depilated for patrols, for instant-fine diagnosis-stations and essence-reading infra-lamps. Toll-takers were spot-checked by psychic controllers with sensories that differentiated between species of bribe-takers. Cadeba had the codes and the gigablats. He was there among it all, seeking the disguised and mutating as the rubble settled. Galveston spread the maximum brain-butter. How many had he pureed by frame accident, how many dissected, how many incinerated? Buck O was handy with the carver too, everywhere and nowhere, interfering with the interface. Cadeba's cadets were pups chasing pigeons. Few could resist the slightest decoy. They didn't have the psychology. Here it comes, their inner only-wish for one unhindered joy-drunk moment. Strip, Enola whispered in the ear, and the denim slipped, square dance frillies, overalls, chiffon, boxer shorts and fake minks. Peel, her voice of suggestion sang in a bluesy fug, giving them reason to believe they had the royal box seat in this cheap spectacle. They sang to the tone, moving their hips to that file, blue, the memory cry without cause. Their last motel-room wall tintinnabulated with Christmas jingles and childhood codes. Pendulating silicon touched the hairs on the pig's back and they realized in the midst of an unknown pleasure that they weren't getting home for their kid's anniversary.

*Be tasted and tasting
We were not for the burden born*

Some victims were like shotgun shacks. The bullet went in one side and out the other. But on a good night the body hug unstuck, nylons unrolled over shaved legs. Enola took whom and how she wanted. She entered their daydreams singing 'Rip!' and the shirtpits exhaled as agents became tropical beasts releasing those moist odors, intense, private, in tune with her singalong. She sangalot and they were side by side on her terms, infatuated right up to the moment she nailed them to the walls of those bamboo huts. She was a serious conductor, and an elusive one. Bounty hunters scanned, but they were lucky not to find her. You were one tasty duckling. Her only surrender was obeisance to the happy blues highway, the mallet passion, the throng smithy, the hidalgo pulse. Your sweaty canyons filled with honey and fungi juice, you were ripe, unimpeded, swimming, shimmying at a speed that exceeded the wildest uninhibited imagining — till she plunged the skewer in the doll.

*I load the gun
You say the prayer
Ain't that the way
To thank the mayor?*

*Come
to extinction*

The screens were full of live enactments, all phony, shot indoors using air conditioning and fake lighting. How else could they see past their noses? As newsreaders spread lies about the promised immortality the back page took over the front page. Mirch was a celebrity who only half knew it; his boss had paid off his Gutenberg. The readers were the real

winners. They had descriptions of the indescribable, sightings of the invisible, itineraries of the unachievable. Mirch served it all up. Hits, hits and more hits — recordings of the annihilated, videos of the assassinated, last words of the executed. Nobody's heartstrings were safe — the dignity of the shell-shickered, the heroism of wad-shot surfers. It was free reign to harvest and doctor. He doctored and doctored. Lighters encumbered the boot rail. The scent of his lungs was a tobacco shithouse. The front page took over the inner pages. Now they had it all, the bagel and the filling. Newsboys bought new boots, Made in Brazil. Informants poured in, every shape, size and price range. Mirch was the drain. He didn't really have to move from his barstool. He just had to support his head, split-chinned on his fists.

He took a fancy to Hoppel Poppels. Those eggs were his primary protein. His bar-tab had zeroes added to it. His guest list grew longer. A band was hired for the bar, playing all his favorite themes. In his spare time he slurped and yelled at the lounge screen, mind on the fight, any fight. He laid bets with the corner bookie and let his vealboys drink Tequila Slams on Sundays till sundown. His competition suspected him of bribing tribalists. They slapped devices on his back and listened in to his shower-arias hoping for code. They followed him to rallies and derbies and collected his losing chits. He needed a break. It isn't easy writing a newspaper single-handed. He longed for the old days when he made the wrecks in that first quarter hour of singed defoliation, days when he still had his masculine lines, days when there was only him and me shaking our heads and holding down the vomit. He had painted himself into that corner, but his latest stories were as good as if he had really been there. Pure fodder. The readers loved his lines, the ones in

WILLIAM DIREEN

Judas ink. Enola loved them. Cadeba loved them. Mirch was good for anything but the truth:

SMASHED CELEBRITY SHUNNED LIMELIGHT

‘Good boy, Mirch.’

That made him feel like the main man. Cadeba offered him protection, but Mirch gripped up proud and bit his cigar till it bled tar. Sure, he had a piece, under the dash, .455 Webley. Tall like that you fall a long way, and cross-eyed with it. Manners like a Minnesota boar, and tense as a teenager in the thighs. Cadeba knew, and I knew it too, that Mirch wouldn’t spill the truth if he was gutted for it. All they would get was Urban Myth, the Outlaw Idol, the Horse and the Jake Buddy, and a lot of pent-up thin-tubed overweight masculinity. Here was a man who dreamed up hip accidents for Gary Coopers. No immediate menace. One night the lackeys of a rival daily laid wires to his auto. He ripped them out stumbling drunk. He had the luck of Satan. I told him Calmos! Let ride, Laredo. But the katipo was in the cup. Mirch was losing it and his enemies were gaining in daring. His tail-light was kicked out as quick as he repaired it, he was forever being trailed. And that Brazilboot vealboy, who was he working for? Mirch went for a vacation with his mutt to his grand auntie who talked like a crooner-mobster. Fifty three rival dailies recorded their conversation. Then Bang! I read it in the first edition:

MINNESOTA MUTT IN ALIEN AUTO BLAST

Mirch’s poodle had been the felix decoy. It had tripped the wire meant for Mirch and was blown two blocks. Mirch

brought back its pieces and a few shards in Easter bunny wrapping paper. Grief gave way to hate. Best fur he had. ‘What kind of monster, Brakeman?’ The Webley lived in his pants now. He would have his killer.

A paper war broke out. I’d never seen so many UFO’s. The Times wanted in on the highway mashes, and they were head-hunting. The Post wanted Mirch’s ratings. The Times wanted Mirch’s ratings. They were poised to purchase his latest story from him the minute he invented it, but Mirch had downed too many Orgasms. Money wasn’t going to bring his mutt back. They could invent their own cryptic.

Presidents, chairmen, hand-puppets changed, and Cadeba was running out of suspects. Mirch was putting on the flab and losing his lucky charm. Vealboy was growing in the wallet, clear swank. He passed the driving test. He hotted his chaser. The epitome of speed beckoned. He pushed those valves just to hear the paste working. It boasted flames, blacklined and gnarly, teeth wearing in the dry joists. No two colors matched, like true fire. Judas was in more than the newspaper ink.

Spring came and pagan love among the news boys. Ravens coursing with seasonal wants picked them up in perfumed arcades. They satisfied themselves in desert-road hangars, pluming them up like Indo-birds and botching them in radio abasement. Their crime was our crime. The news boys sang last years’ hooks and wore ever-west jeans printed in militant colors. Their lives ended in the fissure of a broken chord. Their remains were found in those barns, hanging like sham peacocks from the rafters.

The dancer was keeping the meter upstairs. Chopin and Schubert. I only saw her when she wanted ink — her face the

cast of a maternal ancestor, star of the armchair opera and thief of the hearts of poets. And I heard her. Her rhythms and her message were beauty to me. They cried into my dream bank. Indecent pied horses were carrying sandbags for podiums, shovelmouthed scoopers were lofting the earth from wanland into tigerstriped wagons that rolled, flew, floated to the site of vaunted life-graves. *Don't choose the tomb*, she sang, runtime mortal. *Choose love and exhaustion*. I was in agreement with her on that one. Why mark the loveless life? Celebrate while you got the balls. We owe it to creation. There are too many assholes out there trying to make a million, devising ways to keep you poor in peacetime. They will repress you till you lack personality. They will wipe your past and make you pawn your spite till you agree with their record of you, invented without flair by robotic providers. With peace like that war has its attractions. Be happy. Love and ambush.

The dancer was tapping out Alexandrines in her studio. Chip and I were playing a power game — I had just pulled a fat stoker off his stocks throne — I was winning and lunch would be on Chip — when Ex-P passed the spider window in a high fur busby, knife unsheathed. The regular meter of her foot ceased. We heard Ex-P's quirky step marching this way and that. He stopped. Had he found her ink? Chip and I put our ears to the trap.

'And quick!'

His voice was minus the meaningful frequencies, like he was hollering down a drainpipe.

'Number's up gemsbok. Don't get snippy.'

His phone went off. He had the quarry authority. She pleaded with him. Ex-P shouted into his phone, an outraged staccato:

‘She says she’s got a brother in Florida with interests.’

An indistinguishable growl, like a giant toad choking on a fish bone. Ex-P passed on the bad tidings:

‘Cadeba says this ain’t something your brother kin do anything about. Ink is ink!’

We were existence from saving her. There was no scream, no floom in the courtyard. Ex-P had his quarry. She was gone and I was bereaved. To mark her dance I memorized Pushkin before the sump bungalows. Chip and I festooned oil drums and ignited them reciting her name. A homo couple moved in and redecorated her space. They didn’t know who had preceded them and we knew better than to tell them. She had never existed.

Ex-P asked me where she might have got that ink from, and ‘Wasn’t she from out east?’

‘Who’s that?’

‘You know, the dancer?’

‘The dancer?’

‘Good boy, Brakeman.’

What else could I do or say? Ink was ink.

Cadeba was a hunter born, eternally tracking. Not for him the kafkadesk and the dogmashirts. He would die in the act, not describing it. If he raised you with the giraffe rector, you were stork fodder, no hookah, destined for the crusher. You did the right thing to keep out of his rector range. He was a hunter and a maimer. He didn’t hunt the cornered and frightened, he hunted game. He didn’t go to work to cripple the maimed. He went to work to maim the perfectly able. He hated himself when his missions were less than noble. And since five out of six of his missions were just that, less than noble, Cadeba was, to himself, a stymied professional.

We were all stymied. Not only Cadeba, not only me and Chip and Myra, not only that dancer. Even the richest of all of us, Mirch, couldn't face himself. He couldn't sleep with himself. He so wanted to print truth. What should he do — tell his readers about the newsboys flagellated and picked off among the rafters to satisfy horny mercenaries? That could cost him his job, or his life. To realize his dream he had to get inventive.

The bar was still empty and the barman was chatting with the turntabulist when the paperboys arrived. Mirch bought the opposition editions. He opened them and wept with joy. Truth! His Truth! I took a look and told him it was a desperate hack penned such porno.

'Brakeman, I heard it myself from the rootstock!'

'More Curaçao in your Encore, Mirch.'

'I'm telling you! It's mine! I know it's true. We are doing that crap, Brakeman. Us! The ones on our side!'

'Not to our own kind, Mirch?'

'To our own kind. It's the truth, Brakeman, I got proof, see?'

He drew the original leaked documents from his vest pocket, the ones he had leaked on and which The Times and The Post had published. That night the offices of Mirch's rivals were lighting the skies with their flames but the world had been given the truth—if only the world would believe it.

'A doc with a conscience came to me. No one would have believed it from me, so I passed it on!'

Mirch had leaked it, and his competitors had published it — real live truth. It was the first anybody had heard about Pell. That's where they were sending you, if they courted you. Your brain and your strains were their baby.

I threw back double doubles. The DJ was in a reckless

mood. Mirch was on to Perditions. He was loco and starting to shake. He thicked hard and jacked. His hand was hot and the hairs on his palm were quivering as he called for Veal. His sentences disintegrated in the boot trash, his head was foaming. The barman dialed nightline. A medoc in a baseball cap gave him a prurrophine cure-all. Three burettes in the pocket and Mirch was in coma for the weekend. The price of surrogation. The barman pinned up a poster he had won on the web: 'An event will precede the day of the Lord.' Thessalonians.

The Day of the Lord had been and gone.

It is hard to keep up the good fight knowing the struggle is futile, but harder when the enemy becomes almost human.

I roped in Chip and we caught a call early—Daimler, sleeve-valve, last series before fuel became a police privilege. It was the one called Lonely Joe. I was admiring Buck O's style when Cadeba rolled in.

He didn't behave as usual. No toting the tell-tale clues. No searching impatiently for the blue box. The agent had been one of his best and his supple spot was showing.

He snapped, 'How you get out here so quick?'

'We were dressed to drive, sir.'

'What you up to answering calls without my say-so?'

Ex-P told us to, sir. When the state channel was hijacked. It was Ex-P's directive.'

'You didn't... you didn't touch his body, did you?'

'Not a hair, sir.'

Lonely Joe had been more than a pal. What was left of him was shivering with flies. There is no enigma in death, only hard reality. Cadeba was in the throes of a grief that is the origin of all art. He wanted Lonely Joe back, he wanted him alive, he wanted him, even dead. His moleskins were quivering. He drove his thumbs deep under his silver-notched belt. I could see him rising and had fears he would penetrate that biological hazard. You can stare your own

death in the face, you can kiss a classmate goodbye, you can cut down a crucified tribalist and bury him without a tear, you can steel yourself to mass indignities or cannibalism, but there comes a day for each of us when our minds will no longer be held in check by the loss of a thing we loved. Faced with the transfiguration of that responsive and deciding body into a swarm of ecstatic flies Cadeba was no longer himself. He was human in a way I had never known. This was re-animation of a rancid left-over in a pig trough — Cadeba's soul. For a few seconds he was no longer a man who dreamed of new ways to debase his enemy; he was a human being divided between fear and faith, self-annihilation and unfounded hope of Lonely Joe's resurrection. He was an advanced evolutionary brain taking refuge in the expression of our earliest grandparents. He was a wounded ape howling at the smog layer.

His grieving, rooting call echoed around the mountains: Cadeba at one with death and sexual, his head thrown back, then forward as his guts doubled in like a shitting dog. He soon lost control of his reflexes and Chip and I had the sense to vanish in the murk, making a lot of noise loading the metal. When he snapped out of it it would seem that we did not know that he — the great Cadeba — had feelings.

We heard him cursing as we welded and hammered and loaded. He cursed the killers. He cursed Lonely Joe. He cursed the road, the mountains and the razor-sharp coral. He kicked the dump bin with his pointed snakeskins causing the radio to start up from the heart of the dead Daimler. Then he called our names.

This was it. We stepped out of the gloom towards him, wiping our hands, passing the oil rag between us. His pecker was still hard, showing through the velveteen. He stabbed

me with his heartless eyes. He lined up Chip for the circular saw. He needed suspects. Someone had to pay. He towered above Chip as the radio blared. What was Cadeba not capable of? It looked like nothing could save Chip from certain violation when Chip's own system failed. His virus used to kick out under stress and it chose the right moment. Cadeba adored sick. That's what saved us. He was a vomit connoisseur. The flesh-acid of true fear was the only thing Cadeba loved more than blind revenge, the smell of it, the sight of it. No vomit and you were ratioed. I swooned.

After Lonely Joe's ambush Cadeba told his agents to move in twos and threes, but that didn't stop them being forced into the rusting seas. The cowboy killers' signatures seemed apparent enough — Buck O'Beau's determination to carry out the most unlikely possibility based on the fall of the dice, and Galveston's butchery and cuisine — but it was Enola who was the first to be clearly identified. She gave away her signature and overlooked a king's ransom in the glove compartment of a Latino wreck.

Towaways was whistling when I drew up. He had already decided to give me one eighth of the take and say it was the half of it. I would have believed him if he hadn't been whistling. I asked him, 'What's in the blue box?'

'We got this one tagged. ID perfect.'

'For real?'

'He was no match for her. That broad's got gaming instinct.' He handed me a bundle of bills. Towaways had watched too many black and white detective films. And he didn't know a secret to keep it.

'She?'

'Female, Brakeman. A beach beauty. He had just sued for

double-lane play when she drew alongside and paired him to the finish.’

‘How do you know it’s a she?’

‘The new decoder cracked her ID. She’s as good as gunge.’

They were always trying out new useless gadgets, but this one had worked just fine. It had Enola down to the DNA in the mole on her chin. For the first time in months Towaways had good news for Cadeba and he had pocketed seven eighths of our take without me raising an eyebrow. He had no guard to drop.

‘Cadeba know yet?’

‘Just you and me.’

I had no choice. I had nothing against Towaways personally but this was duty. I jammed his wrist under the package cinch and reached for the grill chargers. That one glimpse I had of his eyes remains with me to this day. Towaways, my oldest friend still living, was now my first blood. He was a pile of smoking dust when Mirch burned up in his boss’s Dauphine, left blinker crippled.

‘What kind of killer, Brakeman?’

‘They don’t play by the rules, Mirch.’

Mirch was at full stretch. His boss was mauling him for novelty.

WRECK HAULER SIZZLED BY REBEL RIDDLERS

Chip blew bubbles at the send-off. Towaways had been his welding idol. The terror trio cancelled all attack plans till they had reverse-cracked the latest decoders.

I asked myself: And if Cadeba had identified her? Existence without her would be my enslavement, the kind I would not bear! I hit the Grenadier cocktails, four thirds spirit, using

WILLIAM DIREEN

up lighters on a diet of brandy snaps. I was burning up internally. I had to see her, to face her, to feel her. I sent out a code tap and took that drive over the Stolen Ridge. The toll-booth pimp had new thrills for tourists in Surabaya. I bought tickets to his snuffs and tipped him heavy to throw him off the scent. An hour later the blind mystic in Katabiru remembered my footfall. I heard her approach and idle. The mystic brought me my coffee with a single fortune cookie. I was staring into the cream clouds when she busted open a pastry and read my fortune:

*come to me virgin one
inclused wanting*

*where the lame
carry lances
profane acts hail*

nature refuse to die

The moment hit, the one that can always be your last, as unconscious and impetuous as the first moment when you know it is love. It was her. I was hers. We initiated in simulation mode, fragments of our identities imaging in the mirror-reflecting windows. She felt the same in my arms. That's what counts. How long could it last, together like that, the seconds seeding into each other, as we extracted the other, as if surgically, out of elapsing budding moments? I caught myself hoping that the racial war would never end, if its prolongation meant such evolution in the innermost of reactors.

Life continued with a patch on one eye. Stalkers disembow-

BRAKEMAN—END OF THE PRESENT

eled, twig lovers were kidnapped, webs were infected, wars were averted by massacres — Mirch's paper printed it:

CURSE OF THE SIDEGLANCE DYBBUK

Mirch scored an Easter bonus, lost heavily to the bookmaker and drove to the levee to watch the signs illuminate:

HIGHWAY SNIPER SNIPS TIRE

He sat in the kitchen while bulbs blew their meaning. He took bottles to drive-ins and waited for inspiration:

PHANTOM SCYTHE KILLERS HAUNT BURIAL GROUND

He churned and he roiled:

OTHER LIFE VENDETTA MOTIVE

Good boy, Mirch. The more he earned, the dimmer his sparkle. You could see him slipping away. I remembered something Myra once wrote about a state plan to erase intuition from the human roadmap. Mirch was on the way out. Vealboy was at his side and the lucky kid rolled him home to mastic music.

The agents had their virtuous, feeling love as we did, but with no act of resistance to nourish them. There was one couple who couldn't take any more, who had seen too many half-eaten corpses, who had crucified their last tribalist — I watched them through the scope of my Winchester. Faces flickering in the flames, minds meandering, they approached the inferno holding their issue weapons, Anticaster and

WILLIAM DIREEN

Needle Laser. They staggered in the chassis pyre. Last avowals passed from lover to lover. They stared into the flames prestissimo lento stepping ever closer. Five shots punched and the essence cache exploded. After the flames died down, they were roasted better than Galveston could have done them. It was Galveston who found them, but he wouldn't touch them. He ate only unholy meat.

Mirch never faltered during the peace.

LAST TRYST OF SWANSONG QUEENS.

His heart wouldn't last but he could write sap in his sleep. He wasn't the only one snappy with the patter. The murder columns of the rags of eight ruptured sub-continentals were viscous with endstation connoisseurs, necktie enthusiasts and masochist shakers. Mirch was the sleekest, though he was falling into fantabulism. He replaced the Pomeranian, and developed a fear of lifts. Phobias demand insulation. He was more flab than ever. A plane with him on board wouldn't have got off the ground, he said, and perhaps he was right. His scales went roily. He was two hundred and gaining. He had to come in the goods door. He had a double barstool, one for each side of him. He could hardly reach his pocket book. Vealboy could reach it. He paid his bills with the Editor's green tabs. He drove him home in his chaser. He was priceless, 18 karat chicanery.

It would soon be terror as normal. I had cracked the identification decoders. Enola was safe to carry on strafing but nothing would save Mirch. Locally, Vealboy had control of the corners, pavements, buses and trains. He watched his paperboys like a hawk. He moved through subways, mirrored café's and corridors, doing the rounds of underaged

pimps by kerb and tradesman's exit to the cocktail line, returning to roll Mirch into his chaser. A true traitor. He turned, his eyes met Mirch's. Sure, something lower down was burning. Vealboy gave him something to remember for eternity, one hand on the stake, Mirch gasped the moan of helpless addiction on the lathe table as Vealboy cured his fingernails, locks of hair above and below, shaving the fur so he was bald around the sapling but strong. Cream hit the alveolar. Inner blindness and a flapping in the pericranium.

Mirch hit the bar early. He rheum-eyed me and tried to blink but the folds closed over. He half-smiled. On his canines Georgia vowels. I didn't need to reconstruct the melody. The Veal kid had a future in the stock market. He had already diverted four fifths of Mirch's fortune. Betrayal is the ripeness of neglect. Mirch was booked for his own Disappearances column.

We impel necessity. Even the inevitable requires faith. This is how it happened. Veal paid some errand boy to lock Mirch in his MG and drop a cement brick on the speed pedal. It flew like it was now or never, over the side of the heavy water wharf. Chip and I were there when the crane lifted him out. The send-off was a rat-tailed casserole, journalists echoing journalist list bosh. Politics, money, drugs, the star, aliens. Veal's team was there, a team of whoring mourners. He was smarter than ever, selling Mirch's disks to the highest bidder.

I was diagnosing linkage and thinking about the Vealboy set-up when Cadeba came wrapping at the spider window. Had I seen the papers? Mirch had spilled claptrap from the ashes.

I told him not to make a big thing of it: 'Wowee! That tripe! Tomorrow it'll be wipin' asses.'

The smoke dribbled from his mouth like the afterbirth of bad sentiment.

'It says it's been a he-harlot doing it!'

He was outraged. This was slander. The intersexed were a holy sect. I gave him all the outrage I could muster: 'She-man! Two-way! Ambi! Don't say! Just another saucer sighting! I bet it's on the loco page.'

A sign went up. Fresh mangle.

We drove out together in his Blackhawk, each of us fearing the worst. I was afraid the crack wouldn't set. If the terror trio were identified we were all in the skillet.

There were the skids and the sudden swerve where Buck O had needle-eyed a fresh-faced cadet. He made no distinctions. That kid had a girlfriend and a mom who sent him maple syrup. Galveston had taken the leanest schnitzel. Cadeba opened the blue box. No images. No IDs. Just those words of the doomed and dooming:

*Flow nowhere
pain of closure*

*Go
there is air where love contracts*

*Come
to extinction*

I could feel Cadeba's hate rising. He didn't trust me and his brain was smoking overtime. A fear was tearing him apart,

that the only one on the case close to cracking it was a decomposing presshound who gleaned his garbage from scavengers. His Blackhawk growled into the sunset as a plague of UFO journalists descended, buzzing around the smoking site. They wanted two-timers — any color or shade. They wanted armed bigamistas, double-crossing one-armed sex-sisters, knife-happy dueling terroristas. They wanted he-women!

I left them to the crumbs and headed home happy. Cadeba was cornered again, ineffective meantime, x-ed out of formerly in the trajectory of augur, corruptible, longing, corpus vile, viscera boiling, strategy lacking, a hairy of the unfit headside.

At base Chip was in bad shape and cursing more than usual. He was eating pills for everything and beginning to reek. He had cramps before eating, cramps after eating, cramps while sleeping. He said it was nothing, just an ulcer, as he popped a bagful of uppers to combat nausea.

He was testing the sculpture volume of a department scan wagon, casement leaky when suddenly the depot was reverberating with more than rumors. The footfall of paratroopers! They hadn't come for us, not yet. They needed their scan-van, and now — there were demonstrators in the next quarter. Galley masters! I gave Chip a hand and charged the torturebook. The paratroopers piled in and drove on out, ready to go into one-sided battle once the illegal Haploids and incense speeches had pacified the students.

The riot cops were in full swing when I was roused by a pair of fresh-faced cadets rapping at my spider window asking for another favor. They should have been at work, damaging drugged students, but they had gone on a frolic, cross-

ing some rocky terrain they had no right to breach and their steering linkage was leaking. Cadeba would send them down the deepest hole in The Hole if he found they'd been playing hooky in a fully-equipped surveillance wagon. This was going to be easy.

It was built like a radio sedan, roofed with aerial dishes, and it had picked up some syphilis down a gangway where it shouldn't have strayed. I showed them the centipede and killed it on the third strike. I disarmed a sniper that hadn't caused any trouble yet and that coupe was purring. We unlocked drinks and I left them to it. While the young sires were toasting their good luck I pin-holed their tank and twisted two link wires to spark on the first hard turn left. They weren't going far. The Bourbon was death strength. The cadets owed me one, they slurred. They told me about Cadeba's new Dodge hunters. I looked bored, though the news had me worried. I hadn't worked on Dodges since populations traveled by air. They thanked me again. 'Sure guys! You were never here, right?' They took the first straight west and a few more I guess. That web scooper was ready to blow. The tank was dripping and the wires were sparking in the undercarriage. The further they drove the purer the proof of my innocence. I saw it on the far side like distant lightning, my second blood. A plume of purple deeper than the city waste incineration. A stink of singeing and ziggurat lime rose and spread with the night vapors. It lingered in the air for weeks.

They arrived at The Yard on the back of elongated flat-decks. Cadeba had scoured the earth for them. Dodge automatics. They numbered eighty four and had already been remodeled for long-haul missions: refrigerators, monitors, sleeping seats, ejector seats, super-tires for those empty heat-cracked highways. Chip and I wired in the media and blue boxes and delivered them to parking lots on the ninth floors of Ritzes, inaccessible to common space predators. The roofs of these hotels were pixilated with kennels and sepulchres, for surviving and mourned canines. A dog's life was short. They were strangers to sleep. Their efficiency as guardians required insomnia. They knew neither day nor night, bitch nor sire. These dogs dead were more monstrous than kicking, their eyes turned into emeralds, their fur into kelp-crust, and a low howl issued from within the carcass for hours after their blood had frozen up. The eyelids, long strangers to repose, dried and flaked off like dead leaves. The mournful keening and the sight of those eyeballs gave you nightmares or excited your greed. The emeralds were real. The sanctity of many sepulchres had been violated.

Over time, information dribbled in about Cadeba's ruse to capture the Tribe. The hunters' mission was to home in on the Tribe's last refuge by tracking members or families whose 'scent' corresponded to a certain genetic rag. Since the con-

tinents had become lakes or gaping cavities due to collapse or drainage and enchained ferrous lava eruptions, they were to cruise the world along land-bridges and any highways that still lined the raised rims of all continents, eliminating possibilities.

I clung to the shadows as the flames played on. Cadeba's new force had been born, tried and true soldiers. Theirs was neither labor nor hate, this was professional sport. They were like the future of the planet — inhuman. At recruitment they were not programmed to kill. These hunters' orders were to throw the net and to cage!

The old-school agents had been Ex-P's boys and girls. They were corrupt from the pineal to the peritoneum, kicksters at recruitment and kicksters at graduation. They took pleasure from killing, raping, and playing it double-time. One of their scams was legend. Using information on ill-gotten fortunes, a gang of them offered immortality to one of the richest women alive, an aging queen who owned some islands and still had subjects somewhere near Atlantis. She was terminally ill. She signed herself up to be tranked so her serene body would sleep till knowledge had beaten the death gene. She went straight into the acid vat. It takes a swine to smell a swindler! Ex-P got wind of them, questioned them by the Persian method and a hooded judge did the rest. Their heads went the way of the lower dogs. Excavated alive. They say Ex-P personally scooped out the brain of the leader with a jackhandle, and poured the purée into feeding gutters for experimental vermin.

Cadeba's new hunters changed all that. The Tribe was no longer dealing with trigger-happy pooch-doting speedsters who just loved to shoot and skin. The hunters were puritan

to the deepest neuron. It wasn't fear or passion or dreams that kept them loyal, but duty. If the command was Drive, they soared along those wide and neglected highways. If the command was trace, they left their Dodges and ventured forward on foot, seeking resistant hangouts, the coordinates and numbers of the Tribe. Their instructions were number-coded, Pythagorean. Their bullet-belts were stacked with tranquilizers. When their sniper rifles struck, you looked dead but your heart was warm, thumping meat. They were trained to self-flagellate if they experienced pity. Sentiment was in their repertoire — hate, patriotism, lust for revenge, and the emotional assurance of believing you are right. That region of the brain that gives credence to your enemy had been disconnected. They were barren in most human sectors and they were under no illusions. If they gave their prey the slightest credence, they couldn't expect less than the spit. If they got the chance, they were to dope and drag back the slaves to give and give till their hearts could give no more. In this way at least a few of the so-called 'superior' lives would be extended.

Their training had prepared them for the worst. Elbow-kneeing up ridges, kiln-ants biting the tender regions, they lifted brows over crusted verges and beheld the resistance's chief vengeance. Cannibalism of roasted offerings, acts that gave rein to the ditch-bed of fancy. They had endured classes of gruesome and virtual description till not even nightmare could elaborate the decadence of the sub-sects. They were saturated with stories about flaying, dismembering, gratification tactics, and the recipes of the flesh gardeners—force-impregnating their captives for liver paté of agent embryo. It didn't help their meditations, the freshest of them were throwing the net early and dragging just any tranquilized

stranger back to base for a heart donation. Cadeba really believed they would take the race, they were his and humanity's last hope—but he was treading heavy water.

The same night I booby-wired that scooper I was strolling to the gambling bar and saw the first of the educated class to seek refuge on the streets. These derelicts were young, literate, sterile and peeling. The microbotic had mutated again and even the temporary healants were not working. A fresh epidemic had struck the pubescent population of each and every highway continent. It was spreading exponentially. The finest minds of their generation were reciting poetry and enigma as their skin flaked off. Their eyes were foaming from the very viscera with unidentified colonies. The Tribe was no longer a means of extending life for a few governors and millionaires. The greater populations were going under. The farming of the Tribe had become indispensable.

The jungles weren't infinite, and the Tribe had to be losing stamina in there drinking the lagoon water, but maladies weren't the only enemy. Cadeba underestimated the Tribe at every turn. He thought of the Tribe not as the first true race to descend from man, but as a herd of hairless and regressive pandas; and he wasn't alone in that. Global education and training had developed a fully-conditioned operational racist gaming reflex. The Tribe, no matter how dignified, no matter how highly-developed its arms, was a herd. It did not deserve respect by virtue of the fact that it was the hunted, the required. With logic like that wars have been fought and often won, history has been written to justify them, and numberless peoples have been annihilated.

Cadeba and Cadeba's kind believed that it was an abnormality in their strands that made them immune — consequence of mutation after biological warfare. It never occurred

to them the Tribe's immunity came not from their bodies but from their minds.

I was with him when he surveyed the remains of a few of his new hunters. One had been suffocated with his own dog. He felt the shadow and the light, Enola's, and I just knew he had a taste of her then and there in his bull imagination, of her mood and scent. Enola corresponded with something in himself. She was like his own invented, his double similitude, on the periphery of his subconscious, his most desired. She was the mirror, the double, the opposite eternally within, even after death. There he was, grim, and there she was, smiling back from the head of the dead hunter. She was Cadeba's own self yearning for him, exciting the lust gland, hormonal lust stirring his instinct to brutalize. The breath of harmonious antimony haunted him, moved in him. On the slack-side of his periphery, a tonality like a maternal tomb was calling — the voice of his otherworld Nopi out of the mist of Enola's exhalation. This was his ultimate rival, his inner and mirror opposite. This was all the antagonist he would ever need, the lure of his final dancing partner.

Existence was frenetic but measurable, I was playing it safe, no sick-days. All was all. Still within still. It was 4a.m. I felt the blunt circle against the back of my head and heard the ratchet, the hammer arching. Buck O'Beau's arms dealer was a metal purist, every centimeter was shiny as a morgue drawer handle. He was just kidding — it was the desperado in him — but knowing the psycho in the desperado I could not be sure until the barrel turned back and the hammer disengaged.

'Get ya fat pouch ready, Brakeman. We're going through. My job's nearly done. Yours has just begun.'

A bullet with a shiny golden tip spilled from his chamber on to the splicing table. 'Do it like she said. One slice, sure. And sew it neat as a surgeon.'

'Can't you do it for me? I might pass out.'

'I can't stay in one place, you know that. It's all there,' he thumped a purse on the bench. 'Anesthetic if you really need it. The cutter's sterile.'

One last look, eye to eye. The Futura revved and faded. I staggered against the workbench and prepared to slice my fat pouch open. I thought about loading the chip in and memorizing its information, but my personal memory would spill it if I were nuked under interrogation. Brainware is just too easy to access. If I had learned one thing it was that the personality print pad isn't so cryptic, no code is uncrackable, though for the moment scarred soul delineation was still beyond the number crunchers. Sure, the chip would be safer in my fat pouch in the long term. If I were X-rayed Myra's life work would look like a remnant of shrapnel from a teenage battle. But not today! I put the bullet in the chamber of my own Colt for safe-keeping. I would slice myself up when I had the courage.

Buck O's days were numbered but he would go down fighting — the old way. He steered clear of the Dodges with their armor and offensive defensives. More wrecks with his signature arrived, internals smoking, drowned with foam. Their drivers had swerved for kilometers on ghost highways, before incinerating in fireballs.

Ex-P's Quadrofolgio needed engineering a week later. He was getting sluggish on the uptake and his timing was out. He was getting a bad name for his compression. He had waited so long before booking it in because Ex-P didn't trust anybody. It's not that he suspected me, he didn't trust me

— that's different. His chauffeur had a cough worse than his Romeo. He was everything Ex-P was not. An endearing stutter and an Adam's apple that struggled with its voice notes, 'We was g-gonna c-cover the Union Thursdee!'

'Not in this Beagle! What if it clacks on the fly-over? How you gonna get brakes in that back-water? I got to give it the full treatment. You wanna be sugar-cake daddy nex' Xmas? Look thar! No navigation! Boodle seals gnarled to Moloch. Heck! Proton-mousse in the walkabout chip. Six days, maybe seven.'

He took the bad news to Ex-P and I chanced his codes, knowing that if I entered a false one the game was up. If I had so much as hesitated the Yard internals would have been smoking, and our artificial intelligence would have incinerated in a fireball. Confidence was part of the code, confidence that you are right. Under a graphic drain I delved down a history crack and in a side-pocket touched an unprotected signature, recent in rhythm and shock. It had no family or label but my sixth eye was true. I hit fast copy and scrambled that happy canyon. Ex-P would never know it existed. The chassis went to Free Parking with a question mark on it and I sent a confirming memo to Ex-P, 'Jammed with poison.'

That night I skipped the ball game and took the copy to Random Server, doubling back through teardrop space to lose the spoor. It was a contra-sign, reverse encrypted using kidney-shaped algebra. Random cracked it quick. Random is its own mother. The major commands had been ciphered and there was file corruption but that disk, written at the highest level of elegant instruction, rich with callous commands for enslavement on the dark side, was nothing less than a neatly-veiled blueprint for the lowest acts against a

minority in any planet's history.

Soon the entire fleet except for Cadeba's Blackhawk had given up their history pockets to me. It felt like we were winning. The chauffeurs were regular guys who copulated with game-maidens and gambled with each other on shared zip consoles. Sometimes we knew each other already, having chewed and spat and compared ideal teams at auto-nostalgia dances. We scorned together what it was common to scorn, reviled the liberation strains, judged the latest detainees, agreed on the king-pins in the lists of latest suspects, ridiculed the cranks who pleaded their case, idolized the Colony Colonels of the Imperial Age (who were further gone than Galveston in sadism and retrograde habits), and finished the evenings staring into space regretting the drying up of the oil wells. They were sloppy enough to let slip fragments of the major commands. That's the way it is, the lowest personnel reveal the highest.

The jigsaw toothed. With the information of their linguistic and the accumulating fragments of their histories a content was forming. The long, the short and the shameful depth of it spelled Armageddon for terrestrial man. The hunters were gathering Cartesian coordinates on lone genetic-trace tribalists that had come to define a sphere they were calling Eraton. The prize had to be in the center. The Tribe, code-named The New Plantation, would be stupefied before the auto-destruct gene self-activated. Scientists were working on a fast-acting behavior-specific compound trial-coded DYS SERIAL. Object: the capture of the Tribe through tranquilization for unconscious farming.

Destabilization was stepped up. Buck O'Beau crippled a monorail then landed an anonymous attack that caused a fine dust to settle between the city's central nodes. It erased

sign and signature, same and differend, zero and one in the financial sector and caused a stampede on all markets. Our salaries dried up. Executive was broke. No one, not Cadeba nor his superiors calling for his hide, knew who had crippled those nodes. Cadeba's drawl turned icy.

'Diagnosis, Brakeman.'

'Unknown, sir. Could be sclerotic!'

'Can't you clear that pile up?'

'Mass erasure, sir. It's out of my hands!'

He didn't like the truth. He ordered all drives to be taken, mine and everybody's. They grabbed them from the workshops, city halls, business and communications servers. They lifted some in suspended diagnosis from right off their tech-jacks.

Chip and I took to canned meat.

It was twenty five years since the world, or what was left of it, had declared itself one state. The world turned twenty six. The new configuration of the earth's plates was holding. Magnetic lines were settling in to the new order. We were belting through time as before, 365 days a ringband, 67,000 miles an hour, the sun beating through the Milky Way once every 225 million years. It was eternity as usual, the Milky Way descending towards Andromeda, both galaxies tugged by the Virgo cluster, everything was as it should be except for the being known as man. We were at the pin head of a piston on the point of a turn that defied comprehension and we thought we were making progress. Here a yellow flag, there a pit stop, man-made disturbance at geographic speed.

I was afraid to sleep, and afraid not to. I sat up nights

watching, waiting. The weather was playing tricks. Cloud was condensing in the Yard, dribbling down the walls. It was gray all day, every day. The atmosphere grew heavy, denser and denser. Air was transparent but so thick it impeded motion. Fatigue set in. I tracked them in my dreams. One pair of tail-lights hounded by another, sharper, unimpeded, vexing like a fly piquing a sick pig. Another victory for Galveston. There was much blood between us. He might have had quirky taste in meat, but he was quick and efficient in the field. The new hunters cruised unimpeded — heavy slow-blinking gold lights on Galveston's screen. Their Dodges were too well defended for unscaled attacks. We had to wait for them to make the first mistake. They would soon overleap. They hadn't been turning up the statistics and the first hoped-for slaves, the easiest prey in the sphere called Eraton, didn't have the necessary jam in the membranes of their hearts. They were hybrids lacking the genetic traces. Cadeba needed the real blood. The hunters would be driven to take risks, to leave their Dodges and venture deeper into the forests, seeking, tracking purer concentrations of the Tribe.

Ex-P moved the homos to Entertainment and set up a bunch of screen tablet apprentices in the rooms upstairs. Their voices carried two blocks and they had no shame. They were experienced in bribe-snatching, image-mixing and mode-fixing. They were running up catwalk costumes of babycalf leather and linen. This was wear-once fashion. The swish and clap of their oversized snippers and the jabbing of their stitching machines was an insult to the memory of the dancer's bounding rhythms.

I kept my head down like a good diagnostician, but the saboteur artists needed codes and I was yearning for the

clime of Enola's damask rose. My habit had one true wish, employment one desire. The day would come. I would drive to the pearly light of the clematic scramble, to the center of the festooned matrix. Together, Enola and I would blow.

For Buck-O the battle was eternal. Cripple evil with cryptic evil. Not for him the coward's memorial. He would have another type of honorable death. Galveston was a man of sayings. His favorite was 'Prepare ye the way of liberation.' He really thought there would be a denouement, him with his cut tendons and head-baskets. The most cruel are often the most naive. They suffer without knowing it, intent on their own *satis*. They smell the violet, in there where the limbs of the fallen decay. They think a world will exist where their children are no longer interface-tagged and brain-tattooed. They inhabit a paradise of eternal revelation while practicing active dissuasion. These are the true chanters of hip mantras, the fairy tellers. In their coarse and sudden violence all is light, true sense and misplayed emotion. They had no theory. Myra was theory — and I had Myra.

For months I had believed I could have, should have saved the dancer's life. Then I saw her, or the dead spit of her, on the national channel. She was talking straight at the camera, clean as an archetype. There she was again, in a chat show blabbing about her friends on the Côte d'Azur. They'd kept her body but her timing had been altered. Nothing too extravagant, but the lost kids loved her, a distended farer-doll with a numbered bank account. No U-turns. She had to be working on an implanted motor. Pubescent girls were copying her. She and her lookalikes were advertising everything, beds that bobbed to your body rhythm, carpets that felt like grass underfoot, dance floors of light-stained Nevsky

piners that would sustain all-night slow-hands and high-risk rhumbas, utensils, pop-ups, flip-downs, turn-ons, remote commanders, gun metal drinks bottles, schoolbooks, interior designs, a better place to bring home sex patsies. The dancer had become a beacon for wanted things. The viewers didn't know they wanted them yet, but they would. One engagement with the eyes of my bionic dancer-newsreader in electron space and the stores could not get enough of the product.

I fancied I passed her in real space, real time. Was that her in that Slimline? We exchanged glances at speed and she was gone, leaving me with nothing but her gaping poem. Her ghost was my only ever threat to Enola. I saw her, no mistake, in a closing club at 4am. You know how it happens — suddenly you are toe to toe with the famous. I laid eyes on her long enough to hear it, the fourth tercet. In an instant she was empty again. At the bottom of her erased consciousness she remembered me, but one of her desirables whisked her away. They had shorts to shoot in Marseilles and Menton night after balmy night.

I couldn't buy nachos at St Tropez. What would I have to say to decadent Italian counts and chorines, princesses and beauties on bikes in Monaco. She was photographed in a cape-draped box accepting the ear of a bull from a stained matador, masquerading with an antipodean scribbler of lesbian erotica at Monte Carlo. I fantasized over that peahen's silhouette. Call it sexual memory. Then I dropped her from the brain carriage. Lust is a capsule that dies when the pouch shoots. She had been a fine dancer, the best. She had danced on my head. Every time I saw her structured self reinvented on prime time reading the word-scrolls it replayed, opera buffo, in my mind, her unfinished poem, completed

*Circle the rim see
yourself up ahead
laboring*

*the image assails
becomes an object
of desire*

*mirage of mirages
create and consume*

*who enters remains
everlonging*

Between ignoring me and cursing the emaciated vermin, Chip had been hitting the substances. I reverted to target practice, shooting soup-bags full of holes so they bled with cinematic grandeur. Chip took the burning spoon, radiant and tremulous. One beer remained. It was a lavish indulgence. He roared while his team scored. At least the Red Sox were still winning, unless—

I woke, head miles from my feet. They say it happens near the Poles. Ant vision. Not an occupation but a position in a root directory. I was playing tools, arms longer than my own. How is that? Existence not mine either. The white worms find the breached stewpots. That Kommissar lied to me. There too, in the cock yard. A certain state, polar. One end of the world failing to hustle the other. That's when the moss comes in. I was on an anti-wall, a winter wall, the cold flank of an iron planet's cracked bell. My body a mountain, I heard a scream, ineffectual, unprotected in the passing lane.

Next day I tagged a busboy, 'Who won?'

He gave me the trade word. The Red Sox no longer existed. It was all fraud. Chip got desperate. His gambling habits went to the dogs. He was confused and wayward, betting on shoot-outs, taking bets on shoot-outs. The deaths were real. The cocks human. I completed back circuits at three in the morning and found the grease pots in the seeping jack room. I tapped in to stadium reports, to play-offs in Heyday. This shoot-out gag was profitable and gaining. I fell again, deaf. Chip was on the other side of the lab. I tried to speak, to tell him not to mix death and money. No particle. Business loves a vacuum. It was going to be a cold spell.

When sound returned there were starry-eyed estate agents everywhere. Before you knew it values were up. Cinema had bought up Hope, and the old Utopium narratives, you could hear them, people were saying that there was still profit to be made, that it was safe to dream again but something was rotten, real rotten.

A mayoral car cruised by and bought up the sump bungalows. The slimmest of square meters were insane with offers. Drachmas were flowing, the mint was squirting. One morning lakes of indifferent mucous had formed in the forecourts of the bungalows. Little pools of frustrated toxic Flood had risen from the water table. Prices dropped. Mayoral advisors killed themselves. Their self-immolations were announced over the network. No photographs. Humwired shatpated kids were blamed, but the kids had been in bed, as always, memorizing the dolly lines of apolitical hipsters. The only rage was for lollypopolia.

Cadeba was getting close. Galveston had been identified as the cannibal of the flyovers and a lot of unhappy shareholders wanted his ass. His hits and kiln meetings were threatening

global holdings. Buck O'Beau's offender signature had been divined. His Futura was not long for the highway. Enola was laying low, code indecipherable. I missed her every moment, the old Enola and the new, her pulse-beat. It was love at last sight, ineradicable from the chromosome-index.

It was the decade of the cattle syndrome. Shatpate kids promised to be good and bought up stocks. The powers gave them appointments, medallions and seals. Their weal, my zeal. I took cover under code search. Cadeba's moods worsened. In our tiny lab Chip and I swore at each other as we disputed the last mouthful of canned ham. After the partial eclipse, a distress call came from Buck O'Beau.

I drove all night. The veils on the Companion Gate were jammed tight and I had to bribe the toll-snoop to tell. He had seen it all. The hunters cornered the Futura and gave Buck-O notice. There was no shot, no hole in the headrest. Buck-O slumped. When they opened the door, his body fell out. That's how it was. That's how it would be.

When Cadeba started making like we were old buddies I knew my time was short. Galveston was the next to go. I was ordering a consignment when I heard about it. Chip and I made the scene. Six hunter hoods had tracked him. He was out of ammunition. They were moving in to take him alive, a real cop operetta, then he dropped. Just like that. Cadeba was brooding and worried: 'What's in the entrails, Brakeman?'

'Auto-erase, sir?'

He had chewed his bottom lip blue. He spat, 'Time the B-hawk for me. I want it at dawn.'

He was going a-roving for Enola, sights cocked to kill, and so was I, all over his inner map. It was the chance of a lifetime. I winched up that dark bull. At the first degrade I

researched his habitual. Nothing creepy. Second class decay. He had gum in the mercury. Cheap moralizing. I hit Execute and it cooled like Cola. Bone chips in the modulator. More serious. The DNA of a nation under suspicion. I almost felt sorry for those sold-out college kids. Then it opened for me. This was it, the history pocket.

His brief was simple: keep them alive, from the liberation assassins to the lowest of the low, the Tribe had to be prevented from *retreating into victory*. The blood froze in my leather. Was that motive or delineation?

In the old days the Tribe was easy game with no sense of self-worth. If you had influence you could hunt them on safaris, no questions asked. The generations before Galveston's kind changed all that. Many migrated to the cities to earn slave wages. Some of their bodies managed to forget their own genes. They learned how to vow, how to gauge, and how to serve. The remainder confederated and retreated to the last concentration.

When their heart extract started saving lives there were plenty of their kids in the schools. Cadeba's kind initiated screening programs. Those kids, tranquilized in suspended animation, prolonged the lives of the wealthy and powerful until their innocent hearts gave out, but now not only wealth and power and all that it depended on, namely poverty and powerlessness, now existence itself, not only their hierarchies and investment programs, but their systems of under-classes and slaves of under-classes, now all that they knew as advanced life was facing extinction. According to the discourse of their cracked reasoning, if the Tribe wasn't caged and farmed, every last member of their society perfected by monetary evolutionism was heading for the compost layer.

Cadeba had one objective: to corner the Tribe in a fit state

for farming. Liberty depended on it.

As for the third member of the cell, Enola's identity was safe. She was known as Phi, agent supreme. That was all he had for the moment, a naked character symbol among fairy-words and a lot of blood-stained blue boxes.

There was something else in that history pocket, a message from an unidentified source that Cadeba respected as some kind of a god: *The way to salvation is not a path but a method — controversion of the errant. My head was spinning. The path to the future exists where no path exists.* Who or what was this source, and why had Cadeba or his superiors given it credence? He took "the path to the future" to mean the path to the Tribe and its capture, and "where no path exists" to mean the forest where the lagoons would need to be navigated, but capture and navigation were known methods. He was heading straight for his own ambush and was going to take us all, and I mean ALL, down with him. If there was a way through to this so-called future it could not be divined, only revealed. Its promise was the sphinx, possibility the notion of idle motion, of a passive molecule, an indefinable noun. I wiped the segments and slept heavy. Forgetting is a terrible birth.

A call from Cadeba's chauffeur woke me. He checked the music system before starting the motor. The Blackhawk was growling smoother than ever. He told me Cadeba had a job for me, handing me a set of coordinates and a warrant. 'You got to bring back some cripple's alum tube.'

'A cripple, y'say?'

Years of standing by like a robot while Cadeba caused other people pain had set the chauffeur's face in plaster, but this time he gave an active reflex. Another flaw in Cadeba's

defense had revealed itself: his chauffeur knew shame. He roiled off in the Blackhawk, mad as hell I had seen him blush like that. I ran inside to warn Myra — too late.

As far as Cadeba was concerned, the tribal killers were sluts who'd fallen out with their mothers, but Myra theoried so deep her carbon was diamond. She dropped when the time came. For Myra, a life was your sum perception at the clearest moment. You achieve nothing in real terms, that's all psycho-slander. You achieve to the extent that you know who you are and where you are. There are people who say the positions of the pieces need to be changed, but it's the people who need to stop playing games. No one achieves anything in a lifetime, not Caesar, not Napoleon, not all the saints marching to the scaffold. We achieve in death not in life. Change takes time, more time than anyone possesses. Myra only wanted a better world. Once she had made her contribution it didn't matter to her when she passed out of the present. How could Cadeba know she was the soul of the resistance? To him she was just a crippled rebel, a silhouette for the bloodbats. When I got there a trio of agents was in a ring around her. A dog was mauling one of her ankles. A cadet laughed and dribbled, poking his finger in the hole in her head sniggering, 'She ain't doing any more thinkin'.

She had downed the first hunter crying 'Revolt is personal!' but when she saw how many of them there were her gun and her tongue went silent. They shouted her way, offering her a fake deal, while one of them circled around and sent in a gas cylinder. He masked up and jumped her all right, but he jumped a cadaver. No bullet through the heart, no cracked suicide kernel, and no theory. He put one through her brain and told the press she'd decided to take the secret of her crimes with her.

If I looked after her golden bullet her seeds would grow long and true after the last member of her Tribe had lost consciousness. Myra's theory would make it to the future.

The hunters returned to spool the hyper-highways leaving juniors to load the cadaver and send it down The Hole. I was grieving but saw the necessity of stitching her golden shrapnel inside of me. There would be a sadder and a duller future if I let go of that info-chip. A cadet jacked over her and took her scalp. Pretty soon media crews had the scent. They set up a re-enactment for the press of her annihilation: our state trooper boys had played honest, that terrorist's dirty tricks were her undoing... her kind get what they deserve... the troopers had arrived too late to save her from herself... The readers would swallow it unchewed. They had been swallowing anything since Mirch died and with him his style of evident fiction. They were too full of angst to doubt a word. Tomorrow's advertisers would sport Myra's worried face, and a classic paratrooper would appear on the glazed surfaces of sugar cookies. The thought of Myra would always give me courage. She only wanted a better place for you and me.

I hooked up the alum tube and toured the neighborhood for extensions. It felt to me there were blood-suckers behind every lamp-post. A left armed actor was standing by a pot, stirring right-armed casserole.

'Even the bone has goodness in it, he whined dreamy.'

'It's your own?'

'Later I turn the food into shit.'

I had to get out of there. With miracles like that Cadeba had to be gaining.

Chip was waiting at base. I showed no emotion.

'What he want with a Alum tube, Brakeman?'

‘Scan it for theory accumulation, Chip.’

‘We got the means, Brakeman?’

‘You know we ain’t got the means. But we gives Cadeba what he’s after.’

When Chip made for the Alhambra, I laid my piece on the buro and wedged the head from the shining bullet by the light from my desk lamp. One tap with the heel of that Colt and the gold cover fell. Another tap and its chalk casing split. Among the snow there it lay—a tiny, thin, golden plate housing a black rectangular speck: Myra’s life-scrolls.

Under the eyeglass my skin seemed to belong to someone else. Ant vision overcame me again as I abstracted. I lay swabs about and hit — a fine slit on the right side of the waist above the hip bone. I forced that chip into the fat layer and sloshed antiseptic over the wound, before sealing the deal with a simple plaster. I slept it off in the caravan, Myra’s words sleeping, now, in me. Would they be in a language anyone understood when they woke up? Our own phrases were mutating. Who was preserving their current meaning?

If Cadeba’s bosses had their way, salesmen with Boon Hall accents would soon be dazzling urban couples with their stanzas, the only books on sale would be verses of *The New Utopium* and collections of advertising slogans. An experimental gas was in the stills. Instead of choking or maiming, its aim was to re-educate your sense of history, your sense of right, and finally your ego. A corrective drug would close down dangerous liaison paths to freer thinking. And it wouldn’t need to be dropped as bombs on the pockets of urban civilization that remained: all this and more would be on the market, its effectiveness increased because it will have been willingly acquired. Purchase had become the means to our own effacement. Infallible arguments were in the printer

cables, to convince us to buy and, therefore, to be converted.

The world was on a giant forgetting curve. You did well to kneel and obey the ‘impulse to currency’. If you were not disposed to the idea you had better not show it in your attitude. Sing and be quelled. No dragging the chain. Sing with one voice and believe in the cure that will defeat even death! Such a future was on the way! An age of rose endeavor for those who paid the door charge. Humanity would never be more zealous. Poets would never be more busy with their hymns of happy hopes.

Trade winds were bearing those figurative spores and the politicians were showing retrogressive tendencies. They had never been more righteous in their rhetoric, devaluing the Tribe, ridiculing them, denying their evolutionary virtues. The Tribe was less than human. The Tribe was barbaric in customs and anti-agricultural in attitude. The Tribe’s behavior was tantamount to treason. ‘Mankind’ would treat them as dissidents should be treated. Mankind’s families would one day spoon Independence Day pudding “in security”.

Depression set in. You know how it happens without you knowing it. You waste time watching patches of green on the monitors called playing fields, you play yourself on the screen, cruising the backwoods and deviant quarters. You have fears for your savings and enter banking again and again. All is in order. What is going in is going out. Then the secondary symptoms begin. Scratching, scoffing, stumbling. I raided the medicine cabinet and soothed out. I needed a break, we all did. Trunks coursing, I could feel it leaking, reality. 3am. Another callout. Another agent who couldn’t spell his name to save his skin. Another scalp for Enola at partial eclipse.

‘Look at that!’ Cadeba prodded his brain with a bronze-

tipped electro-cane: 'Only one side was working.'

He wasn't threatening me. He was threatening every living being. He was prodding the brain of all of us with that cane. Rage was rising within me. I had had enough. There was something he could not know because he couldn't see further than manipulation. There is always a future. It might not be more than a few seconds dragged to the light moments before universal extinction, but it is waiting there, and I was going there, where its discovery would be the present, as the misuse of the present by types like Cadeba is history. 'The future!' The thought calmed me down while he lobotomized his hunter's brain, 'The future.'

The following week his squad wrecked our network and heisted our drives. They would fall asleep over my scrupulous accounts. They would understand why I was not a millionaire. They would record it all, appointments, installations, bonds, public treasury contributions, stock in, Dodges out, client beers, cash, perks and regular payments. No tin was left unopened. Components, concoctions, everything went to core police. They snapped the legs of our stools and the bottom rungs of the loft ladder. These guys had no etiquette. They tried to set me up. A newsboy stepped out of the overalls locker. He had a message for me from a guy called Galveston about a he-whore. I told him he should go back to acting school. Bad move. Ex-P opened his peephole in Security. His eyes were flashing like he'd been snorting Simurgh sherbet. The orbital vein on his forehead was bulging.

'Who's the last killer, Brakeman.'

I had to play along. Sure, he had read the thriller columns about the he-whore. It was spill or be spilled. He was map-

ping my holiday in Hades. I went for the slow drawl.

‘Could be. Maybe I touched a he-whore when I was checking Lonely Joe’s palm pilot for cream cookies. I can’t be sure. There are millions, ain’t they? Two-ways and androgynes running around, a million pixies a minute?’

My heart was pumping proof adrenalin. I was ripe for Easter suckling. ‘Yeah,’ he sniffed, cracking hazelnuts with my multiple-use pliers, ‘Nice try, Brakeman. Somewhere out there a pretty Bellette is nothing but smoldering powder — a Bellette that you checked over, Brakeman. A vanload of my patrol-boys has been blown sky-high by Semtex! How’d this he-whore get the word? If I didn’t know better I’d say someone around here has been making hidden copies.’

My only hope was fiction, and Chip.

‘There... there was a... a partial eclipse, sir... There was me and Chip and—’ I faltered again, ‘—and Miss September. I was for a fishing trip but Chip had fallen for her Thursday at the bar and he wanted party games. What can you do with a randy mechanic who’s lost his heart to a pin-up girl?’

‘No one works for me who loses his heart to a pin-up girl.’

‘That’s what I said to him, sir, but she had the arsenal, and her code-beasts had Chip hypnotized. I cruised the district and ate at the nightcart. I spied on them later, Chip snoozing on her breast. Miss Sep wolfing her food like only a man can do. Look! In his locker, there!’

‘That her, a redhead?’

‘She looks all woman but she’s all spy!’

An hour later he dragged Chip out of the Alhambra. I had implicated my best buddy. Chip would lose control at the first curling ball, they would never know he didn’t possess any game secrets. I sat still as a monk. Rotting. What would Chip not suffer on my account? One liquor lush less. They

nabbed Chip, they nabbed the model who posed for the Miss September calendar. Then they came for me.

Cadeba came in person. I had prepared myself for the end. We do not always choose the path we will take. I felt the strength leaving me, the life draining. The longer he stood there offering me deals the weaker and less of a living being I became. A pain had entered my joints and my guts. My muscles were in agony and soon my forehead was circled by a band of hot metal. My vision had all but dimmed as he reached the ultimatum.

I was his living link, he was telling me — I should let it all go, all the sites, and leave it to him to decipher the timing, the targeting and the identities. He offered me set choices: fame by anecdote, self-esteem by personal myth-housing, a new identity where the he-whore couldn't track me — or sudden contract closure.

Pell

WILLIAM DIREEN

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Pell was no fun house. Observation windows were embedded in the walls, but they were recording their own smudges. Cadeba, Ex-P and their cronies believed all they had to do was chart your health and drain your mind, that you were secondary to the process. They did not know with what mutability and stealth our minds and bodies conspire when we sense injustice.

At first they sought the least trace of the tribal gene type but they weren't going to milk me for extract. My genes were the usual mix. Why else was I alive in that stalag? Cadeba had the auto-erasure of Galveston, Buck-O and Myra as dying proof but he wouldn't see it. Not one of his tormented suspects inside Pell belonged to the Tribe. How could they? They tolerated captivity! A yellow glue ran down the walls of the ward at nights, gathering in pools where tiny flies bred. They didn't bite you, not like the mosquitoes and the midges, but they pestered you, interfering with your concentration. The mosquitos and midges struck in swarms every few weeks when they had gone through enough generations to crack the latest pesticide or insecticide. Then medocs would rush in to slam the windows and kill them by hand. Cadeba wanted us alive.

Our ward looked over a delivery bay on a Level One courtyard used by electric flat-deck trucks. You could see

them unloading and loading drink cylinders. We were all sweating in there, the orderlies as well as the suspects. Though the nights could turn cold, we were wetting our collars one way or another, sweating into them from heat or fear. We were near the waist band of the earth, not far from one of its putrefying diminishing soups, former lakes or coral seas, the legacy of centuries of pesticides, effluents and slow tar leeching from the high ground. I could feel forces, magnetic forces, at work in my balance spirals. Earth hadn't settled on north after the geo-upheavals and the fluctuating tension at that latitude near drove me delirious. When they stormed up, those beams belted my brain harder than Ex-P's insidious questioning.

There was a library with real books in it, hundreds of them. It had a barb-wired viewing balcony that looked out over the arterial route that was deserted most of the time. I saw a hunter Dodge cruise through the mist one day, one of the last Dodges off the line before the continents collapsed. There was an off-ramp a mile or so towards the smoking towers of a half-destroyed city I didn't recognize. Its towers had something oriental about them, like seed-pods, or the prayer-towers of Baghdad. Cadeba and Ex-P must have taken this off-ramp before curving around to Pell and entering at Level Zero. Ex-P parked underground, Cadeba made his chauffeur wait in the bay—the same chauffeur I had seen blush with shame. He had high Tartar cheekbones, wore a stovepipe suit and had the patience of a guru, waiting all day and sometimes all night. He listened to Norteña music near the covered entrance. That's how you knew when Cadeba was around—the music of the oppressed. If Chip and I were ever going to get out of that cage, it would have to be there, through the car park at Level Zero.

The interrogation was constant and it wore you away. Ex-P poked at you until he found the tender spot—then he poked some more. I was wading through a natal gouache of his concocting that had already suffocated his inner mother and castrated his father. He was trying to draw my thinking liquor out with a psycho-suction tool. At times the machine seemed human, an organic, natural intelligence with a talent for true therapy. You were so bruised and worn out that you almost believed the soft voice when it said it would do all it could to get you out of there.

They started with verifiable fact. You dribbled and gave, releasing what you had in any number of ways. They wanted the name of your childhood train set, the smell of ozone when the sparks flew. It all flew. I gave it all to them. My childhood sweetheart. My crush on the science teacher. How I had been high in the buddy-pool. Blaise, my first mentor, the apprenticeship, my first romance. My square-dancin' gal waiting for me weekends at the cinema. The prize for brakemanship. How I had been so proud all those years ago when Cadeba's scout headhunted me. The pleasure of renovating and seeing those old cars run again — all that I had to be proud about. Mastering bomb detection. Being teamed up with Chip. His crush on Miss September. The Red Sox. Chip's signed ball collection. The workshop, how it was ordered. More about Chip and how he was innocent, whatever his crime. That's where I foundered, stopping for breath every time, at Chip.

Whatever I said only made it worse for Chip. They pushed me on, past him, onto Mirch, his Klondike auntie, the enslaved newsboys, the same-eater's casserole, the Guadalcanal shots of the killer queen, the dry-dock trimaran

leg shaver. It flowed and Ex-P's machines took it down. I played my knuckle-bones carefully, no tricky syrup. Our hard drives had been requisitioned and I couldn't risk a lie. I didn't want to be lasered beyond revocation. I gave him it all, the facts and preferences, all about my first mentor Blaise. I told them Blaise was right about the ratio principle.

'Wha'd he say?'

'And... and the song strophe. The Indo-European song strophe. It was Blaise who cracked it. Didn't you guys know that? He was the mind of Scutumville.'

All true, all decipherable and verifiable. The questions were specific, like the last of the bombs. The answers were thematic, scattered archeological evidence of human occupation. They made sense out of it, though they'd never heard of Blaise. A twinkling researcher said everyone knew it was John Logie Baird and Jackson Nancy who busted the command code. I insisted Blaise was the ratio king and wouldn't retract. They took a break, fearing heresy if they let it pass into memory. They called Ex-P. He was suspicious of the song-strophe. He ordered them to fill me full of Haploids and to get everything they could on this Blaise weirdo.

It felt like sugar in the first seconds then I bucked and spilled the entire apprenticeship. Blaise was a silicon genius who couldn't cook a tomato. Inserting pacifiers for errant processors hardly paid for the fast food. He was no fulcrum-wiper. When he came up with an idea for the foolproof password he said, 'Boy, let's eat!' We bought a trolley of TV dinners but the refrigerator was soon bare again. He had the DNA identity idea before it was practice — or malpractice. And that wasn't his only discovery. It was Blaise who first proved that frag-maps force in all directions. He aired an analog model at the Declaration Expo. It was simple. Take

the monkey grip, plunge the pump and the ram oozes at each shove. He said it was to enlighten the people. People were disgusted. Where'd he get a notion like that? We worked night and day to make it work but we never could beat friction. His mind was in constant momentum before it left the galaxy. I helped him home one night, he was exhausted. He had been working for twenty-five days and nights without a crust to eat. I told him to slow down or I would be alone in the world. He didn't slow. The oil was used up. The continents had caved in. The coasts were lined with empty highways. The population was down to danger levels. The world needed Blaise, he just knew it. He said he would be back. He pulled on a pair of shin-length baseball pants and flew to Palo Rialto. Not one nerd took the slightest heed of him. Poor nerds. Poor world. Poor Blaise — the inventor of owner-specific terror-checks and multi-directional bit-blasting. What didn't go on in his mind! Every streamlined fantasist buffer from Palo Alto to Kerala, Blaise outstreamed him, Blaise outdreamed him. But the Raj reimbursed him no rupees. His sandals wore out, then his feet. He went cock-eyed, serially unrelated to reality. He lost his bearings in Austronesian and was arraigned for tribal sympathy. They butchered him in a military hospital for what was left of his thinking gear. I wanted to go after him; to track him down and break him out, but the 31st offered schooling to orphans of the geo-chaos. I learned hard, a study pinscher, head in the script manual. Hewlitt, Cisco, Appelo, Intro, but I never forgot Blaise's beloved monkey pump.

'Austronesian?'

'Huh?'

'You said Austronesian, didn't you? How'd he learn that if he was innocent?'

'I didn't say he was innocent. Chip is innocent. Not Blaise. Blaise was Blaise. Not innocent. Not guilty. Innocence doesn't come into it.'

'You saying he was wrongly accused?'

'I ain't saying nothing. I don't know. I don't need to know. You know what Blaise used to say? *What you do know ain't the half of it.*'

'So tell us the half he didn't know!'

'I'm telling it, ain't I?'

Ex-P had had enough for the day. To see him give up it felt like I was winning. He told the psychonurses to test my tolerance before they went home. Haploids were experimental. They were already flooding the colleges to disable the best minds of the generation. I gushed ever onwards like a guest from Gehenna. At least the psychonurses looked interested. When I spilled about Blaise's brain catastrophe they wouldn't rest till they'd verified it. They tracked down Blaise's encephalo-scan in a cure-center cache.

'It's low order, but yee-hah! What the Brakeman says is truth! Low order truth!' one of them yelled so loud I could hear him through the observation window. Those few verified details okayed everything I had said up till then so I told them the stuff that was harder to take, how Blaise used to wander down Karanga Drive talking theorem to big-boned queens. The researchers noted it all, how the beards of his uncles grew violet and how below, where they never shaved, the hairs turned bright green.

When Ex-P returned his cheeks grew more veins: the seeing eye would have a tough time verifying all this. He turned up the heat and created more fog. He wanted to know the strangest things, like why Blaise let his last pair of Reeboks go all to hell. His inquisition was the real mystery. I gave and

gave, answered and craved. I gave him truth, every word of it, every statement had a strict analog in pluperfect reality.

At tea break one of his team told me this Blaise was OK. He told me I was OK. He told me you got to hold on to your idols. He told me that it was loyal of me not to betray my memory of Blaise—but he had to do his duty, he had to inform me that Jackson Nancy was my man.

I wanted out of this ever-closing trap. The air pressure hardly let up. Humidity drew closer to 100% at night without the skies breaking. It had become like a language. We got to know it better, to accept it as a given in that place, to recognize its effect on our urges and wants. A change of a few decimal points could bend an idle whim into a libidinous craving. It was all too bodily. It was warm and moist and fecund. We were at the breast, the cleft. It was at our clefts and wherever we were dripping. Temperature, humidity and desire were inseparable. We underwent rapid transformations of state from hunger to lust and desire, from attraction to fascination and arousal, from frustration to relief and satisfaction to the strangest resolve to undergo extreme forms of denial.

Every couple of weeks, when the murky suspension thinned or a breeze cut a swathe through the cloud, over beyond the arterial route and the city you could see a liquid descending from the distant mountains. It wasn't anything more than a trickle of mucus but it gave us hope to see that riverbed. It reminded us that our planet once operated a perfect system of water circulation, and that it was still there, water, in the earth's cavities sucked of their petroleum, in the ripe colloidal atmosphere, in ourselves, and in that creosote bleeding where there was once a free coursing river.

One day a diseased breeze rose from behind Pell causing Inquisition to be suspended. The stench made us recoil. It was coming from no ordinary lake. It had to be coming from Flood itself, the single turgid sticky self-leveling globe-enveloping putrescence that was once the cleansing ocean.

I was thrown in the can with Chip. Chip didn't seem to care that I stank worse than Flood. The first hours passed slowly as he sought the first words.

'When they gonna let us out, Brakeman?'

'Patience, Chip. You gave our files up, didn't you?'

'Dunno. Yeah... files... I reckon I did. That what they're beating us up for?'

Poor Chip. What half-apprenticed bus-boy had been messing with his gonads? It pained me to see him like that. He didn't smell much better than I did—an odor of involuntary ejaculation, sweat crannies and fungus strike.

'Don' it roil ya, Brakeman?!'

'It roils me, Chip.'

'They got Miss Sep, Brakeman.'

'They're herding the innocent, Chip.'

'What they gonna do with a body like that, Brakeman?'

'Your guess is as good as mine, pardner.'

'We both know, don't we, Brakeman?'

'Don't fret, Chip. Think of the children.'

'Children?'

'They didn't get the children did they, Chip? The sex-tulips.'

'They got 'em, Brakeman, every one,' and he started to bawl so loud the night orderlies woke up.

'What's the shame, cell-mates?' he drawled. He stank and he spat, but as night orderlies go he was tops. He depended

on the bottle, slept on the job, and wrote letters to a kid who thought he was the daddy. More than a regular guy.

Next morning they rolled me to the Speech Room and I picked up where I left off. I was learning the ropes. Rule One: Don't tamper with the memory. Rule Two: Know your saturation points. When I reached The Three Suicides the going got sticky. They showed me photographs of each one in their morgue drawers. Myra was slimmer than ever, too frail not to excite human sympathy.

'Seen her before?'

'She was beautiful.'

'She had herself to blame. You knew her, right?'

'I seen her. I... I hauled back her alum tube.'

I rolled Myra out of my embrace, faked loco and fantasy took over. 'My first date. A star at the military academy. She won a citation for bravery. Can I keep the photograph? She was beautiful.'

'Wrong file, Brakeman. How about this one?'

The death mask of Galveston, toothless. They'd found traces of agents in his gums. I screamed:

'The workshop! The particulate analyzer! Don't you know it needs an expert at the panels. Don't you know not just anybody can detect Optic Semtex?!'

'Open! Swallow!' A half-naked extra-muscle medoc gripped me by the hair and flicked out a razor asking, real military, 'He's through, ain't he? We cut him up?'

Ex-P's voice echoed metallic from the observation loud-speaker: 'Cadeba wants him whole.'

They rolled me out and I woke without Chip. They would no longer be ignorant of all that Chip thought he knew. They played me reruns of the old Grand Prix, buzzing, buzzing like bluebottle flies.

A Bible Lady with a shivering hand came by the day the paperboys arrived. She got in without their knowing. Some people can do that. They can walk in anywhere — opera houses, embassies, town halls, rocket launches. A true zealot, she started talking to me about fishes, hunger and rain. She told it good, one hand jiving and the other pointing to images in her little book. There would be rain, and soon. She told me of a hermit building a lean-to in a state-funded buffer zone. She said, ‘The tide will turn on the left hand of evil. He will cast out shadow. You know who *He* is, don’t you, sinner? You got to sell your goods.’

I asked her to go back to that bit about the rains. ‘When you say they are coming?’

She answered to the window, ‘When Gabriel speaks.’

I told her that ideas are stronger than superstition. I said all the poetry I could remember to myself to prevent her ideas infiltrating mine. She sighed at me as if I was going to regret it, as if I was a fool to wallow in my own ideas, as if there is salvation only in blind belief. I stared back at her, eyes blank, as the rhyming couplets of minor poets ran across my forehead. That’s how the visit ended, with the conflict between art and religion.

The scream of a paper boy, then silence as he gave all he knew. A medoc shot the viewing slot and cursed. It took two orderlies to carry her to the stairs, legs pedaling in the air, both hands on the Bible. She screamed ‘He will cast out the shadow!’ all the way to the entrance on Level Zero. I had my doubts, about casting out the shadow. And she would be back, for sure. She was too prickly to kill and too smooth to arrest, not a person at all, but a tendency, a regression into childhood, the need to trust in the Pilot. She could slip past bored chauffeurs and any front desk receptionist easy as

The Invisible Man.

The Bible Lady was loco but she gave me hope—not because she was a mentor, but because she walked right in and she left without a stitch-mark. She was pax. She was Escape. I had given Ex-P the truth about Blaise and he had swallowed it. What had I to fear? I had the strength to think now. Everything gave me hope. There were ways in and ways out. The very walls gave me hope. And as long as those reflections of yourself were mutating in the wrinkled surface of the mirrors, you were still thinking.

Hope can't last. It is too much like a flower. Despair refuses to atrophy. It is too much like cancer. Paperboys screamed, folded, gave up, blurted descriptions, any descriptions. The cæsarian saw dropped a gear. I was lucky to be breathing free. Enola's identity was safe. Ex-P was wrestling with a Wisconsin prairie bloom, no mustard, all airy-fairy. Enola was a monster-minister horned devil-shopping Akkadian noun with infinite untranslatable cases. He was playing a pack with fifty two suits.

The medocs had grown paler since the killer breeze from Flood had passed. Their beards were turning bright orange, a side effect of too many recreational Haploids. They had to excuse themselves in the middle of my recordings to shave. They were re-entering the orangutan age. Experience had substance but no flavor. The universe was turning gray for me but my whiskers were still black. Cadeba's linguists analyzed the vocabulary. Every word had repeated itself at least once. If they got a new word out of me they believed they had plumbed deeper into me. They examined it for malaise motivation. They checked it all for truth and variance but their system was cheating by definition. It couldn't register

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all it heard so it reverted to words that were already in its dictionary. It had no eyes, no ears to trip the ruse. I let it go. Street slang. Names we called each other. Half-names understood between buddies before the tyranny of spelling imposed itself. They weren't going anywhere except the womb. New words appeared, words I had not said. If they accused me I could counter in all honesty. I entered infancy.

To justify the errors of their machine they sent me for a therapy called Writing.

The nurses had been looking forward to having me, they said, though my tongue was a blub of rubber and heavy perspiring was my greatest talent. One of them mopped the brows of the writers as if she was wiping benchtops. A linguist evaluated your level. He showed you an image and you gave him a word for it. He had a way of saying 'Thank you!' as if he wanted you to repeat what he had said. He said it at me each time I gave him a word, mouthing his words, opening his jaw wide and contorting his lips into a chimpanzee smile. He said it as if I was the one who should be saying Thank You.

When he had his responses he slid a hardcore Gaming magazine under my nose—the Teamwork issue. He grimaced again and whispered, 'The dollar is mightier than the rose.'

Why should I trust him? How could I be sure the gaming magazine was not another form of punishment? I stared into it without looking up, without turning a page.

'You like to shoot I bet, don't ya, kid?'

I repeated, out of time, 'Thank you.'

His shoes and stockinged calves moved around in my periphery. I wasn't going to brighten up his day job. Where did they find these nurses? He click-clacked out the swing doors to his next victim on Level One. I flicked through a feature on a winning team. The new therapist arrived. A sec-

ond pair of legs, strangely familiar. The shoes were polished, white regulation with eight eyelet-holes; rubber soles, leather laces, a double reef-knot. Slender ankles. Firm tendons like a dancer's. 40 denier mesh. A starched, unstained white coat. She was waiting for something. I heard her breathing in the silence. She took a step towards the courtyard window and stood with her back to me. There was something non-regulation about her, something independent in that silhouette. I knew it as deeply as Leviathan. She wound a window open a few inches. Norteña music. A sordid cigar-cloud crept in through the air conditioning. She stepped towards me and stood with her back to the observation window. How long had I known that scent? How great was the attraction! This was free fall. She was looking hard into my mounting eyes, measuring how much I had taken from the inquisitors, how much I had given, trying to decide whether I was still on her side.

I played it cool: 'You... you've changed,' and I didn't mean her dress. It looked like Enola all right but her face, her posture, her way of walking, many things about her were different. A medoc entered and checked a box on my chart. She snatched the chart from him and asked the medoc rudely, 'You... you the graphologist?'

The medoc grunted, 'You must be new here, ma'am. I ain't nothing but an orderly.'

She gave me blank paper. She said, loud, so the medoc could hear, 'You are gonna think for me. Try now. What does the Teamwork issue say to you?'

I stared at the paper, controlling my joy. The medoc cleared out. I spoke her name, quietly, under the music, 'Enola?'

Her look was cruel, her lips still, but her voice was kind:

'*You know who I am.*' An enigma to soothe every nerve. A voice of light. A poem and a look. If she was a plant, if the real Enola had died while being captured and they had remodeled an imposter to prove my complicity, they could have cracked her scent or tapped into the timing of her replies but there was one thing she would never have given up. I asked her for it: 'Convince me.'

She was standing with her back to the camera and, by instinct, she knew her position exactly in relation to all surveillance. Without altering her posture she moved close. The cigar smoke entering from the air vents grew stronger. Could she be nothing more than one of Cadeba's ruses? She turned up the music channel, moved near my chair and put her hands on my shoulders. With her head stock still, her lips began to move. From the observation monitors it would have seemed she was bearing over me, laying down the golden rules of writing. They could not know that she was repeating the first lines of Myra's manifesto:

We are incidental but workable. We register phenomena in the ground processes of our wishes. Later, we learn to insinuate right judgement without registering our opinion. This gets us through the first years. No teacher teaches. We do not acquire. The seed of the poem is within us or it is not. If we possess it the poem flowers. That much we know. It flowers once or many times, it is up to us. If it is not in us we fear death, we drag down whom we can, or we push them down before us into a living hell.

Her irises contracted. I could see her, the old her. She was mine again, come fire or torment. I was to call her Nurse. We were going to get us out of there.

The hard heels of a two-way medoc returned. Enola

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slapped my hand. The pen fell. 'Don't fiddle with that, Brakeman, honey.' She opened the Gaming magazine: 'Look, honey. Stealth and accuracy. Ain't that what it's about?'

I was staring at the tabletop. No distortions. The medoc stamped near. A waft of abattoirs. He made a joke about a cop and a concertina to Enola, who faked a laugh. We had a chance. The medocs were dupable, luke-warm, occupational puritans. They were beyond suspicion and beyond suspecting.

'Wouldn't you like to write, honey?'

Three words maximum. I gave it a go:

I am through

'Good boy, honey.'

She tore off the slip of paper and told me to try again. It was Ex-P's innovation, the writing lark. He thought he'd get more truth that way. The ink had a curious aroma, as if it was laced with accelerant. It was outlawed in the big wide world but in Pell it was deemed to have its uses. You were allowed one pen per sentence. No fetishes. The ballpoints were refillable, but what you had just written had to be good enough to merit a refill. You waited for the critical judgement, repeating the next line to yourself before fatigue and brain malaise stole it from your storehouse. Enola dangled a bonbon before me.

'Try again, honey.'

Chip is innocent

The pen ran out.

'Wouldn't you care to read it aloud?'

I would try. I was a tree, branching for her.

‘Just your normal voice, honey.’

Controlling the lust burgeon, I sought my voice. My eggs were up there with the love vultures. I made a big effort. Ex-P was planning to scramble my ovals with parsley. I took breath and aimed:

Suspension hoist rupture

She played it up.

‘Ex-P’s going to like this!’ then louder, ‘Here’s your refill. More voice, honey!’

She wiped my forehead. With a hand like that we could paddle any puddle. I thought it through, oil simmering. I tried to be creative. I tried tragedy:

Miss Sep Chip

The pen ran out. She read it and breathed heavy, she cried, ‘Yes!’ Rapture. I earned more ink, more pens. It was flowing, refills followed refills. I let it run.

Open flesh wings

She ate that one. She shoved it in and chewed it up. My sex column was aching. There is a cool reality and the desire of those who are losing their minds. Refill. I tried again, disguising the eros drive:

Stoked missile delving

This she could publish in the ward anthology. I was wet. I

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had my own ink. Blood for oil or bile or semen or that something coursing out my eyes and nose. I would make it myself. She won me a citation for creativity.

‘Good boy, baby. More missiles.’

I wrote like my life depended on it:

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| <i>Dia</i> | <i>spora</i> |
| <i>loss</i> | <i>of child</i> |
| <i>Go - gol</i> | <i>gotha</i> |

| | |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| <i>seven sorrows</i> | <i>earthcleaving</i> |
| <i>Blood</i> | <i>and lava</i> |
| <i>the spurtide</i> | <i>nearing</i> |

The two column antistrophe! Ex-P would pick it over for anything seditious. At least my balls were safe. I could hardly see for the mucous dripping uncreatively from my head. A swarm of fruit flies rose and made for the fluid. This writing was no lark. The infuse driver phoned in. Jam at the Toto port. Humidity playing havoc with the truck-electrics. No fresh water until barometer drops. Next day she was there again.

‘Try, baby, try. I’m listening.’

‘You mean, with my mouth?’

I couldn’t believe it wouldn’t arouse suspicion. Ex-P wanted writing, not voices. I wanted pens. She fingered the Puritan Book of Verse. She reached inside her sponsored vest and drew out her own.

Optic Semtex

She drove in the empty again and refilled. We wrote:

BRAKEMAN—END OF THE PRESENT

The Yard Ford

'Good boy, baby!'

While U Wait

Under the guise of such banality are all lovers tropical, eloquent, raging. I racked my brain for one-liners. I wrote like a blind man, sight restored, who had never seen a smile.

You and me

She pocketed it and whispered to me not to lose my sincerity. She reminded me that the very instinct of Adam was an escape wish and this could be our ticket out of there. I gave her the look, toned with ballast from the love boat. No pretence, I was a mess of water-signals, letting pints of fluid go from everywhere but where I wanted. I was thirsty. I was reduced to drinking the shower water. I wanted in, I wanted the yin, and Enola too, she wanted the yang. Desire within earshot of the saw.

Around nightfall, when the day-long dusk of brooding sexuality darkened, it sounded like they were playing football down the corridor. At least I still had my head to scratch. A newsboy moaned, screamed, gurgled and gave up. The saw spun down. I opened my mouth. She leaned low. We kissed, it was heavier than any drug. I received her, the real Enola, in the hypothalamus. We were lovers of the golden dawn, thinking the same thing, enlisting every sensory perception for transmission of the love message. This was some neurology. My little man blew his cool.

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There were books in all the languages of the world in the library and I could only read one of them. When he saw I could read, the night orderly slipped me the back pages of his daily newspapers. Surrounded by the unreadable past I kept in touch with the present—that's to say, such a present as the papers give us: espionage in the Indianapolis trials, new invaders called Traumas in the networks. Mirch-imitators were doctoring up what violence they could find, but the highways were not the abattoirs they used to be. The last of Galveston's kind had been tracked and suicided out. There had been no cell-attacks since the solstice. And there were other troubles. The cities were facing recycled-water shortages, and the young were reverting to experimentalism:

HUMIDITY TOUCHES OLD HIGH

MORALITY NOTCHES OLD LOW

LATEST ANORAK RECYCLES SWEAT

Enola's voice, even when we were alone, had hardened. She didn't have to say it, I could tell from her demeanor that the reports were true. The Tribe no longer had an urban front. There was no going back to the city.

The atmosphere was so thick we were absorbing more moisture through our lungs than our stomachs. You held out for as long as you could, till a tingling sensation in the brain told you it was time to drink another cup of boiled toilet-water. The days were sweltering, loaded. The observation window couldn't see shit. Your eyes gummed up with a yellow mucus

and your tear-sacs suffered fly-strike if you didn't dab them dry in time. Other bugs, like roaches and fluorescent armored beetles were slipping off the walls and drowning in festering pools. The walls were clean and my thoughts were carnal. The atmosphere was too much like the regions of my body that are fertile and yearning, and my mind was suffering from false premonitions. I imagined I was about to go back to the Yard for a fresh start, that the dancer would persuade the new generations to make peace with the Tribe. I was sure Cadeba was about to roll in and announce the Age of Understanding. But the air thickened and sleep could not lie: the world was going downhill and we were the living carcasses in an experimental soup.

Enola gave me her hand. Just hers and mine and the lathered pen. She forced it in and drew the plunger. The nib glistened. The cartridge took it all. 'Together, Baby!' We wrote:

*Hair throated
hole to hole*

While the night watch snored we made our way to the library. The balcony doors were open and vapors were licking in around the highest shelves. We were soon licking the vapors off each other, imbibing and nibbling. A balance overcame us, the kind that says you have become like a single organism. We were happy humans, pure as snow. The air cooled, fresh, that sterile freshness. A premonition, true this time, of imminent rain, of the stratosphere that knows no fertilization nor decay. And another sensation, acrid, full of associations of laughter and reflection, of intoxication and lechery. We had made love.

Depleted like that, lying there on the seagrass, clouds entered the room, close and heavy. It was a cloud unlike the foggy mists that had been assailing us up till now. This was negative cloud, it didn't stain though it appeared black and intellectual, it was as if a dark god was spreading himself down over us. The temperatures dropped. We scrambled for our clothes. That dark medusa wasn't half of it. A sense of foreboding drew us onto the balcony. The clouds were disturbed, billowing silently about the top stories of Pell. I held my hand out and it was immediately covered with droplets, the way our eye sacs had been brimming with flies up till now. The moisture swarmed onto our hands, our faces. The beads gathered together and rolled off. Now we could see droplets in the air like tiny planets. We were there, Enola and I, half-nothing earthlings inhabiting a lump of stone hanging in space with millions of others at the very moment the deluge began. Droplets fused before our eyes. An odor of birth, of death, of sex, proliferation and decomposition permeated every molecule. The pressure mounted to maximum, it pressed my cranium at the joint above and behind my ears. My skull and the skies were about to crack open. There was a lightning flash and a loud crack. The precipitation that would extend over seven months had begun.

It had been a long dry, as great a calamity as when the ice caps had melted and the dried-up viscera of the earth had caved in, fragmenting the continents. True water had sunk beneath the petroleum gunge, the dregs of centuries. Underground caves had sucked it way down till it was too deep to bore. Some of the water had returned as steam from volcanic port-holes but it had changed. Its chemical composition was no longer H_2O . The clouds that formed were com-

posed of compounds that precipitated less readily than the former hydroxy ones used to. Evaporation turned the lakes and oceans into dead seas. Condensation never compensated for the upward displacement of vapor. The world underwent an inversion. A weight, as heavy as earth itself, rose above us. People got used to it, thanks to conscious or unconscious homeostasis, to their bodies' or to their minds' manner of dealing with such things. A generation adapted. A new generation was born and grew up with it. I never knew any different until I was told ours was the era of maximum suspension.

So you see, when the rains came, it was hard to accept. It felt as if the sky was falling. Enola and I, there on the balcony, our hands apparently weeping like shower-roses, were witnessing the end not only of the dry, but of our era. A decision had been taken, a chemical decision: 'Let fall the molecules! Rip open the sky!' It tore in different places, the thunder was a roar of anger and of pain as quantities of liquid, a liquid of fusing particles like the one that once created life, fell in masses about us. The gash on high, the wound, had widened. Rain was pummeling the city and the mountains. It was a curtain, a screen, a wall with no other side, expanding towards us with such force it sent up clouds of atomized fluid two, three stories high. We bolted the balcony doors and told people to stand back, for other patients were around us now. They had arrived silently, like the walking dead, dazed by this event, this violence greater than the one they endured in Pell. Some were amazed, their mouths open, their tongues appearing like dry worms at their holes, wanting to taste this power, this insistence that did not demean them. Perhaps some believed the rain might release them from their humiliation. Some simply listened, their eyes

unfixed on any point. Some were clearly disturbed by this phenomenon they had no name for. We were herding them back from the windows when a wild sheet hit, scalding the decking. A pane cracked, and another and another. Rain, a sort of tar-water, drove into the library, bringing with it an aroma, a mixture of neglected sewage and industrial cleaner.

Terror in some, ecstasy in others! Some slid into it amorously, wanting to love it, some released their own violence, grabbing shards of glass, feeling no pain. Sliced hands mixed blood in the dark water, filthy with the stickiest dust. All orderlies and patients were on the upper levels. Orderlies were trying to distinguish other orderlies from their tarred and bleeding patients. Some were telling us to get back to the wards, though the lower wards were awash. The courtyards hadn't been able to gush the downfall on to lower ground, Level Zero had flooded and the loading bay on Level One was about to give. A voice could be heard over the loudspeakers, the voice of order, or rather of tyranny, telling everyone to gather in the gymnasium. Few heard it, and those who did hear it attacked the speakers. This latest assault, the rain itself, might have been a freak of nature, but the gymnasium was a denial of all nature, a syphilitic king's fetish chamber. The speakers fell silent. The lights fizzed and cut out. We could only wait for the dark curtain to pass. A few security guards were wading to the main block of buildings from their dormitories to beat us into order. Chip was there among the wounded and the orgiastic, committing acts of unspeakable harm upon his greased limbs. Panes everywhere were cracking. There was pandemonium in Pell. Orderlies were running this way and that. This wasn't rain, this was The Flood! You could hear the clatter of tables and floating objects bashing against each other and against the

ceilings of the basements. There was no going in or out now. A new speaker was enabled, one we had never known. Patients were to be strapped into their beds. Security and batons arrived. Enola guided me over the linoleum so my bare feet would not slip. She strapped me in with extra care.

The initial curtain hadn't lasted more than a half-hour but much of the damage it caused was irreparable. It had destroyed the weakest buildings in that unidentified city, drowning thousands, and had severely fractured the overpass. The river, meanwhile, continued to swell, becoming a horizontal force, surging along its channels and canyons filled to brimming. By daybreak the newly-tumescient river had broken its banks in several places. An entire suburb had been washed away.

It rained and it rained, settling into a rhythm. The river defined all the secondary paths it needed. We could see them spreading out like tentacles. Flood was filling up again, but the compounds in the water would not be any the more diluted. The rivers were slow-moving repositories of the same dark effluent and chemical tragedies as before. The stench outside had worsened. Surface fluids had run off, but a thicker fluid remained all about, a sponge-like urethane of spillage and silt that was drawing a foul-smelling sap from beneath the skin of the earth, the way a poultice draws pus out of a festering wound. The putrescent contents of the sky-lady's bag was mixing with the excrement of centuries.

Even when the sky lightened precipitation did not end. An attack of silver grit followed — freezing, cutting scraps of jagged light-reflecting hail. It smacked against the buckled tarmacs of the arterial route. It beat the plains, hacking them up then mixing the dust into a brown glue.

The lights of a Dodge came into view, sliding this way and that. A wheel grooved in a fissure and the driver over-corrected, crashing through a barrier and over the side into the rising mire.

Other storms passed. How long had it been raining already? I stared for hours at each renewed smoking curtain, varying daily in volume and grayness and flavor. For you tasted it, this rain. It had the flavor of that decomposition that is the provision of life. It suffused the air inside Pell and you accepted the sound as the new foundation of existence.

Lines of dispossessed from the lowlands were walking through the drizzle along arterial routes. Those elevated arteries were the only means of going between concentrations of populations. From the library Enola and I witnessed a burial. It was like a sea burial though the body was naked—they couldn't waste clothing on a corpse. They gathered around for what were surely incantations before the stiff figure tumbled from the crash barrier into the slime.

Inquisition had been suspended and the doses of Haploids had been doubled. The doped had the luxury of going through their own bio-sexual mysteries without cruelty, resolving sub-conscious passions through dreams, a rare freedom in Pell. Sometimes I wasn't sure which was worse, the old piercing cries of rapidly-inflicted physical pain, or those excruciating laments of mental agony that now rose like their own mourning.

Therapy recommenced. It was time for their anthology. The ink was flowing again but I was in a rut, repeating the same words: *'Two by two.'*

I wasn't the only one blocked by the image of dancing pairs. Cadeba was carrying. Some were saying he had it done to himself. How long had I been in that fortress? Long

enough for him to be showing. His hips had widened with the weight and you could see its outline. It was already too big to force a natural exit, jammed between his left ribs and right hip, and he was sick of carrying that kid, you could tell. Just what I needed! A sentimental commandant with a kid shaped like a steering-lock jammed in his uterus.

It rained hard, it rained soft. One day there was a warm mist drifting legato, now a storm of polluted salts. Some nights, when Enola and I were in the library, a kind of snow descended. If you tried to catch it, it went through your hand—light with the appearance of down or thistle seed, but light only, nothing but freezing light.

Whatever happened to fingernail lifting, drawing, quartering and head severance? Whatever happened to processions of flagellants in dark hats, to skinning alive, to guilds of butchers, tanners and bookbinders paying homage to idols of hook-jawed salmon? Whatever happened to molten lead and pouring sulfur in the wounds?

I was in the library when I heard Ex-P telling Cadeba that I was holding something back and he'd prove it one way or another. Ex-P burst in. He threw down a wad of loose pages—my writing from therapy. He said, 'This ain't writing, Brakeman! You know what writing is?' and he searched through the shelves till he found a spiral spine. The gun laws. It was like being in the 31st again. He snarled, 'That is writing. Now that is writing!'

Cadeba didn't take much interest in Ex-P's theatrics. He was staring at the rain, his face set with the pain of bearing. He had hardly begun the circuit of suspects and his distraction made me feel I was anything but special. I told Ex-P, 'The wheels don't turn. You got to have friction or the brakes got no confidence.' He didn't hear me. I was a window whose thickness he was trying to estimate. I tried again: 'Without maintenance the vehicle is trapped in the glaze, sir.'

He hooked my book from me and read:

a charioteer

*Is snatched from out his chariot by the hair,
So shall Time be*

He snarled, ‘Waddya say — hey! You like that? Waddya say, Brakeman, we soak up some puddles with it?’

What did he want? That I stick up for Rossetti? My guv cylinder was knocking about inside one stumped-up cranium. My own liveloin existence was in need of a service and a sadist with ambitions for his boss’s job was threatening to ruin the best book in the library. His aroma was like the one that used to rise from the empty lots in Cisco high summer. He’d been sight-seeing the detritus and corpses, for sure.

Cadeba took the book off him and read the same lines. He said, ‘Now that is poetry. Ain’t that just poetry?’

Ex-P stared at Cadeba as if he hadn’t heard right. Then he figured Cadeba was hamming it up, only I could see he was genuine. He crooned, ‘Oooh! Sure boss! Yeah!’

He held the book before my eyes and tore the leather binding down its spine. My throat tightened. My guts were rising. Cadeba didn’t react, but he would live to see Ex-P with a float-arm through one eye.

Ex-P unrolled a poster of Miss September baring her love organs. He mooned at it, ogling at me with the other eye, ‘That is hot. Now that is hot, ain’t it?’ I feared for my health if Cadeba took out his growing hatred for Ex-P on me. I feared for Chip, implicated by infatuation for that sex doll. I smelt the fine lubrication fluid we used for the reading-head motors—I was back in the tuning yard. I was losing consciousness. Ex-P changed tack, starting in friendly—that had me worried. He was looking at me with one eye like a heat crab: ‘I mean, not that buses would have stopped for you but

your yard had a good name.’ He had a video of my workshop. There we were, me and Chip, working away like it was Santa’s workshop. I rolled out from inspecting an undercarriage and filled out a diagnosis form, ticking the boxes marked ‘absence of explosives’. Chip was yodeling by the water vendor. Or so it seemed. I was holding on to those marbles. I croaked, ‘Phony order. That ain’t Chip. How you do that?’

Ex-P ogled, ‘Good boy, Brakeman. Sure it ain’t. Ray-on toobs, see thay-it?! Y’kin fake life wi’ them thangs. Y’ want more?’

His accent was stronger than usual — he had been listening to his favorite Tennessee music in his time off. He conjured other examples of the coolest gamblers, the cheapest traitors, the finest goalsters, the biggest hitters, the dirtiest grabbers, the greatest escapers when suddenly there was me suffering torture in Doc Kut’s gymnasium, arms strapped, writhing like a worm on a pin. I was surrounded by six flexing sporting types. They looked set for a mother train of degradation and I couldn’t take much more of imagining what they had in store, but he blacked the screen and flopped out another surprise — a pile of Chip’s wage bulletins. The game was up. He knew Chip had been paying himself twice for work software had been up to. He had all the angles he needed to slap our hands but none that warranted the firing squad. He returned to Doc Kut’s scanning machines, dormant in the darkened gymnasium. It was quiet as a gassed nursery. He showed me myself at peace in my usual ward. ‘Asleep!’ he added, as if I might have been dead. He showed me myself in the shower, picking the sleep out of my eyes, cutting my fingernails. He must have known which hand I wiped my ass with. He struck a light on a cartridge,

‘The ley-eft.’

I swung out, missing him by a Moon River as Enola burst in. ‘Yech, yech! Hey! See thay-it, Nurse! Brakeman’s losin’ his linings.’

Enola saw the dangers. She counseled me, ‘Be nice Brakeman. Ain’t you got nothing for Mister Ex-P?’

There was something in her voice that told me if I didn’t give him something I would never walk straight again! I took the hint: ‘Without maintenance the vehicle is trapped in the glaze, sir. We wipe ‘em, we clean ‘em, we okay ‘em, we drive ‘em round the test circuit, no big breakthroughs, you know. One day a Persian comes in and we run her through. How are we to know if its stealing unprotected memories?’

Ex-P pressed his hands together at the fingerprints. ‘Per-rsian, you say? Dress?’

‘The chauffeur was clothed sweet. Suit and tie with the labels showing, clean but rough, you know the look, sir? He said he was with one of the candidates but when we sent the account to The Hole it came back. Fake engine registration. There are technicians without scruple, sir.’

‘Y’ don’t say!’ He brought out the bottle of yard ink. ‘So tell me this—whass this crap in your desk drawer?’

‘That’s kidney liquor for Betty, my one and only, sir.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘We’re going to marry in the fall.’

I was losing. He had the ink. The sword above. The pit below. He might have had a full confession right there but something about the words ‘one and only’ had triggered a human memory in that hate robot. He had that faraway look, further away than that cracked motorway. He was conjuring his ranchland cowgirl. The way his accent reverted at times I’ll bet it was by the Big Sunflower River. The gals are

strong in those parts, what with raising animals and helping out. They are outdoors types, Ex-P's types. They like to doll themselves up and be she-women. You can't put them in a pen though, they know all about that. A red and yellow tear was running from Ex-P's infected sac. She was no more, that much was plain. He sensed me in there, following his sentiment. He stood up, pert and proper, 'Quit the corn! Spill! Where you dredge Betty from?'

'Dredge her, sir?'

'She don't exist!'

'They killed her! The cannibals!'

'Don't try it, Brakeman. She was never born to this world.'

'We were going to marry in the Fall!'

'Why isn't she in the register?'

'Register? She's not in the register?'

'Not in the register, Brakeman! Not her and not her folk!'

'Whaddya think, sir? They couldn't read and they never voted. Simple folk like yours and mine. From the mountains. It's not like they were dancer stock, sir.'

'Betty don't exist and you know it because you invented her. That ink wasn't for her because she don't exist.'

'I swear it, sir. Betty's as real as Miss September.'

His rhythm halted. Sure, Miss September existed, I had him there. He couldn't deny it. Hundreds of mechanics had brought themselves off into their oil rags goggling at her image. Try telling them she didn't exist. His eyes were burning with bestiality. Wouldn't he like my skull for boot practice! He brought his lips close to mine—cabbage and deloused mohair, pickled onions and one bad tooth. He whispered, 'Now you tell me about the synaptic bogie.'

I bluffed, 'That the one that doubles the power and sends the Dodges over the edge in overdrive?'

'Answer questions with questions you gonna wake up in the jerk ward. What are you pal? Buccaneer or codhauler? Woop-dip or squirrel? Black Jack dealer? Commie dreamer? Money dog?'

I checked my stride. 'I ain't no bit-pony, sir. The Lord helps those who help themselves, ain't it? There is something we done, Ex-P, sir.' He was fishing for Leviathan's carcass and I had to give him some guppies to take home. I said to myself, 'Take it slow, some soft larceny and he'll fix you up. Nothing rancid. A fifth degree Guilty plea. Say you killed priestesses, raped nieces, helped to fix the World Series for the Red Sox. Say you're the hacker set off one of those nuclear wars.' I looked him in the eye like a dueler. The words came easy, in my best Texan, 'Me and Chip, we love our country, sir. It was just a play on the side, sir. Nothing fancy. No bank-heist.'

'How much is nothing?'

'Fifty consignments of false Cubans.'

His eyes betrayed a glimmer of satisfaction that the goliath standing behind him staring over the arterial route, the one man he loathed and feared in the force, the great Cadeba, might have smoked our contraband.

He giggled his own blue smoke before coughing violently then looked at me as if it was me who had tried to choke him. He had a useless confession and he was turning red. 'We don't need to know about your filthy Cubans! We want to know about ink! That ink was for purposes and you can't deny it because we know the purposes. The dancer —'

'Sir?'

'— the one who used to live upstairs from you! She was writing Okhost theory *with your ink!* We want truth, Brake-man!'

I was winning. We had got up to the part where Ex-P talks about truth. I braced. He kicked my stitches. Bullseye. Right in the stigmata. He was shouting in time, 'Truth! Truth! Truth!'

Some outrage, fed by my affection for the dancer, and by my relief that he was finally kicking me instead of fucking my mind, gave me courage. I hit back while I still had wind, yelping at him in between strikes, 'You ain't nothing but a sinecure, a fictive salary, slave to a sadist. If it wasn't for us you wouldn't have a fleet to fuck with!'

I heard his monotone stuttering like inept notes from a holed squeeze box, 'Brakeman, you have no idea of personal hygiene.'

I felt no pain. Three hits, like they say in Moomba: one for the blood, one for the tears and one for the oil strike. The air foomed out of me into the giant vacuum of his pride. I thought, this is what space must be like, when the astronaut tries to breathe. I felt my arm being pulled, and my body followed. He had turned double-brute: 'Let's see him dabble with the paddle.' He had one of the refillable pens. 'What say we fill it up with his blood?'

Enola tried to dissuade him, 'It won't write good, Ex-P!' but Ex-P wasn't taking advice from a she-woman. He drove the pen into my writing arm like a gestapo-nut, pulled on the plunger, ripped it out and forced the stem into my contracted hand wheezing in sardonic imitation of Enola, 'Try, baby, try!'

A vein had erupted and I was battling against unconsciousness. I let the pen drop — writer's block. He picked it up, pointed it at me and sang like a constipated rock star, 'You want to be someone?'

Denial. I was afraid of celebrity. I told him, 'I just guaran-

tee a safe journey home to loved ones, Ex-P... sir!

He rammed it in and out of my forearm again. I see the hole, I see a kid, staring into that dark depravity in his mouth where a moment ago there was a tooth. There is no pain, just that hole. There is no tormentor, only curiosity and relief, yes, relief that the hole has appeared. Ex-P raised his arm again. I braced. He rammed the pen in again and out again in the same action, like a machine, a human punching machine. I felt something close to gratefulness that it had come to this. I was winning. He struck a second blood vessel—a shower of burgundy shot up into his face. He rammed it in again so the nib drove through to the arm-rest. Blinded by the blood he left it there and swore out of the Vesuvian gush, cursing through the hot geysers and smiling as if he was happy to be tarred like that with his own brush. I was numb as if someone had told me my home town never existed, but when I looked at my arm pinned there the pain came on. A hundred symphonies were competing in my head for the soundtrack. I stared into the purple rain and caught his eyes, corn-kernel irises. It hit. I had been insensate till I came eye to eye with the damage. I wanted that arm off and now. The left one was straight out in the air shaking in a twisted salute. The room was heavy with the deadly sins as his anger luxuriated in the warm bath of my life juice. Where was he? His piece was throbbing, violence had transported him to his cowgirl. He snapped out of it. He was a Basque whaler, quarry dragger. He wanted lamp-oil. He was sizing up my head like a harpoonist. He was going to split it in two for spermaceti. I heard a scream. It was my own. I heard a scream and I heard another scream. I had screamed again. Someone else had screamed as well. I was screaming and that had triggered a relay of screams in the castle. A chorus came

to my aid. All it took was for me to sing the first lines. All the pension was screaming their agony and desperation. Nurses were running. Cowgals were moaning. Ex-P was bursting out of his pants. Ex-Ps everywhere were coming blood into their victims' sweating saddle-sap. His lips were spread in a rabid bulldog grin. He barked at me like one, as if I would understand. He barked at me, no word, no language kernel distinguishable. Then I hear his meaning. He is barking at me to take the pen out and write. The pen won't come out. Enola pushes it through, drawing the quill and reservoir clean out the other side.

It shoots forth, my breakfast and digestive fluids, all over Ex-P. In a flash I am spinning like a dazed roach. Medocs are laying me down, ungripping my fists. Ex-P is scraping the vomit off himself and spreading it over me. He socks me. I am dreaming of Blaise, I am scratching an itch I can't find. My arms are pinned down and what kind of mite is in my skin? What kind of torture is this? If I don't scratch I am dead. I am screaming. A medoc has socked me again. Ex-P is hitting my eyes with the ruined Rossetti. When I try to open them I am almost sorry that killing me isn't part of Ex-P's brief. He advances towards me. He wants an answer to a question I do not understand. He is repeating it at me without any change of emphasis but with a voice that sounds as if it was manufactured in the tubes of a bronchitic trombone:

'The queen. Who is she? Who, Brakeman? The highway queen?'

I make out the words but not the sense as I slide past Punk and Argot to the obliterated languages of blackout.

When the light came back, an orderly was hosing me down.

The way he hosed me he had his sights on being an assistant in Kut's gymnasium. I couldn't be sure he wasn't hosing me down for just that, the final degradation, and was relieved when he wheeled me back to the ward.

It took three orderlies in face masks, swimmer's goggles, rubber gloves and gumboots to clean the mess. They squeegeed the tiles clean, chatting about Traumas.

'It's the way the commands come in. It's the pauses between the key-taps.'

'So what's to avoid, fast commands or slow commands?'

'It don't matter none. When you hover, the Trauma gets its chance. The must is not to hover.'

I was in and out of sleep. Usually, before waking I was falling, hand on the rip cord. My dreams transformed the sound of the rain into the thrum of an ancient plane engine, a Devastator. My heart skipped a beat. My hand would not pull the rip cord. This is how people die in their sleep. It is not peaceful at all. The pilot jumped. I had to jump or go down with the plane. I jumped. I fell. I would have died if Enola had not been there, slapping my jowls. Her eyes were smoky, she was pretending that the anthology depended on me. For three days it was like that, in and out of free fall. This was no classic comic. I was mixing up the flights, now it was a Tiger Moth, now I was a homunculus no bigger than a ginseng root jumping from a toy plane. In pulse time or slow beat, in real size or miniature, the nightmare was the same: the parachute was on my back, if I could only move my arm and *pull the rip cord*.

Consciousness and hunger brought a gray lowering light. I was alive and Cadeba and I had a lot of things in common. When he began throwing up on account of that kid, he

spent a lot of time examining his own vomit, appreciating it as only a mother can. He was infatuated with it. Sure, we shared a penchant for Rossetti, and a hatred for Ex-P, but more than that, he had trouble believing I was guilty because of the excellent quality of my belly acid. How could an enemy of the state stink so good?

Basketballs were thumping down the corridor. The air was full of steamy smoke. I was battling against dope and had a head full of shadows. That fine crystal light like snow was drifting across the courtyard again. There was no lifting my arms, if they were still attached. Enola dabbed my bruises. Pain never knew such pleasure. Our lips were freezing; it was natural to warm them on each other's. We kissed. I drowned back into Haploid slumber for hours which were one prolonged moment, a prelude to orgasm.

When I woke she was gone. An orderly changed me and washed me under the recycling hose. They did it this way so as not to waste the drinking-water. The shower-water went down a recycling drain and came back purified. It wasn't exactly pure, but some process had pried off the shit and come. It was bland in the ward and all the blander for the squinching monochrome decor. As I surfaced time and again from Haploid slumber there were fewer sensations and no encouragement. The room was like a single-celled phytoplankton, emanating its history of disinfectant and all the plastic, bitumen, plaster and urethane that stuck it together. The warmth and wetness of my own body seemed to have deserted me. I felt cold to myself, cold and dry. Life, or the violence it passes as, was occurring outside of me, above all the struggle I sensed one evening as a nightmare: on the other side of the room: two shadows were wrestling, Cadeba's and Enola's. It was a grotesque couple, Cadeba

forcing his spine into an arc so his emptiness could fill the void between her baneful hips.

When finally I had thrown off sleep, I was alone in the room. I heard her footfall and she came to my bed. She whispered that Cadeba was off my scent for the moment.

‘He ain’t happy, but he doesn’t want you amputated.’

I opened my mouth, but it’s hard to frame words when what mind you have left is occupied controlling its paranoia. A medoc measured my reactions. Ex-P stalked by, pocket lamp in one hand and scalpel in the other, to carry out a torture warrant on a fellow writer. There were dark red spots on his suede jeans, and the outline of his piece was visible. He had charred my dreams but the truth shone undamaged from the remains.

The next day she was there with the pens. No sooner had I lifted my right hand a centimeter or two than that vision of her and Cadeba together returned. My hand dropped dead. She came back day after day until I could hold a pen. On the fifth day there was a lull in the rain. The silence was full of noises that had been masked for weeks. While everyone listened to it I gathered my forces and wrote:

I love you

She chewed it up to the trickling of the gutters.

A bored orderly passed with a bowl of steaming biopsy offal. A bored ice-cold nurse with disinfectant breath gave me my allocation of antibiotics. They were all bored in there where the highest honor for a sadistic orderly was to make it to the gymnasium team to serve an organ salesman known as Kut.

My brain was a clump of gray matter prancing in a depleted blood bath. Day dawned mustard cream. The drip-bag ticked and the rain persisted. Enola was ambrosia, giving me extra spoonfuls and whispering that we'd be out of there as soon as I was able. We would march the pulse bridge in 7/8 time. We would run the festering trenches. She was the gal for me. My arm was going to make it. I asked her for more on this Kut character but she sidestepped: 'Take it from me, Brakeman, you don't want to meet Doc Kut.'

She had a stack of biros and I was soon working with my left hand. Soon we would have a script, a real pot-boiler. Old trash with the hot stink, survival stories, commando raids, jealous killers, androgynous embryo-farming hitchhiking cannibals, city-born unknowing incest pairs, isosceles political love triangles, rebellious impotent pinned entomologists hot for virgins and farmer-savages, heretic self-made executioner-rippers caging leper monks and concupiscent boat-boys.

Imagining is free, even in three-word strings.

The swelling in my arm went down. The medication had been authentic. So the brain-washing centers were still being funded even if the motorways were falling into ruin. Another patient winked at me. He resembled Chip without his teeth or half his skin jacket. Gee, but it was quiet in there that morning with that Chipalike — a tongueless, double-crossed leftover with a mouth like a love-hole.

We slurped our soup together. It was gray like gravy, lukewarm and thick. Enola tried to keep the poetry coming with one hand on my column. The skin around my cheeks was tight. Were my bones growing? The balls in my sockets ached as if my eyes had been dancing round the clock. My jaw was cramped with strychnine and another nurse with one tune in her music box was wanting my blood pressure. Lashes long and nylon. It was pure glissando. She had a willing co-conspirator. She gave me the newsbreaks. Volatile mud was rising to the heavens again. Flood was a litter of sump bungalows. Flood was a no-bonanza sweat-pond.

I asked her for more but she had no more. No one had more. Only the Sports channels were booming. Replay after replay from the epoch of inexhaustible fuel. Monte Carlo. Le Mans. I couldn't take it. A medoc strapped me down and hit me with Oblivion. There was no moon, no cloud. No family in the brain going deaf. Not one evening Lionstar shining on my telescope. Not one steamy thought promoted by the dream council. This was bum narcosis, medication of heavy marble, the black unscribed head-stone you get when your double replaces you.

I could turn pages but the magazines had nothing on the monsoon. They were getting thin on content and fat on poker tips. Flood was wiping out the coastal cities. Only a few elevated motorways remained in any condition. If the

rain didn't let up barges would soon be delivering the drugs and water bottles to Pell.

Bad tidings. Cadeba had ordered the nuke tube to be primed. Suddenly I could stand Monte Carlo replays and the sports weeklies. I saw the benefit of the world's ten thousand sports magazines. I asked for them all, all the weeklies since Gordon Bennett. I was heavy with phlegm now that I was off the antibiotics. The orderlies said I'd be out of there real soon. We played quizzes. Ice hockey princes. Spartan defenders. We were getting on fine. I told them about my lost bar buddies, about the fragmented tank assemblers, about the kings of the fender-crunchers and Towaways' terrible accident with the grill-chargers. I told them more than I ever told Ex-P. My head was a pine log at a woodchoppers' conference. It was a fixed system. I was on treatments against anxiety and inflammation, one treatment cracked the head, another glued it up, a third relieved the pain. They fed you and bathed you and drugged you and mopped you, no gap in the routine. You dreamed a little till sleep became an apnea blackout.

I was spilling my food, pissing my sheets. My brain wasn't functioning enough to deceive them, but how could they tell fact from fiction?

Cadeba hadn't been getting any love letters. He was walking with a stick and hauling heavy water with that anorexic kid. He had less and less freedom of movement. It looked as if his hip's ball-joints were about to fall out of their sockets. He wanted shot of it. He was chewing his Cubans instead of smoking them and breaking new ground in cursing and spitting. And Ex-P had failed him.

He chopped my dossier on the flat of the table like a fat blade. I heard a rush of matter from a waste bin into a tip truck then Cadeba saying to Ex-P, 'You half-kill my best brakeman and that's all you got on him? That therapist got more than you!'

Then we were alone together. Just him and me. Cadeba's hair, where it protruded in greased curls from under his Stetson, was white, the kind that is white from birth, but the hairs on the back of his hands were black, jet black. His lashes were long and curved like the tentacles of a Venus sea anemone. Half-ape half-albino-girl-eyed Frankenfiend. For a while he said nothing. I would have spoken to him but my mouth felt as if it was full of cotton wool, and that wool was creeping down my throat. He stayed near my bed, chewing and spitting. His flanks flexed as if that part of him betrayed the animal inside, a tight-skinned neatly-honed half-mare with a five-star phallus. A nurse checked the fluid level in my drip-bag. Her steps faded. My guts were rising again. Here was a man who believed right was on his side. This was a man I feared more than a hundred Ex-Ps. He felt it. I saw his boots, shiny and deprived, coming closer, to be bathed in my effluent. From the covered car park on Level Zero the sound of Norteña music—his chauffeur relaxing. I let go.

Like I say, Cadeba appreciated quality. When I had no more he talked to me like a brother, as if I would understand. He didn't pretend I was going to get out of there alive. He didn't say I would soon be back writing decoupling commands and scanning state componentry. He didn't even really look at me. He was like an officer in an old cinema war, staring into air defiled with the malodor of a spoiled ideal. He was looking across the flooded yard, over the tips of barbed wire, over and beyond the roofs of Pell and the cracked

motorways: 'There was peace, Brakeman. There was peace and a better world — and now they're eating our boys!'

I looked as straight as my cobbled eyes could look. My lips had no feeling in them. I tried but could not quite shape the words: 'What kind of monphhtherzh, zhir!?'

'You know what we want, Brakeman. People are peeling on the streets. Voters don't have the energy to turn on their televisions. The nation is being sucked of its life-blood. We only want a future, you know, a future for our kids. We want that cure.'

Torture is not only acts of desperate degradation, it is the absence of anything resembling affection. So when anyone, even someone like Cadeba, talks to you sincerely it sounds sweeter than sweet. This was an exception for him too, to speak to someone like another human being. It wouldn't last. Kindness was in his character but it wasn't in his job profile.

He relit the Cuban and released the straps. He came close to the bed. I remember the brass buckle of his leather belt on its last hole approaching, gleaming at me like a Mesopotamian eye. My aroma made him pause and savor it before he spat, 'You ain't who you think you are, Brakeman.'

He blew smoke towards me till my eyes smarted. My hand went to my face. It was covered with beard that had grown overnight, a side-effect of the heavy-duty Haploids. He riveted his eyes onto mine, 'Do we have to hack into your head?'

I didn't want to end up like Chip, a donkey lost of carrot in the exercise yard. My mouth opened, now the wool was full of tack ends, 'Ya never ha' no Ovtronevian in d' f-f-fleet, d' ya?'

He didn't understand me. He called for the therapist. A relay of commands and I heard her coming in. I smelt her

close. Enola leaned down. I fashioned the words again. She told him, 'He means Austronesian, sir. It's Austronesian you mean, Brakeman?'

I nodded at her like I was trying to knock a nail in. Cadeba was musing. His beady sunken mastodon mind was musing. I was thinking, 'Everybody is afraid. He is going to kill me.' I manufactured the words again, 'La-te mo-del Offtroneeffian.'

Enola leaned over me again, placing her ear close to my lips to listen: 'He says, yes, sir, he says he sent an Austronesian through. He thinks it was one of yours.'

She's leaning over me again. I say I love, that I love her. She stands up and translates, 'Couldn't be sure, sir. He says it might have been a boy-girl. Or a businessman time-buyer under the overpasses.'

'Console?'

'Front seat, Brakeman. What did the console look like?'

'It waph unorphodok, phirr, harf-phunk, depwayvd.'

Cadeba drove his thumbs into his bullet belt so the kid rolled over again in his gut. That was some strange-shaped monster he had inside him. He was worried. His face gained years right there, he was no longer a tight-faced rider on 2,000 pounds of white fury. He went to a panel and opened a window looking in on the gymnasium.

'You want to end up in there?'

Naked assistants adorned with scant leather straps were sweeping up bone-chips and loose hair from around a circular saw bench. It must have been hot in there. Blood-hot.

'You see Doc Kut?'

All I could see were flecked glistening figures gracefully cleaning up human mess. There was no one who resembled a doctor. He took my ears and lifted me up to tip-toes.

‘You see him now?’

If I had nodded this time it would have been goodbye to my ear lobes but I was afraid what he would do to me if I didn't respond. I was forming a phrase that could not be misinterpreted when the effort of holding me there caused him sudden discomfort in the abdomen. He dropped me, a dead weight, on the linoleum and opted for the quickest solution. He would nuke me. The latest advance. This was progress. He would extract the entire file list from my brain and sort through it at his leisure. Thunderclouds held congress high above the acid showers. There would be more rain before there was less.

History is a living palimpsest. Man lost the plot when he learned how to erase. He wrote over the top, losing the long version of all that went before. Life became survival, outliving, riding over someone else, anyone else, everything else, no means invalid. Darwinian Einsteinism was about to blow the tune, the piano and the lounge bar. Cadeba's kind were hell-bent on wiping out the Tribe as a culture and caging them like animals. That would mean the end of the film called Humanity. I had to steer them up a goose hunt or we were all destined for the rubbish heap.

Hail was thrashing the balcony and bouncing into the library. Until then the blind worms protruding from cracks in the walls knew more than me. Now I had news for Cadeba, big news. It seemed the elements were in accordance. The sky, natural-born cousin of the atom-sent illumination-grenade, flashed in sympathy.

Nothing is more misleading than what is almost true. If a navigator is half a degree out his ship might sail for months and slam into the white brute of a polar cap instead of laying the anchor in a tropical bay. I had my truth ready with its

half-degree of error—an image and statistics to cling to when the nuking started. I repeated the details to myself. It was my only hope. Generations had adored her boy, generations had despised him. In the Oil Age her name was as popular as Mary had been in the Middle Ages. There they were, the whole family, Paul W. Tibbetts and the homophone mother of sheer destruction.

There was a scramble of nurses out of the Smoking Room. Cadeba was in nuking mood. Orderlies flew towards me. I tried to throw up but they had starved me for the gig. Cadeba gave the command, 'Nuke him!' and so I gave: *'Fourteen foot long and five in diameter. 10,000 pounds. The fission core less than fifty snug inside. When it reached 1850 feet a fuse detonated a charge which shot a chunk of U-235 forward at 5000 feet per second. It collided with a bigger chunk of U-235, a cup-shaped piece in the nose.* Exploda! The primal terror. It's the hag! The sell-out vamp! The killer queen! The traitress! The he-whore of the Doomsday Dynasty! Violator of the rights of man and ace core-cooker! The capital criminal! Exploda! Ee-ee-nola! EE-EE-N-O-L-A!

Cadeba turned to Ex-P, 'You got that on file?'

Ex-P was stumped. 'He's —'

'I said have you got that down?'

'Down, sir. But he's... he's looped!'

'I'll decide that. Give him more.'

The charge was high. My chromosomes would never be the same. I returned to the flight plan, cannibalism and the tycoon ruse. 'She's... she's eating our boys! And now the mayor! The mayor's boy! City... city hall! The built-in crash, she's... the market endgame. She's ... the pay-back crisis!'

'Who is she, Brakeman. More! More!' Cadeba was talking

WILLIAM DIREEN

to me about 'more', but the orderly at the controls took it as an order. Infinity and instance fell fancy to somersault. I regurgitated: '14 by 5. Mineral thrust! 10,000 pounds. Interest-quake! U 235. The contra-national share-holder deflationary tactic! 5000 feet per second. Inventor of the myth of shared property! *A cup-shaped piece in the nose*. Tastes good! *Altitude 1850 feet*. Now that's wealth! It's... it's the Pantocratrix and premiere user of the lie of equality! Eeeenola!!'

It was merciless and so was I. Enola was a maternal immortal in the history of marketing, inseparable from the genesis of the A-Bomb, in bed with the fundamental principles of desire creation, mass consumption and market manipulation. I was panting, pulse pacing, halting, declaiming. The old skin was about to find oil. Boils surfaced. Brain cells played the dodgums. The last drop of pigment left my skin. What pulse? I was the ghost of the party. I heard Enola, my Enola, saying: 'There's no pulse, sir. Shouldn't we unclip the terminals.'

Cadeba was drunk with punching. 'Make him sing for it! Tell him to sing!'

Ex-P was losing it. I heard him barking at me, 'Sing, asshole!'

Enola was losing it: 'Sing Brakeman! Sing honey! Sing, fuck you, honey!'

I had no plan for this. I opened my mouth, unsure whether that was the right orifice, unsure whether a song would save me or sink me. Somewhere in the heart of me I found voice. I bellowed like the San Fernando Valley just opened up. It was the only way:

*Cabuenga Pass, waiting for the road
Load me a desert city let it blow*

*One day we gonna go go go
every man gonna own his auto*

*I got an All-Weather Club card, yee hey!
I'm alight on Hollywood Freeway!*

*My great-grandpappy rode the Santa Fe rails
to El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina
I got iron pipes I got rancho blood
I'm alight on Hollywood Freeway!
Alight on Hollywood Freeee —*

*— way! Blow oh-may Sheeby Jo's!
All the way with Texico rose*

*Texico rose
Sheeby Jo's!
Oh-ee-oh 'igb-ey!*

*Stock in LACE, Pasedena stores
Mr Huntingdon owned the ocean
He had the universe and the lotion
in his pocket slow-hand-motion*

*I got iron pipes I got rancho blood
But he owned the lights on Hollywood Freeway
The lights on Hollywood Freeee —*

*— way! Blow oh-may Sheeby Jo's!
All the way with Texico rose*

Texico rose

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Sheeby Jo's!
Oh hee oh! Highway!

The clips sprang back. My arms were free. I scratched and beat and bared my armpits which were ripening with spontaneous parasitic plutonium fungi. I scratched and dug. My nose was a volcano. Chips were popping from rising carbuncles. My chart had long peaked to places where graph-lines don't usually go. My pericranial hairline had sprouted silver rivers of mad mohawked anchovies. I was vomiting blood: 'Get back! Don't get it in the eyes! Don't touch it! B-b-buckets, on the double!'

Orderlies scattered down the corridors, glad to be out of there, afraid of the droplets in my exhalations, of the slavering eruptions. Cadeba's voice was reverberating like a thunder god's. I heard him say, 'Nuke him again! Double-nuke him!' I remember struggling as they placed me on ultra-thin sheets of steel. I turned crayola, heard marimba, musk in the adenoids. I felt my nodes arcing then the pastry cooled and it settled. He just wanted the reprise:

Blow my way Sheeby Jo's!
All the way with Texico rose

Texico rose
Sheeby Jo's!
oh-ee-oh 'igh-ey!
Oh hee oh! Highway!

I had taken it. I had spilled all that I knew about the atom and investment, the priceless outflow of my information bank. I had obeyed the call, rigid, intense old tire changer,

hearing commands of another bestiary, seeing no straighter.
I had sung for it. Another friction-expert stricken wight,
funky for untrammeled ertia. Another weak type who had
spilled his boyhood fascination with the A-Bomb, the rich
and famous and the Nashville song strophe. They lifted the
terminals and rolled me to the Lucky Ward.

At first it was like dawn. Clear. Everything was fresh and clean and new-born. The first sound I registered was rain. Nothing had changed. My brain was numb, so numb it was like a phantom limb up there above my neck. It had hurt and hurt, hurt till the meter exploded, then I was out cold. Now I could no longer feel pain, but my past and present had never been clearer. The skin peeled off in easy stages. My toenails had curled. My shell had cracked but the egg was still good. I heard people humming it, my song. For weeks after you could hear it in the latrines, in the corridors, in the blitzing chambers:

I got an All-Weather Club card, yee hey!
I'm alight on Hollywood Freeway!

Even the psychonurses knew the chorus lines. They skipped rosters to make it to choir practice. You should have heard that hullabaloo. They hooted over the noise of the hoovermatic vomit-cleaner, grunting and belching the refrain. *Alight on Hollywood Freeway! Eureka! Oh hee oh! Highway!* Cadeba was chasing a hyper-sensitive deer with a brass band. Only Enola wasn't impressed. She was full of acrid sorrow: 'Puerile ruse, Brakeman. We've gotta get us out of here.'

But who was it screaming on our level? It wasn't a newsboy, and it wasn't me—I was pretty sure it wasn't me. I knew that voice, even wrenched out of sonic shape by pain. Orderlies were shouting at each other as if no one knew what to do. There were more screams from the same source. A grief of heartland wrath reverberated through the chateau, rising, falling and merging into the tone and frequency of a voice we knew and feared, Cadeba's. He was yowling as if someone was ripping his heart out.

They rolled him in at double speed, cutting off his mole-skins and ripping my Ex-Peed sheets off me to soak up the blood. That kid was tearing him apart. Instead of getting itself born it had spent the last weeks attaching itself like an oyster to the rocks of Cadeba's ribs, hips and vertebrae—by tendons and nerves. Doc Kut himself would have to hack it out, but could it survive without its feeding suckers? Kut would have to make the choice—mother or child. He stretched on his welding goggles and rubber gloves. He unsheathed his can opener. He made the slickest of slices I have ever seen, called for snippers, and had the kid out of there in no time. He threw the corpse into Cadeba's breathless arms while he tightened the sutures so his boss's skin wouldn't sag. Now Cadeba was howling with grief, a howl like no other. A howl that no other howl followed. The castle echoed with his grief, and with his only. It burned your memory. Even Enola looked touched when Cadeba put the kid to his face and kissed it, a cross between a skinned rabbit and a long red potato. He pressed its cold lips against his nipples. His own breasts shrank on contact.

Some are born mis-shapen. Some wake up that way. Cadeba cried himself to sleep and woke up a half-hunchback. He would never love again.

I wasn't in much better condition. Nuking had ruined my hairline. A crust formed on the temples after a few days. Enola said a kind of graft was possible, taken from half-willing so-called Ainu sub-sects. The graft was hairy as a gorilla's, and was prone to ape parasites.

At nights I listened to other fallout-sufferers blinking. We knew each other by our eyelashes. There were plenty of us in there, surprised to have woken up at all, being administered coagulant that had no effect. We had all spilled information and been discarded. Some had not been so lucky. It was impossible to know how many had gone down the road to the saw or the bio-war chemists. They were testing mass calming agents, and a substance that caused you to secrete your own cocoon around yourself at the point of death. Some preparative for immortality.

In the early hours, among those blitzed insomniacs, it was all timing and heightened hearing. We were a handful of immobile rejects, prone, lonesome, ugly suspects praying for a second go at life. None of us regenerated a new coating. We blinked at each other. The stink of lazy nurses came and went, the only variation on another stink, that of our own seeping wounds ambitious for gangrene.

Ex-P's voice in the corridor. Enola shot a chilling glance at me: 'Here comes our ticket out of here. Get me?' She was

looking at me as if I knew how to tie my shoelaces.

He entered with a hangman swank, hips tense, femurs bandy, lacking fluidity. He had control of the wards while Cadeba recovered. When he saw my bruised temples, his breath abbreviated in a nervous gulp. It wasn't pity, but fear. He was thinking that those temples could have been his. He was thinking! Noisy old Ex-P. He gulped again, blinking. He said to me, 'You ain't goin' nowhere but the sawmill.' He looked at Enola over my tender body, looked at her with wondering eyes, smiling weirdly, then he brought his own face close to mine. 'You can give it up, or I can send that special part of you, the one down there, to someone special?'

I did not vomit. I would not give him that satisfaction. I made a sign that I had something to impart. Ex-P rasped at Enola, 'Get this down, bitch.'

I told him, 'We do not know what will be, Ex-P.'

'What are you saying, Brakeman?'

'We... we do not know what caused the great extinctions, and we do not know there is a future and...'

He gave me a chance, continuing with my tone of voice: 'and we do not know who she is, the Liberation Czarina. But you do, don't you, Brakeman?'

I hit him with it. 'It's a he-czarina, sir. Eeeenola. What'd I say!' I was pointing at Enola, five degrees off to the right. I heard myself singing:

My great-grandpappy rode the Santa Fe rails

He sneezed so the steam shot from his mouth. He blew his nose on my sheets, wiped his eyes and snapped, 'Give him plenty, bitch.'

Enola wasn't in any mood to be treated like the Dispensary whore but she took the matter of my treatment in hand, and she gave him the eye, the good eye, the dangerous eye. The wind went out of me. The blood left my eyes. A tremor of horror shot through me from my heart to that special piece down there. Ex-P might have been our ticket out of there, but this was worse than being nuked. This was the farewell of the four winds. Interrogation endpoint. Ex-P gets the gal.

How long I lay there only Dispensary's logbook can tell. Beds were rolled in with skinless epileptics and rolled out with putrescent corpses. The survivors blinked on. The pastry that formed over our skins refused to hold. I had lost many blinking comrades from secondary infections before Enola worked out what was wrong.

Dispensary lowered her face mask. Her red brows twitched and her goiter-swelled eyes were glistening with ill-gotten gain. Even in my condition I saw the truth immediately. She had been diluting the coagulant to sell tincture in the addiction bars. Enola told her she wanted enough concentrate for 'the ward poet'. That wasn't asking for much, was it? It would be their little secret. Dispensary huffed and signed out a packet of the hard stuff. She called after Enola, 'Keep his glans covered.' Together we watched the scabs grow harder. Enola slipped me steak pills and weaned me off Haploids. I would soon be back to normal, normal enough to maim Ex-P.

They switched me to the Cure Room where I could hear the rain better. I was soon watching the box, the fads channel, and predicting teams. I took it all in, grand slam breakthroughs and share trophies, pole positions. More pabulum decoys. I learned the A and B team lists and read the Memoirs of retired champions. The night orderly slipped me

the back pages. A surgeon honcho told me my foot would once more know the pedal. I was going to make it. I leaned at the screen, eager for the play-offs, laying odds on the boxing bouts. I was back. Mr Normgut. I was right, robbed, pipped, a winner on the healing scam. With euphoria like that you could forget you ever had a boss like Cadeba. It was like the Pax Romana. No peace at all.

As for Cadeba, he had not left Pell. His Blackhawk came and went without him. His chauffeur wasted time cruising the elevated motorways. He growled up most mornings, Norteña music blaring, drank coffee in the nurses café, and growled away without the boss.

I could hear tubes bubbling. My neighbor had gas.

‘What you miss most, Brakeman?’

‘The stag line.’

A medoc came in and took a psycho graph. I offered to take him where I had last seen her, the newest rumor, Enola, the he-czarina. He smiled like I had suffered much, ‘Sure Brakeman, take these and get some sleep. You’ll be back in the yard before the ball season’s over.’

Ex-P was getting the yen where Enola was concerned. She was taking the form of his ranchland cowgirl. A mist formed circles and haloes about him. His hair was standing on end from the antennae microwaves. His coat was picking up beads like a magnet. My jealousy made him out to be more repugnant than ever, a creature whose brain had become a negative entity. He came close and lifted the lenses of his shades to examine the scabs on my temples. He was wondering how it was my crusts were hardening up when Pell was full of toads with skin like onion soup.

‘You’re looking good, Brakeman!’ His tone took me by

surprise. He actually sounded pleased for me. Then he added. 'The big man will be pleased.'

'The big man?'

'He's back at the rodeo.'

My heart sank. Cadeba wasn't through with me. "Looking good" only meant good enough to cut up. Ex-P couldn't wait to see my organs in the pickle jars.

'Next stop, Doc Kut. You know who that is?'

Doc Kut, last stop before the offal bin. Doc Kut, the blade-juggler who had saved Cadeba's life in the mother-child dilemma! My eyes were burning. My heart was thumping. His eyes were beady from habit, like Chip's. Were they implants? I asked where Chip was. He smiled as if he could tell me some stories. His skin was creviced along a gray-green hairline. Maybe his face was fake as well. He looked at the charts. Enola came in with a box from Dispensary. His eyes went up the slit of her skirt while she pencilled my graph line.

An athlete in on espionage went straight to the Cutting Room. Sounds of desperate exhalation and battering. Ex-P was our only chance. I was careful not to soil the sheets. Perhaps they would forget about me. Piece by piece, step by step. I was preparing for it. I told myself over and over. Enola will give me the nod, I will take Ex-P's coat and we will hijack Cadeba's Blackhawk.

Insanity and infantilism, Ex-P hovering about, passing by again and again, playing the bull-drake, hoping to cross Enola. He wanted her living flesh and I wanted him dead. I wished him onto every other slit-skirt that moved. As for Enola, she was talking herself into it. Her whispering voice was doom-laden and lustful, as if she just wriggled out of the

morgue on erotic narcosis. She was saying that he was ready to strike, that she was ready for “what will be”, that his desire would be his misfortune.

A new plain coat felt his way in. I had to speak for him to locate me. He was supposed to be doing a corpuscle count but the way he zigzagged to my bed I was going to have to drive that needle in myself. Retinitis pigmentosa. He wasn't seeing any lines, borders or contrasts. He had to feel for the veins. I held his hand as he took the sample. I didn't want his stray harpoon ending my stag line hopes. Tunnel vision. In a year he would be blind. He showed me the teeter. I told him the blood count was OK.

‘Champions are born,’ he drooled.

I nodded knowingly and ticked the normal box for him. He only had to sign his name — a scrawl like the death track spiral of an invalid octopus. I asked him, ‘What's it for, the corpuscle count?’

‘Doc Kut's orders. We take another one afterwards. If there's anything left of you.’

It had to be soon.

Ex-P had the hungry lusting look. He had overcome his innate misogyny. He would soon make his move. The dump-trucks were coming and going more frequently. Doc Kut was clearing a backlog double-quick. Amputees were being thrown in the bins half-dead without so much as a band-aid and Cadeba was reported to be acting like a moribund Meishan sow. My fingers were bleeding from nervous picking at each other. I tried to see past jealousy. I thought of my boyhood idols. Images of roadsters, cowboys, ragweed, axe, plow and gun. I was thinking about freedom, how swamped will be my valley, how drained will be my swamp. Some fur-tive airborne sulfur-plumes ignited in the mist. Some other

patches of orange smoke followed in decaying nitrogen pockets. Somewhere under that expectant sky was the Tribe. Somewhere in the deepest recesses, in the fractured mirror images of their hidden city they were living on less than little, they whose only death was in capture. From way over the horizon the jagged peaks of mountains rose; a gentle purple poison wove through the scrim. Twilight. Some place where old customs were still observed, families were together. Home, Sweet, Disturbing Home. I was a wreck with all that calming myself down.

Enola came to me, giving off a fragrance like pollen-suckle. The plan was straight. Operation Lure and Alamo. She will draw Ex-P into the Limbs Room. Prepare to pull the lynch-pin. At that moment elite orderlies in the gymnasium began to sharpen their knives. A common orderly told me my number was up. The doors swung open: two of Kut's assistants. Enola appealed to them. She told them I still had a writing exercise to complete. She promised them my Haploids. No antipathy. No sympathy. They rolled me out. Enola was barred at the gym door by an elite guard in diving goggles.

Doc Kut was in a body-hug suit of marine-blue rubber protected from the splashes by a flimsy cotton smock. He looked at me first with disgust as if I was the deviant, then with curiosity as if I was the last intact sample of a genre this side of the spike gates. His eyes rolled over me, examining every square inch for revelations. Cadeba limped in, an angry limp in rabid 6/8 sado-sleuth time. He had grown thin and lost all of his hair but he wasn't as malformed as people had been saying. He hadn't changed none. He wanted everything I knew, everything I didn't know I knew. I thought,

‘This is where they cut out the brain.’

I looked into the light like you’re not meant to and hardly felt it when Kut pressed the point of his biro into my abdomen. He marked a couple of crosses on my skin like he wasn’t really interested but I could tell he had a buyer for those parts.

The light went out and I braced myself. Whatever had been in my guts passed out at both ends. Something that felt like a rugby team passed over me, bruising me, feeling for every organ and taking its measurements. An elite orderly rolled me to the changing rooms and tipped me gyrating onto the shower tiles. The towels were in a dump for the laundry, filthy with confessional feces. I thought of ending it, of making a neck-loop with the towels. I was retching and coughing like a slit donkey, hating existence and unable to do the ultimate harm to the person who had got me into this jam—me! Only two thoughts kept me strong, making love with Enola and throttling Ex-P.

An orderly strafed me with the white jets. All shit and distress floated away like limbs down the Euphrates. She soaped me carwash-style saying, ‘We’re gonna have you clean, you bad boy, Brakeman! We gonna hose you holy, villain!’ I stood shivering with thanks, and opened my mouth to the buccal jets. There is no sweetness like hosewater after stomach acid. An operating gown never felt so warm.

‘What you do to end up in here, boy?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t rightly know. What’s he going to do to me? What’s he just done to me?’

‘He ain’t done nothing yet. He just took an offal reading with his scanner. The slice-up comes when Mister Cadeba says. He’s gonna give you one fat chance. Why don’t you give him what he wants?! Kut won’t open you up unless he gets the

say-so. He'll talk about it till you shit, he'll give you the volts until you spin, but Mister Cadeba, he gives the word, tee-hee.'

At least she was happy. Suddenly I didn't want to know why the elite orderlies were naked. Whatever the reason, it had to be the soft option. When she rolled me back Cadeba was leaning pensive on his carved walking stick. He looked as if he was sick of slicing up innocent mechanics. I went through the bomb assembly spiel. I invented a second script. The dancer was upstairs with the writer of lesbian erotica, Chip and Miss September were locked in a treasonous embrace, Ex-P was doing a deal with a Burmese blackjack dealer.

Cadeba broke the news: 'You're a lucky guy, Brakeman.'

I show him my temple scars. 'This is lucky?'

'Doc Kut takes one lung and your left lobe, that's all. See?'

He showed me the target lobe on my offal plan. My body had passed the test with bubble gum colors. I entreated: 'Let me keep my brain, sir. What harm can my brain do?'

'Think what good can it do, Brakeman. It'll help us win the war and you'll be beyond suspicion. When Doc Kut is through you'll walk out of here a free man.'

I had nothing to lose. I spat the truth in his face: 'Liar! Once he's got that lobe the rest of me will go to spare parts.'

Cadeba grabbed Doc Kut's can opener. He withdrew his belt in one sweep. His white moleskins gripped his meat-fed thighs. They didn't drop a millimeter. He stood over me like a lop-sided bull colossus and put the belt around my neck. Then he lifted me up to spit-in-ya-face level.

'If I say you walk free, you walk free! Give!'

'G-g-g-ive?'

'The czarina!'

My vertebrae cricked in the necktie. The lights were

chucking daggers in my eyes. Night was descending. I gave.

‘I seen h-h-her!’

He let me down slow. My vision returned. He pulled himself up straight, like he was the man who broke in the buffalo. He tore off my sleep gown, rolled me over on my belly and lifted his razor.

‘Good boy.’ He sliced down my back, left side. Not into the muscle, just the pelt. It could have been his fingernail running down there. I didn’t know what he was up to till I saw the blood spreading on the rubber sheet.

‘I... I fitted the slut’s rig. The czarina. That who you mean?’

He sliced again.

‘One slice for each right answer, Brakeman. One wrong one and we hang you up by your tongue. Which rig? Chev?’
‘Oldsmobile.’

A cut with a razor never felt so good. He had bought it.

‘Got that, Kut? The principle powers an Oldsmobile.’

Doc Kut’s voice was disappointed. ‘Got it!’

‘Color? Personal style?’

‘Racing green. Tee...tee shirt. Silver dollar eagle.’

‘Where we gonna find her?’

‘Z-z-zone of Absorption... and... and o-o-o-ver Stimulus way... h-h-h-heart... heart of Oculus P-p-p-prior.’

One more slice completed the pentangle. I would be a sitting duck on all the beaches. The world would know I spilled.

‘Wrap him up!’

Oldsmobile vintage enthusiasts were arrested and flown to military hospitals for brain offal and behavior analysis. Hunters searched every caked mud track for Oldsmobiles racers, their innocent owners were minced into morgue pastries.

He could have thrown me to Kut for spare parts then and there, I might have ended up in a hundred different bodies, but Cadeba's warped sense of honor saved me from instant extinction. Tomorrow Kut was authorized to take the left lobe. I would have my night on Death Row.

To the elite assistants it was all the same if they worked out on me, but Kut was disappointed. Cadeba made sure they rolled me back to the Cure ward where I tried to make the most of my brain during our last night together. The night orderly arrived drunk. He made a lot of noise and opened the gambling section. Enola passed by emanating pollen suckle. She closed the highest window with the long-armed key. This was it, the signal. She left without a word.

When the lights went out I climbed down gingerly and waited by the swing doors. The library to the left was in darkness. The night orderly was hunched over the boxing pages, TV flashing on mute. The latrines ahead of me were empty. I slipped through, closing the swing door silently behind me. A patient called out from a nightmare. The night watch roused. The moments were long. Cadeba's pentangle was weeping into my tee shirt and every second was a second of Ex-P alone with Enola. The nightwatch returned to his swivel chair and switched on the porn channel. I crossed to the latrines, turned off the faucet that fed the cistern and ripped out the water-float arm. A cleaner's smock and face mask were waiting there for me, shoe laces in the rag pocket.

I passed the watch and the second dormitory flap-door. The gymnasium was silent, darkened. After thirty silent paces I reached a bulk order of face masks. This was it. I opened the Limbs Room door and was greeted by the sight of Ex-P's ugly ass and his knobbly spine doubled up in a verbal 'W' among all those prostheses. My bootlace strung his

throat. I pulled so hard it sliced. He bucked up like a riled stallion and tripped backwards. Enola shoved a towel down his throat, gripped his hair and twisted his head from 3 o'clock to midnight. I drove the water-float arm through one eye as his life faded from the other.

The room was full of dancers' legs, shoes, pedals, and a lot of skulls laughing at each other. We took each other there among the bones beside the cooling monster. There would always be this between us, between her and me, fire-skin and raging blood that separates us from the fossils. I changed the blood-spattered cleaner's smock for Ex-P's coat, put on his I.D. specs and baseball cap and we took the stairs, brisk, to logout and Cadeba's Blackhawk. We would be in absolute reversal before they let the hounds loose.

The water was higher than ever but the geological restructuring of the end of the petroleum era was holding. We took the Stolen Ridge to San Andreas before curving around towards Compagnon. The surface of the swelling ocean shone beneath us and the rising moon revealed its extent. We untied the chauffeur and dumped him where he could start a new life under the overpasses. I didn't fancy his chances if Cadeba got his hands on him.

After a while the drizzle took on a condition between water and steam. It was not falling any harder than before, but it seemed to be evaporating before it hit the tarmac. We stopped till visibility returned. We had pierced successive curtains of atomized liquid and the air was thick with separated salts, almost too thick to inhale. We pushed ahead at turtle pace until the road descended and we broke through to a vision of the trash pond that was once the clear blue Ocean. The edges of the sea curved away in purple-greenish arcs. The basin before us seemed like the result of a single

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drop of astral nitroglycerine. Captivity was far behind us. To the north, more turbulence and tempests. As we neared the last toll-booth of the 53rd I switched off the lights. We prepared to leave the road.

Flood

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We set the Blackhawk on a trajectory for the toll booth and descended giant legs to the water level. The air was dense with gases and clinging vapors. Gravity was light. All around us fluids were streaming, but they did not make the descent more difficult, if anything they improved our grip. We reached precipitation level. The toll booth blew. The Coral Sea lay before us.

Where the surface had skinned over it resembled human flesh. Thin curving reeds left it at intervals like hairs shooting from pores. The mist cleared momentarily, and the scene illuminated. A sheet of fluorescence spread above us like a wrapping of blue-green plastic: a limit of pure pollution which was our only protection from the star.

Where the sun found points of penetration it burned the surface of the sea creating potholes in the crust and searing currents of air. We were facing the foil, tip to toe, naked under our coats and wanting, mouth to mouth, breath, skin and pockets. For a few moments the universe existed within us. We were one, all. When we separated, we stepped upon it, the universe, for it had become a surface, receptive and smooth as a black belly. Flood had formed a rind firm and thick enough to support us.

We trekked for some hours. The color of that spongy ventral cortex changed as the light rose from coal-black to

chocolate, from Indian ochre to Tongan tan, Mongolian bronze, and eventually to the pinky cream of that least protected flesh of all. The shooting hairs became forests of salt-loving mangroves embedded far beneath the tough sponge we were walking or lying on. It was impossible not to entwine wherever it suggested itself for the air, the atmosphere, the tension of the place incarnated mutual desire. We relaxed in conjunction, no longer driven by an escape motive. We were sex itself, twinning, nourishing. We were like animals in their prime, whose leap is the revelation and realization of their nature.

As the dawn light grew, though it never passed the strength of such a light as you might find inside a tent on a rainy day, the air thinned and we heard the sound of running water. A spring was shimmering, rippling with waves and with schools of sleek, randy fish jumping exuberantly. We skirted it and continued across the congealed sea, trying to make the other side before daybreak. We had expected Flood to show signs of deepening in its heart, but it was as shallow as it had appeared near the shore. Beneath the surface we could make out parts of dwellings, transmission towers and sections of city buildings. We were only a few meters above the indigestible refuse of the centuries. Pneumatic drills and call-boxes, rotating blades and screen monitors, guns and swords and tank gun turrets poked out of the thinning murk. In slow swirling bays, office furniture and children's toys, bunks, magazines and baseball bats were floating freely. This was the back yard swamp of what was once regarded as progress.

Meniscus, where it bordered projecting objects or islands of olivine rock, was concave, licking up, as if resisting the downward curvature of the globe. This chemical repository

seemed incapable of promoting life, but as our inner wish was fertile beneath the memory of violence, from cracks in the rocks hardy twigs extended with one or two tiny leaves on the ends of them.

The skies were devoid of bird-life, airplanes had been unheard of for nearly a generation, but something airborne was approaching from the direction of Pell. We hid behind the torn-off door of a wrecked scan-van whose nose was wedged into a truffle shelf and watched as a capsule, trailing turquoise and blonde traces, arced towards the crash site. It was one of the few older-model surveillance planes in existence. Propelled by turbo-charge action and reaction, they were notorious for burning fuel with great extravagance and for leaving noxious vapor trails of various colors behind them. They were used only in cases of extreme urgency.

As it descended towards the smoking tollbooth we could make out a line of reporters' electric buggies beetling towards the same site along the elevated route. The back pages were already reporting that terrorists had drained Ex-P's blood to feed their vampire bats. The chauffeur was suspected of complicity, his Norteña music had surely been the code, sending messages to the prisoners inside Pell about the best moment to strike.

An hour or so passed as they picked through the remains. We dared not move until the capsule had departed. Eventually the fish-head rose from the accident site and made a few passes over the hills. It did not pass our way. Whoever was inside that plane never considered that Flood could be crossed.

In that they were not completely mistaken. The flesh-like surface gum around about us was thinning as the light

strengthened. We had to avoid some growing puddles. Beneath the surface lights flickered and swept. A wall-eyed pike-perch approached us as if from memory, faded deity eyes in a shimmering coat. Its head poked up, edges dripping. Touch that and it's 'Good night, Nurse', as Chip used to say. It raised its glans-like head and gill-slits higher till you could make out razor-sharp fins. We moved our arms so it didn't mistake us for cadavers. The carrion kings weren't interested in living beings. Other pike-perches grouped near us, curious about the new life forms moving above. One fired, but not at us. Its poison shot through a hole in the surface, searching the rocks and crevices ahead of us. It would return to him, his own missile end him if it found nothing. The growing lakes of heavy liquid began to move in lazy elliptical swirls, reaching up onto the edges of our crust which was still connected to land. We made for the rocks at the point of an inlet. Climbing around them towards the bay we looked back over a hypnotizing dance of rose-tipped waves towards the distant auto-route. For the moment we were safe. But what lay ahead? The inlet was fed from the mountains by a seeping gray and violet mud. As we descended from the rocks and tracked through the mudsand of the bay we clinked into a litter of corked bottles of all shapes and sizes, with colored lights illuminated within. The glass flashed and they set up their own tinkling. I tasted an unfamiliar salt and asked Enola, 'What do you see?'

She replied, 'Cradles burning', and popped the cork of one of them. The light went out but a voice came from the dark, stale interior, a voice without words, an exhalation of pent-up wanting, an audible sigh, a sexual groan.

When we heard it we were aware that the showers which had been peppering us since we set out had exhausted them-

selves. There was nothing between us but warm sensuality. Sleep was difficult in that still and quiet. Some images arose and sank again into the night. Some shapes occurred, like objects out of the past : helmet-shapes, square-headed and metallic, and smooth-steel wingless airplane columns alternated with the vision of complex flower-heads. Some naked figures like waifs, mortal and vulnerable, rose out of the mud and dissolved into it again, every one a biological replica of Enola or of me at different ages. We were infantile, playing, pubescent, abused, adolescent, afraid, experimenting. Forms in time, too, were inconstant. We were visualizing a history, a congregation of our selves before we met each other. My head was burning, and I was wanting to scratch the place where Myra's chip resided, until our attitude mutated and we took these images, convex, chrome-orange and distorted, as reassurances of our freedom, and the necessary unfolding of our empathy. We had been breathing in short rapid shots, but now we could draw lungfuls of dehumidified air, charged with real oxygen. We interlaced with renewed force and, newly-charged, rounded a point to find a second bay. A triple-hulled craft was stationed there, the left and right hulls were shorter and finer than the middle one which seemed to contain a cabin. The trimaran — for it was one of sorts — was moored to the rooftop ventilation grill of a flooded motel and its harpoon cannon was aiming straight at us. I could not make out more than the cap of the harpoonist, who must have been less than half my size, but his harpoon looked powerful enough to transpierce all three of us in a split second. We raised our hands, empty palms open and upwards, to show we were unarmed, but when neither the capped figure nor anything else on deck moved, we approached carefully.

The figure was unprotected by cloth or flesh. His bones were fused to each other, perhaps by the radiation wave associated with a meteor fall, or the black sun of a nuclear explosion. His flesh had long ago been picked off by birds or worms. Two more such figures lay below deck. They had been male and female, that much was obvious from the shapes of their pelvises. They were Enola's and my size, and they had been caught in the act when the unidentified phenomenon toasted them from the core. Their bones made up a continuous object. They had no joints, but swollen junctions. Their pelvises and arms, shoulders and teeth were cemented to each other's. Within minutes so were ours, or rather the points of contact of our skin which seemed to blend like molten wax. We experienced the pleasure of the other as a moment of recollection passing.

I was for forcing one of the locked drawers in the cabin below, but Enola found a key on a silver chain around the woman's neck that opened all the locks. Inside the bureau was ink, and a pair of notebooks. The man's contained details on the dangers of Flood, on the fish to avoid, and on optimum calibrations for the craft's instruments. These would prevent us becoming barracuda breakfast. The boat was designed to carve easily through the thickest viscosity. The sides of the boat were of a particularly smooth fiberglass. While certain rules had to be followed regarding center-hull ballast, it was sufficient to breach the liquid by pushing off, and its razor-sharp prows, breeze-harnessing lateens and light but durable rudder did the rest. There were a few solar panels which gave a feeble light below. A map was still readable, though it used parameters we were not familiar with. The woman's notebook contained intimate details of the couple's life together. The smaller figure at the harpoon

had been her son, though perhaps not his, for she said 'my son', and not 'our son'. The three had been caught by the rains, but there was no indication what blast or phenomenon had ended their lives so rudely.

We were soon adrift in that ghost rig on a sea of quick-silver. Barracudas nudged the sides of the rudder to see if it flexed. I drove a carving fork into one of them and flipped it onto the deck. The flailing razorback jack-knifed, but we had breakfast all fingers accounted for. We threw the rest of it back and pushed off, as a riot of barracudas and sharks thrashed in bloody rivalry. We demoted junior and greased the harpoon.

Following the man's notes, we took care to verify every hump above the water line before shooting. There were the ones who neither sank nor paddled, the failure of a mating pair, bloated human carrion. You puncture those and it's Technicolor Friday followed by a weekend of fever. Turtles were the best prize. Their flesh was healthy and protein-rich, and by placing the empty shells upon the decking we could condense a few drops of drinking water.

We navigated through a melee of mashed cottages and condominiums, nearly reefing ourselves upon a sandbank. We moored against a rig of piling that had once housed an elevator. Only the shaft remained. As Enola was throwing cans from the larder into the boat I saw a thing move among the submerged bathtubs, vacuum cleaners and standard lamps: it was the barnacled back of a giant tortoise. One nudge from that and we'd have been in the marinade. The carcass of a four-tusked hairless musk-swine floated near us, freshly drowned. We sliced it into thin strips to bake.

In the distance Flood seem interminable and tranquil, the surface unbroken, but every day we passed through new

environments: sandbanks piled high with military unwantables, a stinking cache of dead whales which, for some reason, the birds had not touched. There were more visions of those forms that materialized and dissolved into the medium, more love in which the skin seemed rough on first contact but softened as we clasped to make one hyphenated being; and dreams of our children, hundreds of thousands of our children. They were like fish in a net, flailing, crawling together, over each other.

After some giant pouch-rats tried to board, one of us had always to be awake to beat them off. You had to love with one eye open. One evening we were lying naked on the deck and Enola took hold of me. She said she was being drawn into the past. She had not been able to expel Ex-P. He had had her by force and come in the way that perpetuates the race. She could not get him out of her, not her body nor her mind. She was afraid she was carrying his child. Fruity with yearning and drilled through with fear, yellow pearls no bigger than pin-heads had appeared on her skin.

The temperature dropped but she wouldn't clothe herself. The surface congealed by night, and by dawn a glistening emerald dew had grown over that. As if elated by the new colors, Enola was dancing on the starboard bow, slow-mo, hand-jive style. I had only known one dancer, and I was crazy about her too. The howling of a dog in the mountains accompanied our embraces. The trimaran carved ahead, born by a subcutaneous current.

As we penetrated Flood we found that there were areas which did not congeal in the night, and crusted floating masses which did not dissolve during the morning. These merged on contact to form floating islands. Their terrain appeared smooth but was jagged with dangerous crystal

blooms. Not all floating objects were dangerous. Some were boons. One floating crate was full of sealed packets of seaweed powder, rich in vitamins.

Our nights were those of reaffirming embrace, our bodies so warm as to break all natural laws of thermodynamics. As the days went by the sun grew stronger. We fashioned sombreros out of turtle paddles. The surface between the packs of crusted islands had become a mercury-like expanse that hurt your eyes. You could only see ahead by means of a superlative squint.

We approached a partly-submerged bungalow. The house had been displaced in its entirety. We forced entry through the hole left by a crumbled chimney. In the attic we found more preserved food in tins — and two more skeletons in each other's arms, picked clean by whiteworms. They had starved for want of a tin opener. There was something familiar about this attic. I opened a chest. There were photographs of a guy who looked like Chip in a yard that resembled the diagnosis business. How did he get into our honeymoon? Was all this no more than part of the treatment? In the dining room below we could hear barracuda swarming, rapping against the ceiling and the attic door.

That night I saw two lights undulating far away, moving as the headlights of a vehicle on a motorway would move. They vanished and reappeared as if the car was curving down into a valley. Tongues of flame spat out when he changed down. The tail-lights dipped out of sight and seconds later a hyperoctane nuclear Meso-plume shot into the pock-marked sky. The howling of a pair of dogs or seals lasted till morning, then a second howling started up, deeper in, Enola's labor cry. She gave birth on the verge around mid-morning. We named the baby Richie Tibbetts and made frequent stops to

ransack wrecks for blankets and baby provisions. Enola turned protective, suspicious of the slightest noise, afraid the least variation in temperature would impact on the baby's health. His face set after a few hours. I liked the look of him. He reminded me of how Enola used to look when we fell for each other. A few days passed and he could already speak, and sing, something like the melody of Texico Rose. Ex-P's or not, he called me daddy and slept a lot.

He developed at an amazing rate and we were soon worrying about his schooling. We wanted him to be a normal kid, to grow up to lust after dancers and make the grade, but there was no escaping it: Richie was developing nasty streaks. Winter was setting in and he was whining that it was too cold, that he was sick of eating tinned food, that he wanted to go to a forest and catch butterflies. We paid more attention to him. We gave him everything he asked for. I took my role responsibly, teaching him about necessity. Maybe my moralizing was faulty, kids can sense that kind of thing. He didn't conceal his boredom. It didn't take a shrink to see he had had enough of us. He picked holes in everything we did. We only had to breathe. He asked smarmy questions. I was sick of him, he was sick of us, but Enola was afraid what would become of him if he left home.

The temperatures dropped and the smooth surface hardened up. We were stranded in mid-ocean with a whining adolescent. He was having nightmares by night and oversleeping by day. When he was out cold in the afternoons Enola stripped and passed the time dancing, as she liked to do, on the starboard bow. Her naked body made the perfect target. A shot echoed around the mountains. She fell, winged. Two dog-seals, their front legs, part-flipper, part-paw, were already upon her. They took her feet in their

mouths and dragged her over the surface towards a trapper who strapped her on a sled behind his own buggy and sped towards the shore. A pillar of smoke was rising behind the hills, a reddish-orange smoldering that I knew well — the meltdown of a crashed Dodge could smoke like that for weeks. Richie and I wrapped our feet in marlin skin and set out. Everywhere pouch-rats were gasping for air, their jaws working above the ice layer, their bodies trapped in the freeze, squeezed by the expanding ice which in some cases was forcing the offal out of their mouths. Ice fungi were soon at work, and other new foliage on the surface, blooming bright crimson and yellow.

As we neared the cleft, we made out a string of dark shapes descending into one of the elevated valleys—members of the Tribe, heading for the hidden city. If they had seen the smoking Dodge or the trapper's campfire, they took no notice, and soon disappeared from view. The trapper had been drinking musk-wine and was gesticulating towards the wounded Enola with sudden arm movements, the story of a hunt perhaps, or justifying himself. He was engrossed in his own narrative, but Enola saw us and, clutching her left shoulder with her right hand, began to sway to the left and right. He took it as a sign and, unsheathing his knife, he lowered his rigging. He would not enjoy her dead before he had enjoyed her alive. The trapper's mutant barkers were play-fighting on the other slope. When we began to run, they barked. The trapper lifted his head towards the dogs, then turned to see what they were barking at. Before he could reach for his gun it was in my hands. I gave him his own sex eye in the middle of his forehead and potted one of the dog-seals off. The other made it to safety, where it began to howl piteously. We strapped Enola onto the sled, tied the dead

dog-seal behind us, and slid down the slope to the lake of crusted mucous using the trapper's rifle as a paddle-pole.

The ordeal made Richie easier to be with. He wore a strip of the trapper's fur coat as a trophy. Enola's arm regained mobility though the boat remained icebound for a short winter. The supplies of tinned meat were running low when, one morning, Enola was cleaning the observation window and there was a crack all around. She sent up a shout. Richie roused himself from his nightmares and together on deck we stared at the darkest of deep-red gashes. The ice had fractured from the shore to the horizon along a jagged line which included the trimaran. The shell had split. We opened a bottle of the skinny couple's bourbon to celebrate. We had been freed, and read hope in that rising blood-like sludge.

Warming mud is a revolting reality. We drank to numb the senses. With the heat came thousands of small creatures we had never seen the likes of. Reptilian, strangely human, like encrusted human embryos possessing survival instinct and motor impulses. Larger ones followed, not much larger, but with an appetite for the former ones which they swallowed in twos and threes before sinking back into the turgid scum. They were more like bloated carcasses than living, hungering, creatures. A new generation of barracuda had found its way from suspended animation to join the fun of the fair. The sea was running hot. Its currents were quickening. Its shades, green and brown, grew complex and revealed wide sweeping currents.

Richie saw it first. He called for me but I wouldn't listen. I thought he was crying wolf. In spite of all we had seen, when I looked up I could hardly believe my eyes. It was rising miles away from over the horizon, lifting like a megalosaurus.

Enola, full of bourbon on the starboard bow, was stretching out her good arm crying, 'Retro, Breakbark!' when lightning, or a glance of that reptilian eye struck her and she fell into the brother-witch lake. As I reached my hand towards her, it seemed that other hands were under the surface, other human hands! I could feel their wish to draw me in, to share that fetor of bacteriological cousinage, their woe of want, their blindness and rejection, their submissive credulous madness. Flood, the mental malady. I was starting to think we would all be better off in there, naked, bleeding, mouths swollen, gulping that orphaning thickness, that precipitation unwanted by earth or by heaven, than up here, hand reaching for beloved hand, seconds away from annihilation. I slashed open the remaining tins and spooned the jellymeat overboard. There was a wild splashing of barracudas and the sea of hands disappeared into someone else's dreams. Enola climbed towards me, bald as Cadeba under his Stetson and glowing with electrolyte. We embraced with such finality that we felt the pulses in standing position.

The dark form of that astronomically huge hate-shaman continued to rise, darkening the sky above the horizon. Richie was on the forward bow, spellbound, staring at the surge. He would not budge from his crow's nest. It now had the form of a wall kilometers away to the south. He was staring into it as if it fulfilled some prophecy. There wasn't time to find out which one. The air was warming and thinning till it was like breathing through a straw, and the stench was outrageous. We were snared in a stagnant expectant silence on a three-legged raft in a low-lying waste facing a tsunami that knew no friction. I had to knock him out in order to seal us all inside.

We waited. Richie came to crying 'Mummy' — he

wanted to go out feeding. Enola cupped her hands under her breasts to satisfy him. Dark voluminous, the wave approached. The boat rocked and slid forward as the liquid beneath us was sucked in to provide matter for the wave. Richie recited good-and-evil proverbs as Enola and I braced for collision when—

insignificance. We had not broken any physical barrier or law, but in an instant we had become the darkness, the rip, the panic, the evidence that only a dream can provide of stupefying ignorance, that knowledge suppressed for a lifetime or during the transformation of our species — we had become the denied wish, primal anti-matter, tyrannical, neurosthenic. We were ready, equal to the surge, already within its physiology, voyaging in the fluid of its eye, in the Mesozoic, the pin point of measureless time, within nothingness, dark and futile, a passionless futility, neither atmospheric storm, nor rupture of the earth, nor tidal. An intrusive negation. Matter and light had been reduced, antified. It was hurtful, mean, and vindictive. It penetrated you like a warm dye you could feel in your olives. This was it. Bad luck. We were the glue. It demanded all. It mocked us.

We could not speak and were not aware of breath entering or leaving our lungs. We felt nothing in the windpipe. We had what it took, the equipment to speak, but no muscle responded in the larynx itself. We looked at each other, as figures in a photograph look at each other, momentarily, eternally, ineffectually, incapably. Our feet were like tree stumps, our legs cast in the space that held us. Was this stillness, or the speed of light? A moment, or eternity? Only our eyes moved, like those of iguanas. We had been installed in the unthinkable, less than primal, protoplasmic, our meager lives burned inwards to undergo this negation. We were

flames between the act that would cause their extinction and extinction itself. The history of humanity seemed to compass less than an instant. We were specks, thirsting, yearning, but above all specks. Nasal fluid and sweat was running. Our urine was like the juice of an unknown fruit, for Enola sucked it out of her discarded pants, becoming one with the medium outside. That which had been most vile was most palatable. If we had been seeing lights in the brain during the darkness, now there was another light, external, a luminescence like a hand trying to touch us. Enola gasped. Something had touched her where it counts. She cried faintly, as if we were just within hearing. I saw her face in the gloom like an image in the clouds created more by the perceiving mind than what it has perceived. The face I saw was in agony. It was hard to bear. I must have fallen.

When I came to Richie was out of control, tearing off his jeans which were heavy with a form of excrement, luminous but odorless. We stood watch over him as his perspiration darkened and coagulated. Speech seemed inevitable, necessary, but it did not arrive. We had no appetite for life. We had to think of things to say, but the effort of remembering caused us to drift in and out of consciousness. When we drifted back he was still there. Words were there, irrelevant words, but tenses had lost their adequacy. We had need of other tenses, of new words, new tunes, new time signatures.

At that, density lessened. The surge and its aftermath passed. It was one second later.

Clouds of birds of all species were congregating about our wreck. We double-checked the clasps, because they were poking their beaks, sometimes as long as 15 centimeters, into every crack. Our vessel was covered by birds of all feathers, pecking and attacking each other, driving the weakest off,

engaged in pernicious duels, so that we descended with the added weight. Slime was soon lapping over the side decking, increasing our sex-wish. It was summer in the Venus suite again, but any movement might have proved fatal.

Suddenly the birds rose and flew as one body towards another floating mass, which proved to be millions of fish compressed to death by the surge. The birds scrambled for their carrion, coming to rest on the floating island of fish-flesh. We drifted with the tide around the warring gaggle and steered the trimaran towards a second dark mass, not a land-mass, but an island afloat, the size of a skyscraper, and reeking of synthetic fibers. Though the composition of that berg was not common rubber, it was equally as soft, flexible and watertight. It was easy to climb up, permitting a grip without crumbling. From the first ledge we could make out other masses like it drifting freely, and, in the distance, true mountains.

A rock crossed the sky and plunged, burning into the lake beyond the horizon. A three-colored cloud rose like an ostrich plume green, orange and violet. No wave followed, not a ripple, only a coiling periwinkle of spectral light which hovered above us. It would cause greater disturbances. Spontaneous fires followed on land, and on the surface of the lake. Birds were being sucked towards them. Fire burst out among them in mid-flight. A second flock near us rose as a single body from its carrion island, and was sucked to extinction.

Enola started another of her slow-moving dances on the rubberberg, resting now upon the ball of the left foot, now on that of the other. She used the feet, the knees and the heels, singing to Richie as eddies turned the island around in mid-ocean:

*Nola had a baby boy
First words li'l Paul said
"Gonna be a-drivin' man
a steel-drivin' man"*

The tidal currents grew stronger and the breeze became a scorching blast. We sewed Marlin skins together to make a protective awning. The solar rays were causing fissures in the sides of the craft so we moored in the lee of one of the bergs to boil down some clods of fiber for glue. While I was climbing a scarp a darting eye came perilously close. It had passed by before we knew it—a tide of light and sound that took all in its path into the parallel investiture of its singularity. If it had been a bit more to the right Enola would have been annihilated. That speedier-than-light menace had whipped a channel from one horizon to the other which Flood was rushing to fill in.

We were still in the narrative.

Enola continued to sing. She taught me how to dance slow like that. We orbited each other as Richie picked up the chorus of the steel-driving man. Now he was dancing. It was not slow like ours but fast, electric boogie, hot-coals jiving. He was grooving to the rhythm of his generation. He dropped his chest back while snapping his pelvis forward, shifting his weight and reversing feet positions. We smiled, proud of junior. His head was spinning and while he was down on the ground he started to scratch the surface. He spat in the cracks and clawed and spat some more. He mixed it with some shit in the boiled down caulk and he had discovered ink. It looked like he was fixing to doodle. He drew three skeletons on the decking. That had me worried. They looked like us. Were the skeletons of the original owners

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presages of our own?

I'll die with a hammer in my hand

The refrain wasn't enough for him. Soon he was wanting to pay life back in its own coin, to make up his own songs. Since he only had old songs to work with, he invented three word strings that sounded to me like refill therapy:

*Head hammer hang
Steel-dry man*

Before he had remembered any of the next verse we had beached ourselves. We took some supplies with us and squelched over a tidal mudflat towards some distant trees. Ahead of us we saw three figures carrying packs: two adults and a teenage boy. Richie turned back to take one last look at the trimaran, the skiff of his childhood. The boy ahead turned to look at us. We set off again, feeling things squirming in the mud about our feet and calves. The figures ahead moved as we moved, stopped when we stopped. One had a pentangular scar on his back. We were following our images, which grew fainter as the mud firmed up.

We smelt the odor of water, fresh water so pure, so drinkable, it seemed to be perfumed, water that had deposited its burden of chemicals, water that had filtered down the inner chasms of cleansing mountains. Criss-crossing rivulets were flowing out of the forest as if to greet us. We fell on the running water as one, slurping like animals. As we reached firmer ground we were faced with the spectacle of hundreds of fallen palms, undermined and washed down by the rains. Beyond them was the forest of no return.

The Tribe

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Sated, hydrated, we heard the squawking of parakeets. That was, to us, the most beautiful music in the world. All was abundant. Life in all its forms was dripping, overflowing. Tremors passed through the earth. Sub-duction plates far below were lifting. This was the least stable country of all. Even the ridges and saddles of the mountains changed their shape daily. There were mountain goats up there, and along one distant ridge we could make out part of a low-order arterial route which was certainly a dead end.

There were no roads into the forest. Any road would split and buck as soon as it was laid. Only the Tribe knew its way through the forest, and Enola was of the Tribe. It wasn't a matter of knowing which way to go, it was a state of mind.

We made our way through elephant bamboo, stepping carefully over heavy, slippery clay, but were halted by an expanse of quicksand crusted lightly with a thin zinc paste.

By prodding the earth around about with lengths of elephant bamboo we found solid ground enough to proceed. A trunk creaked and there was a rushing sound as a tree fell, crashing behind us. The place where we were standing began to rise. It had been a carapace. We clambered over the fallen trunk and, concealing ourselves, watched the calceous mound appear, revealing a history of segments long coalesced into one immovable crown. We saw a tiny tail on our

side of the carapace, and heard a noise like sobbing inside the shell, which reverberated as if it were hollow. The reverberations increased in depth and intensity until they were like cries, or more correctly, howls. At the front of the carapace where you might expect the head of a turtle, for example, there was no head nor beak, but a small sac hanging over the edge of the neck-hole. It was like a leather money pouch or a tightened scrotum, and it appeared to be empty. It extended to the interior of the shell by means of lax cord of wrinkled, weathered skin.

The howling grew louder. I couldn't bear it. I was possessed of a vision of my own conception, of the violence that accompanied the tearing of sperm from my own fathers' sac. The sac hanging at the head end was growing in size. It took on an oval shape and blew up to about the size of a rugby ball. A gush of excrement poured out the other end from under its raised tail while the sac reduced to the size of a ping pong ball. The mechanism of the neck, the tendons and vessels appropriate to it, self-activated. Priming itself by some kind of pump action it grew again to the point where the egg shape within was stretching the skin of the head-sac. This time there was no flow of excrement, and the oval was so tight that it seemed about to scatter its contents in every direction. We took cover behind the tree trunk. The howling died out, the sobbing resumed, complicated by a sort of huffing, the kind that might presage laughter. The huffing increased in intensity and frequency and volume until a voice let fly an extended cry. It grew louder and longer, impossibly so. It seemed that it would never stop. Hearing it tore a similar cry from us, and we had to cover our ears to deaden the sound. The cry ended in a series of swift cutting and swooping sounds, as if a scythe were reducing all, even the

trees, before it. These faded, and I lifted my head just in time to see not an egg, but an eye, speeding into the forest. According to the myths, the eye of the Klomathon was capable of great violence in the first minutes after release, but soon used itself up if it failed to hypnotize its prey. Before us we beheld the spectacle of the spared, exhausted parent, slumped in its own putrescence. Its head sac was in shreds, but it would manufacture another eye, and another, before being destroyed by a desperate offspring.

We prodded our way along the path that had been burned by its trajectory till we came upon the exhausted seeker, the surface of its raw orb covered with a film like the blister that forms over serious burns. Around this orb were indeed cilia that resembled lashes, but these were weapons of attack, not organs of detection or protection for the seeking orb. Behind these lashes was a system of tendrils, whose function was to enfold the prey.

A taste in our mouths of rare salts returned, but no single salt identified itself. Our exposed surfaces, the skin of our hands and arms, and of our cheeks, felt the presence of several salts at once, as one might sense various tones in the locution of a person. This sort of thing is rarely perceived on television or in films, but in real life I often used to be amazed at how many different tonalities exist in a person's speech. I came to expect it, a mixture of tones underneath the single attitude that reigned. If the presence of salts was like reality in this disunity of signals, our centers were hit with an emotion deracinated, unleafing, remorseful. We were overtaken by an aphasia born of logical thought-conjunctions. In the vicinity of the eye, our emotions were assailed not by the simultaneous complexity of the signals we were receiving, not by disharmony, but as with despair, by an ines-

capable, a self-reinforcing conviction that there was no hope, not for ourselves nor for the Tribe nor for humanity.

Doubly, triply despairing, Enola had lost her intuitive knowledge of the forest. The three of us were lame. We could not move. We could not try. I felt that color and heat were draining from our world but above all from our bodies, and a concomitant repulsion with ourselves in that muddied, grayed state. The sense of simultaneous unidentifiable flavors and the crippling of our motor impulses had culminated in a shame of uncleanness.

The sound of falling water and the arrival of airborne droplets repaired the situation. We were light again, it was easy to move. We left the scene that was so despairing, moving like balloons in the wind towards the water source. A golden light fell upon the surface, in fact it seemed to fall exclusively upon the scene. If the empty victory we had gained over the Klomathon had all but defeated us, this light, and a longing generated by the water, made us feel all but invincible. I felt that we had the right to fight, as we retained the right to live and to love, to feel and to imagine.

We threw off our clothes and prepared for the intense cold of the mountain water but when we plunged, the water in the pool was not, in fact, cold, and, stranger still, it did not seem at all wet. It was like entering another body. We felt the pressure of an enfolding medium against the skin, and this medium hardly resisted our movements. It was quite as easy as to move through air.

As Enola and I played and wove and spun, some fish approached, their fins slicing the surface of the water. They were ample and tight-bodied, like tuna, and their fins looked capable of slicing us in two. Before we could make for the bank they had encircled us. Fearing for our lives, we looked

about for something to defend ourselves with, but there was nothing within reach. One circled closer and closer eventually making a lightning-fast pass at Richie. He cried out, but did not collapse. No blood discolored the crystal waters. Again our fears had proved unfounded, for he had not been harmed. Others approached with less suddenness and they did not cut us nor bite us. Their smooth bellies ran alongside of ours, investigating our bodies. Perhaps our skins corresponded with some aspect of the female of their species for we found we were playing a passive part in their reproductive behavior. We were real, but was reality? Dripping with the swimming jelly of their spawn, we climbed onto a rock ledge and washed beneath a waterfall before circling back to wash our clothes.

As we relaxed, waiting for them to dry, Richie grew impatient. Enola told him not to stray, reminding him that the undergrowth was thick and we could easily lose each other. Richie said he would just climb around the pool. On the other side he called out to us to come and see: the three of us quite beside that strengthening water, beheld a body nailed to a tree. Her genitals and her heart had been gouged out. A hunter had been here, and not so long ago. We pulled on our damp clothes and moved ahead, coming across other pinned up members of the Tribe, male and female, their genital areas 'scalped' and their hearts hacked out for extract. The victims had died peacefully, by a simple effort of will, you could see it on their faces. The hunter hadn't captured more than corpses to string up and desecrate. Having an enemy everything became familiar. Stinking sinking sand, mounds that turned into Klomathons, such things fell outside the common bounds, into the disconcerting wide and ugly Unknown. But we knew who we were and what we

were about with an adversary in the district who would kill us as quick as look at us. We were going to nail that hunter! Richie scrambled up a tree with the agility of our common ancestors, but he could not see any tell-tale smoke nor any signs of pillage.

Enola read his path and moved swiftly through the magnolias. There were no dog tracks and he was alone. We came upon an encampment where he had eaten some forest fruit and boiled water. The pips that lay about were not those of poisonous fruit, but the peelings in the fire were of a hallucinogenic rhizome that The Tribe sometimes uses to prepare themselves for cremations. This could make him doubly dangerous but more open to suggestion. From here on his path was less direct, less predictable. He was moving more slowly than before, but showed no signs of being intoxicated. If anything he was perspicacious, seeing dangers inherent in the forest well in advance and deviating or finding novel solutions to overcome them. A few hours later we heard him firing at shadows. Whatever he was aiming at, it was an elusive target! Silence. As we drew closer his Colt went off again and clicked a couple of times. We watched him from the bushes as he drew a curved saber from its sheathe. Sword raised, he took a classic warrior stance at the approach of his adversary, which now came into view — in the air above him! A Klomathon eye! It had been slowed by the bullets and was weeping a yellow fluid. It circled him but the hunter would not be drawn, he seemed not to be looking directly at the eye, but was concentrating on the space that remained between them, the space in which they would meet and one of them would die. The eye burned around him, seeking a flaw in the hunter's concentration. But the hunter would not be hypnotized. His torso swiveled and he turned full

circle with four steps that permitted him to confront it face on. The eye hovered. It was losing force and had to attack. It dove at the hunter, who was no sloth with his Samurai sword. He scrambled the eye into a hundred sticky bits.

I called out.

‘Agent Brakeman. Diagnostician, sir. Nice job.’

He faced the direction of my voice, sword raised: ‘Show yourself, kid.’

He was one who had prematurely aged. He was far from lean and his toupee was skewed. I threw the rifle on the ground between us. He lowered his sword with relief, drew out a dirty handkerchief and wiped off some albumin.

‘Agent Brakeman! I heard about you. You’re on the run, ain’t it?’

‘They took me hostage. Terrorists, sir. I had no choice.’

‘Where’s your wreck?’

‘I don’t rightly know. They had another one ready, and another.’

‘Where’s the slut you made the break with?’

I jerked a thumb towards the bush where Enola was, in fact, at that moment, moving stealthily. ‘Out there somewhere. I gave them the slip two days ago.’

‘There’s more than one of her?’

‘There’s a Tribe of them, sir.’

‘Tell me about it! You got alcohol?’

‘No, sir. But it flows from certain trees in this sector.’

He took a slug of survival gin and unwrapped some bubble gum. He chewed slowly and when the gum had softened he confided: ‘Listen, Brakeman. The situation’s different now.’ He leaned closer. ‘We’re dying and they’re dying.’

‘That’s nature, ain’t it? No one lives forever—not them and not us.’

'We're dyin' out, Brakeman! And they's got the cure inside of 'em!'

'In their blood, sir?'

'In their goddam hearts, Brakeman!'

'So why don't they offer up, like, to save mankind?'

'You gonna ask 'em? They... they're different from us, kid. If you look at them the wrong way they can just drop down dead. And we got to get their hearts when they're conscious, get me?'

'I saw some of them back a way. You nail them up?'

'You got to seize the moment, you know? I thought if I got their hearts out quick they might protect me. They were good for protein, anyways.'

'And the other parts, sir?'

He had to explain. His self-pride wouldn't allow me to think he had eaten them as well. He said slow and evil: 'Look after Number One, know what I mean?'

He was close enough for me to jump him, but he was on higher ground and I was not well balanced. I replied, 'I guess... I guess I don't, sir.'

'It's every man for hisself. You help me out and I'll cut you in.'

In the farthest flung forest of the great unmapped sector one of Cadeba's elite hunters was just another opportunist. 'You'll cut me in on what?'

'Scalps. Those parts of theirs, down there,' he gestured at my crotch, 'fetch a fortune in the Okhost gambling halls. Worth their weight.'

'The coolest gal in Texas is waiting for me, sir.'

'How cool, kid?' He was smiling like he had already laid her.

'Ain't we supposed to take them in alive?'

'You know and I know that ain't possible. They don't deserve to live, boy! They toasted my bunkmate on a spit. We gonna save the likes of them?'

'No, sir.'

'What we gonna do?'

'We gonna scalp 'em, sir.'

'Forty per cent.'

'Heck! It'll pay for the wedding!'

He slapped his arm on my shoulder and pointed downstream. 'What's that shining down there?'

'That's scarab beetles, sir. Gold is a by-product.'

'What else you know?'

'Nothing you couldn't figure, sir.'

'Any reason we can't use this?' He was holding a phial.

'That the A-bomb, sir?'

'Poison to drug vermin, kid.'

Written on the yellowing label was 25 m2 ground cover.

'We'll knock 'em out with this and pick 'em off like flies.'

'I ain't sure it's a good idea. I ain't sure we're immune, you know?'

'Sure we are. It only works on those critters. Unless you ain't one of us.'

The bloated carcass of a dead doe glided past us and he slit its side open for fun. The stench negated even sound. He was nothing but a match fixer on the run.

'Let's go, sir!'

'You got gumption, Brakeman. We gonna be rich as Midas.'

'Yessir! Whaddy say, like pardners... Whaddy say we... remember the graduation routine?... we swear on the sword?'

'Like this?'

He plunged it in the earth between us and Enola shrieked

from the vegetation. My hands were on his samurai before he turned back. His head came off in mid-scream. After crossing continents, experiencing all that the flesh can undergo from Chatanooga to Seoul, after urging his engine to break the sound barrier above Bering Strait, leaving pin-ups of his telltale crimes in the forbidden sector, he had come to this, an open mouth lost of voice and a pair of arms trying to paddle upstream. His torso finally succumbed to gravity and he shimmied down the bloated corpse's path to damned Damascus.

Richie sent up a cheer, but the hunter's hand had let the phial go. It caught in a churning swirl, surfacing at the same point again and again. His torso slipped from view and the phial smashed. The water weeds all around it died and the forest around about turned black. The foliage withered to within a few meters of us. It was like a flying saucer just used the place as a landing pad.

According to the papers in his sack, the brief had changed. Cadeba's superiors had given up seeking ones and twos. They were going to take the whole Tribe. That hunter was one of many on reconnaissance and a veritable army was following them up, homing in on the hidden city. Soon the entire population would be cornered and caged. They had decided to go in, relying on a five per cent deviancy rate. If five per cent of the Tribe had mutated, if five per cent failed to form the gene that caused them to die in captivity, humanity, as they liked to call themselves, would have its meat-farm. The operation was code-named The Great Safari. It should have been called The End of the World.

We threw his head in his gunny sack and descended to the base of the falls. Millions of black swimming-insects were drifting on the water. The bio-bomb had had some effect on

me, too. I was spitting and snorting snot while a burning hunger was gnawing at my guts. Fatigue ocean. Earth of imminent eruption. Blocked wormhole that once manufactured coherent speech. Enola and Richie were not suffering. She examined me and prescribed a certain fruit which resembled a perfumed violet banana. After identifying some palms of this fruit we tied together a raft out of giant bamboo and rode some easy rapids that led to a wide lagoon. We used a lance to push our way through a red slick of smoking red treacle that was weeping into the lake from the banks, and, after crossing the lagoon, were able to tear banana-like fruits from some low-growing palms. I vomited the first mouthfuls, but soon had the nausea licked. That intimacy with death that is all illness passed.

That night we saw far, far away, reflections off the clouds. A blaze like that can only have come from the convoy, the army of the Great Safari — the soldiers and tranquilizer gunsters who would see the Tribe die before their eyes. Our time was short.

Sometimes you might feel that you should not be reading this, as if a curtain has been pulled back to reveal a room in which a man is talking. You understand that he has been talking not to himself but to someone who isn't there. You understand that he is not, necessarily, insane, but has an imaginary accomplice whose existence makes him and his work more than sane. And yet he is close to losing his reason. Perilously so. Even if the accomplice were before him he would be in danger. Close your eyes, can't you hear the scratching of a man seeking the present as quickly as it vanishes, trying to keep up with a phrase that has already lost its relevance in the past?

The forest floor was teeming with golden land scarabs and the water was thick with other tiny beasts reproducing before our eyes. Logs and the torsos of animals were gliding smoothly downstream and the air was thick with mud-midges. The lagoon was a salt-heavy liquid on which a body floated easily. There was little oxygen in it at any depth. Not even a leech would survive at any depth.

When night fell, the stars were out of their usual order. I couldn't recognize any of them. Not the individuals blinking gaily, not the sweeps of curdled clusters. This was not a beginning, but a moment containing all beginnings. Cadeba used to say 'He's a zombie, figuring like he always figured.' The hunter's head said it without a functioning brain. If they were right, that we think the way we have thought since we first knew thought, the most important thing was to get it right the first time. If we got through this alive, we were going to educate those kids.

The raft carried us deeper in. As we neared the city, we heard the sounds of settlement, of human activity behind a fore-veil of chanting and string instruments. On the banks were black granite statues, open manuscripts in their lectern arms. Here and there lay old rayon tubes or chassis, obsolete cables and motors, gadgets, infra-red boxes and multiple scan screens. Cripples on the banks of pools were singing in a language Enola understood, of the rains and the rising waters. The buildings still above water were supported by blocks of white sandstone and these foundations were decorated with inlaid obsidian. On the first landing were lookout posts. They recognized Enola immediately. This people recognized their own kind. Makeshift jetties extended from the shore into the lagoon. On some of them wire-thin one-armed women were playing santirs with plectra. Some dwellings

were elaborate huts poised above the charged water. Some houses were constructed out of bamboo and planed or carved wood. They rose to three or four, and sometimes five or six levels. Some leaned over the lagoon and seemed on the point of dropping into it. Others towered over each other deeper into the forest and under the eaves of mountains, which rose to a terrifying height, concealing the city.

Children pushed playfully at the raft with long poles, causing it to rock in the water. It seemed they were trying to capsize us. Richie lost his grip and was thrown against the quayside stumps. Enola shrieked at them to stop, which they did, and when the rocking stopped we attended to him. The wind had been knocked out of him and he had lost consciousness.

When we laid him down on the shore the locals became really interested in him, perhaps because they could not identify him as belonging wholly to my kind nor to Enola's. Their way of investigating things and their language were different from mine, but they seemed to know my mind when they did look at me! If I was with Enola I was no enemy, nor was I someone to pay any attention to. But Richie, he was really something.

They made gestures of appreciation, and before we could react twenty of them had picked him up and carried him off. I heard him crying out from their midst as he came to, a deep voice that told us that his voice had, at long last, broken. Enola tried to explain that he was her son, but we could only follow them in the direction of the city center where some elderly members of a tribal council received us. We asked about Richie and they told us he would be "cured" and taught their language. The matter was not negotiable so we got down to business. I conveyed to them that an army of

hunters was coming for them and that a massive farming operation was being planned, but they regarded this as an insignificant piece of information.

They appeared not to care. They wished only to sustain their ideal of the realized self as long as possible, till death. As would discover that their 'realization of the self' had nothing to do with behavior, or what we might call morality, for here everything was permitted. Gambling, for example, was their chief pastime. They stared into my eyes, reading my pre-peeling racial type in the iris crystals. They did not care any more than the children that I was not one of them. Enola spoke to them in their language and took the hunter's head from the sack. The chiefs gave a signal and a ceremony began which was a lead-up to a tea-party of sorts.

The last of something resembling pig meat was laid on the table and a few persons of unclear rank took a sliver. Having eaten, we drank from a bowl containing human milk. As each drank, he or she saluted the approaching end of this life 'of false appearance.' A form of bark was passed around. This was to be chewed; it tasted like aniseed. The tea-party took around two hours and finished with dancing.

The chiefs lacked the usual combination of elements, of right and left, male and female. They were formed in a way I had never contemplated. Few of the males had scrotums to speak of and few of their penises had stems — they were knobs of Tyrian purple nosing out of thinning fur. The breasts of those who had them, whom I will call the women, were large. In fact, they were being milked and their primary protein source must have contained some antidote, an ingredient that kept many of the limitless poisons and microbes at bay. The ganglia of many were, nevertheless, tumefied. The necks of some were lymphatic pile-ups. Many had stitch

marks where apprentice surgeons had implanted digestive organs. Some displayed evidence of freelance experiments: patches of animal fur, non-human mammalian genitals ineptly implanted. This gave me hope. Where there were surgeons there was some form of anesthesia and stitching thread to retrieve Myra's theory. Some children dressed in rags tried to touch us, and two old women whose legs were tucked under them, or who had no legs at all, moved away from us on sleds as if we were unlucky or diseased.

Here children were given to the strangest of visions. The most recent was a black virgin who appeared to twins in the gaming quarter in early morning. The children said she was holding a silver crescent, or the blade of a sword, in the shape of a new moon. The next time she appeared, said the virgin, the children would be told the cure for death. She had said,

*Know all that is possible
In wealth is squalor*

She told them there would be a time of plenty cursed by meanness.

An adolescent, whose name was Xanjal, slender and healthy and endowed, showed us to our quarters in a dilapidated, charred hut, one of the tallest overlooking the lagoon. This was for guests, but its interior was not as simple as the word "hut" would suggest. Xanjal explained that on the first night we were obliged to sleep in different rooms. He showed Enola her room first, which was on the third level and pure white. I followed him to my room, on the fifth level. The tower creaked as we climbed the staircase. I was afraid it might fall with our combined weight.

There was a notebook beside my bed. The handwriting was neat and regular, not the hand of someone whose life was in danger. Xanjal embraced me frontally, torso to torso, and said he would see me the next day. When he departed I took the opportunity to visit Enola's floor. She was waiting for me in her doorway, like a goddess in a cascade of white water, calling to me, 'Come! Come on! Come on in!'

Erasure struck, I heard her saying, 'What's the matter with you?' and the next thing I knew I was hunched up on the bed in my own room. I tried to find her again. I tried to remember what had taken place between us, if anything, in her white room. I tried the different levels and most of the doors, seeking that interior, clean and shiny and brilliant white, which had characterized her room, her appearance and her words, but it was no good.

My ceiling was flaking. The walls had been nibbled by moths, but designs could still be made out. In one of them, an official wearing a cap decorated with blue plumage was passing judgement on a bent figure. I heard noises below like those of dogs trying to scratch holes in concrete. For three days and nights a high pitched squeal issued from the glowing lake. Xanjal brought me cat chops.

'Where'd they put my pal?'

'You should have stayed where you were. Come and see me when you have eaten. I'll draw you a map.'

I gnawed through the chops and went downstairs to the edge of the lagoon. He wasn't there. I looked for him everywhere, returning to my room in between times in case he had gone there to find me. Whenever I re-entered my room I had the feeling somebody had been there during my absence. There was a smell, some animal perfume, like that of wild dogs, or tomcat, or the mustiness mice leave in the

panels, but it had something of its own about it, some fruitiness I knew from long ago. Trying to identify that odor sent me reeling. I found myself longing for an old life, roots in the clay, arms in a known air, before the struggle started and all my buddies took the wrong side. Xanjal came in. At least it seemed to be Xanjal, if it was possible that he had changed into a courtesan of the opposite sex and coloration. She had wild bright orange hair and was my size, my image exactly, same length arms. Even her way of speaking was different and yet she still seemed to be Xanjal!

‘You from rand ’ere. From th’ ’earthland?’

‘No. I am not from here, from these parts. Tomorrow. Don’t come today. Tomorrow. Come as Xanjal, tomorrow.’

She would not be deterred. She said, ‘Yes?’ She was asking me the most intimate of questions.

I said, ‘Yes, now,’ and I laid her down without knowing. Though I knew nothing about her, we understood. It happens once and you do it again like that whenever she knocks — until the day you never see each other again.

Suddenly I was happy with life in that small room. Each day was a perfect bracelet, no loose pearls. I aided and abetted. I counted. I shaved in a cracked mirror and washed my clothes in the basin. I waited for my courtesan. What was it about her? I asked myself if the courtesan was, rather, Enola, if she hadn’t changed the impression she made upon me. The courtesan had a story and her words touched me. Her parents had been miners, valley people. Their evenings had been full of suspicious silences, suspicious not of each other but of the slightest sound. Their quiet ways came from the mines, from listening for signs of an imminent collapse, from fear of causing a collapse with their sounds, or from fear of wasting oxygen below ground. Whichever the reason, fear was at the

root of it.

One day when she knocked she was carrying a bird in a cage. It was an ordinary bird, like a sparrow, not brightly colored nor possessing more than a chirp. It resembled the birds that were common enough in the suburbs during the great colonial wars, bland, of no special interest to collectors. This was such a bird as they used to take into the mines, one that would sing beautifully if the oxygen was about to run out. It was for me. She taught me their names for things. Another day she had a map of the city, drawn like the secondary maps of the geopolitical age, when the borders of areas controlled by marionette governments were shaded blue or green or orange. The areas were shaped geometrically, but not at all along geographical lines. The ground space of each building was clearly marked, not according to the foundations of the building, but according to the function of that building at the time the map was drawn. The hotel had a curved influence, the gaming houses were flame-shaped, the market areas defined by pentangles. There was a temple, a perfect circle without access.

Each day she knocked and asked me, 'Yes?' and we carried out the act, each of us thinking of another, of one other: she of her husband and I of Enola.

On the fifteenth day we rose from the bed and she guided me through the city. There were two cities, she said, contained in the same space, but she could only show me one. There was no law against looking through the cracks in the temple walls. There were centuries-old icons there, pheasants being roasted over fires of seasoned cherry wood, a priest sprinkling oregano over the flames. In another chapel I saw women crucified for having failed impossible tasks. I fell back. She laughed at that. She said that no one sees other

than what is in his or her own mind. She was so like a ghost when we went through the city together, that I asked her if she had ever been in touch with the dead. She said that death returns us to the future. We arrive every moment from the future. When we die we go there eternally. We are always “in touch” with it. As we wound back to the hotel the heads of snakes emerged from holes. She explained this was a sign that the rains were over. She said it with a terrible finality.

The odor in my room was getting stronger. It was mammalian, the thing that had been in my room. There was fur on the bedcovers. Not fur exactly, but strong black hairs, shiny and pungent. And shit in the corner. The courtesan said that it was only a species of rat, one that could detect sperm from five buildings away.

I told her about the hunters, about Galveston and Buck O’Beau. I told her newspaper reports they had died in gun battles were lies, but she already knew. She knew everything about the short-lived resistance. She reached down and flicked back my collar. The marks were clear to her.

‘You’s lucky we fuck. Them pouch-rats tooth marks. When you no fuck, you go to the Temple.’

Making love had made me immune. She took off my clothes and examined me for other marks on the thin skin around my groin and between the toes. They went for the tender bits. She said I must never stop making love or I would die.

She was standing at the end of my bed with a glass of water and a twentieth century Team MacLaren scarf around her neck. She walked towards me without spilling a drop. I took a slug and looked straight ahead, a long-tongued drunken blossoming butterfly. She took the bottle and upended it. Some spilled over her, over me. She recited psalms and

smoked dried woodborer feelers. Then we threw out the furniture, everything except the bed, plugged up the holes and went out dancing.

I was the first stranger she had known since her husband had disappeared. She told me about a road that had once led through the marble valleys to this city. There was good marble there. In those days, every family had a carver, usually the youngest child. He would begin to carve the moment the mother of the family ceased to be fertile. Traders came from all parts of the known world to admire their work. As they grew older the carvers lived in sculpted hillsides. They made small objects, too, which they exchanged with the traders for a fine material that appealed to the skin-sensitive locals. The only information the warring nations had of this place was that no person was known to travel all the way there and back. That was longer than a human life, so the fable went. Those who returned had never stood at the brink of the new infinity, and none could accurately describe the location of the now-submerged valleys and ranges.

She showed me the charred remains of a building that had housed a hundred immigrants. The fire that burned them alive was started by the son of a mayor whose bloodline went back to Ardra. The father and mother and brother of her husband had been in the fire. I told her I thought Ardra was a character in a fantasy novel.

‘You! You’s the one what you say. Ardra’s the real one.’

Boys with sticks were forking the heads of the snakes, easing them out of their holes, cutting them and roasted them. She showed me the last photo of her brother, which she had sewed into her coat lining. They cut the tendons of his neck in order to close his jaw and sewed his lips shut. He had stopped making love.

Now it seemed to me that everything that had happened, and everything she told me, were forms of what I had left behind; unless, as in the case of what I saw inside the temples, I was transforming what confronted me—the completely new—into modifications of what I had already experienced. She and I were looking across an urban gully at a building of untreated timber. The boxwood borers had feasted on it through the drought. A pair of tendrils extended from its cracked windows. They grew so quickly and so long that they crossed the gap and entered my window. We cut them into segments aiming to dry them and smoke them, but the segments developed a life of their own and dispersed, wriggling first towards the light, then falling from the window into the gully. When they hit the ground they wriggled into their holes.

It wasn't long before we felt our own building creaking, leaning, sinking. She turned to me and opened her mouth. There was something shiny in there. A filling, I thought. Or a pearl. She had prepared words she could not bring herself to say. We kissed, exchanging the jewel between our mouths.

We went to the crown of the outer hill and waited under her tree. The chemical mist was thin that night and the weak light revealed us to predators. She was waiting for a leaf to fall into her hand, some local custom, when they descended in a pack. Her hand was still outstretched when they took her. Someone struck me from behind. I woke to a distant chorus and imagined her in her husband's arms.

I returned to the city to find that her body had been laid out on top of a dry water trough, her mouth sewn shut. I would never understand who had sacrificed her, nor why. I cut a lock of her genital hair and as I returned to the place of her capture, snakes with Enola's face

appeared in their warren mouths.

Remembering what she had advised, I went to the dancing women every day to stave off death. I was never required to pay, they had been told that one with a pentangle scar on his back would come to them. There was one I liked more than the others. She had wild hair and plenty of freckles. Some of them had been abused, as you would expect in that job. Even in this city, abandoned, forgotten, there were men who resented the dancers because their love made each ambiguous person not only like a man, but like all men, as murder makes us like all animals.

On my way to the hotel, I heard songs like prayers, several songs, which sounded incompatible. The air grew heavier. Rain clouds were returning. A cordon of women passed me reciting psalms, or parts of them. Some fragments came from the dark interiors of houses of little influence, and from side-streets. Nearly everybody I saw was smoking dried feelers. The odor of love, of sperm and of woman's honey, was on the air. It seemed that everybody had been making love madly, in fear of death. I recognized the courtesan's favorite psalm, rendered incompletely by a masculine, delirious young woman who resembled Chip, the Chip I had betrayed to save my own skin. It was Chip in the face and hands if not in the hips. Others were singing abbreviated psalms, remembering only their aids for memorizing the whole piece—the rhymes, the refrains, the first and last lines which they sang incompletely or in gibberish. They joined forces with each other until there was a hubbub, a phonetic babble, an explosion of half-completed sentences loaded with personal regret. When I burst into my room I saw the fur of the mammal scurrying into a new hole in the wall. The pile of shit had returned. The door of the birdcage was open

and the bird was gone. Feathers on the floor of the cage indicated the struggle it had put up before being claimed. I stood at the window and made semaphores into space. I heard a flapping like that of a curtain in the breeze, though the window had no glass and no curtains. None of the windows in that hotel did. They had no ledges for leaning out of. Outside you only went one way, down.

I rested, waking up for short periods, but feeling sleepier all the while. Round midnight I was woken by chanting. When I climbed out of bed to look out the window I fell to the floor. Mentally I was strong, but all force had left my body. I slept again, there on the floor, only for seconds, but when I woke I was strong and fit. A procession of women was passing under the window, intoning those meaningless scraps of psalms. Covering myself, I made it to the street as the last of them was passing. I tagged along behind her and followed them into the Temple. The chanting of the corrupted phrases ceased.

Some crawled about in a kind of pit. These had forgotten the necessity of making love, for their puncture marks were festering and in some cases had blown up into pus bubbles under the skin of their necks. A body was laid upon a wooden table. A doctor performed a sterilizing procedure. The robe of the victim, a woman of fifteen years or so, was folded back and a priest inserted a needle as thin as a hair between the fifth and sixth rib on the left-hand side. The women grew delirious with craving. A curious odor rose among us, reminiscent of sweet vegetables simmering, as a spoon was brought to their lips containing a purée to which had been added cells removed from the victim's heart. They ingested the cure, and returned to their homes, to love. The difference between the Tribe and Cadeba's kind, the illness itself,

was not genetic. It had something to do with love but I was far from understanding it. I felt for the chip in my hip fat—Myra knew, but it would take generations at peace to hear her. A musician on the quay called out. Some tribal members were bringing in the hunter's headless corpse. Some gathered wood for the oven while others milked woad and safflower to make dye.

Back at the towering hut Enola was at my door. Before making love we took out the shit and cleaned the floor. It was like first love. It was as if we were conceiving one another. I was woken in her arms by that sound of snakes snapping at the air from the entrances to their warren holes. The wild-haired courtesan was lying in the street, her pubic hairs had turned white. She had been beaten to death. A fear shot through me, that hunters had penetrated the city, and a greater fear. I asked Enola, Was this place a reverse index of my own world, the one I had grown up in, the one in which I had taken the side of the lesser evil? She looked at me as if only I had the answer. I asked her whether people here knew all that they had done. Was it not possible that here one might commit an act without knowing it? If I had been the last person with the wild-haired courtesan, I was afraid that I had, without knowing it, been her aggressor.

I ran my fingers through her genital hair and took some with me. A man gesticulating slowly approached me; his signs were like the waving of giant kelp in a lazy oceanic current. Behind him was a trailer being drawn by two boys. The lips of the two boys were spread wide. Their lower teeth, what was left of them, were bared in threatening mode. They took the courtesan away.

When I burned the stray genital hairs on the periphery of

the city a field of paw-paw burst releasing seeds and perfume, an avalanche of gravel slid towards the lagoon, and two streams of a fluorescent fluid trickled from my nipples. A young man was playing nearby, tossing pebbles into the air and catching them between his knuckles. He was facing the light that emanated from above, though there was still nothing you could call a sun. I sang to him:

The man that invented the steel drill.

He added:

He thought he was mighty fine.

I picked it up:

John Henry sunk the steel fourteen feet.

Him again:

The steam drill only made nine.

It was Richie, released from his education to speak to me in the riddles: ‘We see light by inspired flame. We are burned by the flame that intimidates. If school is a prison we think like our jailers. If education is a business we shop like our teachers.’

I grabbed his hand and led him back to the city. I felt the malignancy of the street. An absence. There were no dogs or cats, no animals, no fowls to be seen. Cages were lying about, their doors hanging open, as if all the birds and marketable livestock had been killed. Some of the cages had not been

opened, but the poultry was dead inside. Had the fangs of the snakes struck? They needed blood, only a few drops, in order to reproduce. The area around the guest hut was an obituary to creation.

Frogs were overpopulating the lagoon. Outside our door it was slippery and, beyond the shadows, pitch dark. We had to be careful. Enola had been expecting us. She and Richie gave no sign of affection or of happiness. They were solemnly reunited.

We waited for Xanjai to lead us to safety.

Through a crack in the bamboo we watched the humiliation of the hunter's corpse carried out by the most humiliated people of all. They held up bits of flesh saying, 'Not to be him, but to have his body,' before taking a bite. There was further dancing, and time-keeping, in the ancient manner. Some were aphasiac, and happy enough with it. Some had been so badly damaged they looked as if they were searching for the subject of an earlier search. Only one or two were truly conscious, then he, or she, would lose vitality as another gained it. They appeared to be losing intelligence and regaining it by turns.

The notebook in my room had been replaced by three books. One was written in a mathematical language which I understood a little of. The other two used Enola's language. They were a book of the past and a book of the future. Both were prefaced with the same words: *Be ignorant of all*.

The book of the past told of extinct civilizations. The book of the future told of a negative paradise, a place where all was provided, even a natural death.

Richie began to translate the book of mathematical symbols. It was a form of hieroglyphy which he understood now. Its subject was perfectly suited to algebraic equations.

The Tribe has no genealogical parents, only one parent. Any one of them can give birth, but it occurs days after a form of psychic communication that triggers parthenogenesis. The Tribe makes no concession for its many varieties of sexes, and they have sex of all kinds every day—this appears to be requisite to their survival, to exercise the preferences that shape their genitals. They are not monogamous, but are fiercely loyal to those they communicate with. They possess a sexuality capable of regeneration in one or the other. They are members of man's family and the future of humanity, most human in this respect—they cannot endure imprisonment. It is not an act of will, but a physiological reaction.

He began singing to himself:

*The man that invented the steel drill
He thought he was mighty fine
John Henry sunk the steel fourteen feet
The steam drill only made nine*

But this was not the Richie of before. He was one of the Tribe. He used the sinuses as they did when they sang, and the sound coming from his mouth was thin, futile. I was happy for him, but he had lost all hope. It seemed that mushrooms were shriveling in his eyes:

*New York ore sweet and dir-ty
Gone for Coke at B and thir-ty*

A butterfly flew into the hut, orange with black markings, tendrils trailing from the wings. Richie was not surprised, as if its arrival was a confirmation of his destiny. It landed on

Enola's *mons venus*. This too seemed already-written. I dared not shoo it away. Its abdomen throbbed and enlarged as it folded back its wings.

We heard the ringing of circling bells and a propeller overhead. We crouched down. A shadow covered the village, troubling us as that of a helicopter or a huge hawk would. Rain-clouds and thunder cracked without lightning. The butterfly flew to an altar-stone in the corner and laid its eggs on it. When they hatched, a celebration of strawberry fragrance filled the air and the flock of new-born butterflies flew around inside the hut. Richie grabbed the mother butterfly. He raised it to his lips and though we both called to him not to, he closed his teeth on it, swallowing its juices, some of which spilled over his lips, coloring his chin purple.

An unhurrying shadow descended over him, possessing him. The baby butterflies brushed his cheeks, busying themselves about him like violet cherubs. Richie stammered a few chain-gang refrains but his heart wasn't in it. He cursed in Chadic, or some acquisition of his education, and died before our eyes. A flame with no apparent source, one that resembled the vertical eye between Enola's legs, glowed yellow, green and blue, enveloped the butterflies and created an aurora about his head. The light was all but gone. It was over. Race is cultural. Rain was falling, soft, unhealing.

Feeling less human than bird-mammalian, sex was the purest form of expressing our grief. Enola's skin was warm at the base of the feathers. The stems had tiny insects on them. I fed on them, spilling drops of a white liquid, gazing through the thickets of bone. As she reached extremis I read her dreams in her eyes. She was deserting me for one out of reach, one who is born and dies and is reborn in the ancestry

of the dual ego. The wings of her savior joy were unfolding inside her and she was reborn, white, male. From her open mouth a boom, the signal of a ship across the night, seeking return signals. She spread out her body, stretching her arms wide, smiling. The music of rain returning, light but steady. The gutters were filling. In a bowl on the verandah fourteen male frogs tried to possess a female who died under their attentions. Thirteen of them went to seek another living female in the lagoon. The fourteenth kept trying. On the roof of a hut below our level, a toad climbed out of a dead possum's pouch. There was a weight upon my chest. In a moment of panic I no longer resembled me but she was her former self, the physical Enola I had first-loved. In our arms two entities were dueling, ghosts wrestling with premonitions—the potential of man and woman wrestling against annihilation.

Enola sang weakly,

*The man that invented the steel drill
He thought he was mighty fine.*

Her boy had denied existence. I wasn't much better in the body or the mind. My knees and joints and back were aching. I was feeling more and more like a chunk of butcher's meat in decay suspension. The past was paying me out in sticky moments. An ox was pulling the corpuscle trolleys along my blood lanes in a sluggish mood. I was afraid that there was such a thing as destiny, biological, genetic. I was afraid we had been written into a life plot before our brains started growing. We lay together, the doubts again dissolved in love, vital juices flowed and our force returned. As we drew apart our skin developed the odoriferous protection of miniscule honey drops.

Consciousness returned violently. For a few minutes all was dark red. Was the universe giving us birth or coming in blood? The bamboo cracked. My bones cracked as I moved to the bowl for water. It was full of tadpoles. I felt my way to the window and waited for the feeble light to thaw my congealed lachrymae. Outside the rain was off. The streets were again full of dust. My tears were jewel hard. I couldn't scrape them off. That fear of not knowing your body any longer. You touch parts you believed to be yours and find them severed from your nervous system, from circulation, from cellular regeneration. They stick. You dislodge them. They come away, they fall. You touch other parts of your body, they remain yours. The pile of shit had grown, doubled, mounds of other creatures were there, of two other creatures. Birds? Mammals? Who were we? What were we?

A lemon glow chased the rosé tint from the sky. Some suspended vapors thickened directly above us and a great purple bruise diffused over Richie's face. The swamp between floating scum-islands had become smooth and green as polished jade. A raft meandered towards us, carrying a second hunter. He was staring into the forest, clicking an empty tranquilizer gun at his hallucinations. Crusted and slimy and delirious, the sight of him sent a murmur of delight through the village. Soon all were hailing the unappetizing fool and drooling as he drifted ever closer, though epidermal slime was dripping onto the boards, and his lips had all but wasted away. His raft came close enough for the hunter to be received and led to his death. Xanjäl seized the chance. He came to our hut, carrying his own doctor's bag. He had learned from his father some of the principles of medicine,

and some knowledge of the plants of the forest. His eyelids were purple with insomnia, 'I know the future. My father has told me. My people are going to carry it through. The enemy is nearly upon us with their cages.'

There is a moment when your knowledge is simply true, beyond the reach of fear or disappointment.

A silence fell among the crowd below. Xanjal's father cut a vein in the inverted hunter's neck and the blood was collected. Xanjal took my hand and insisted, 'Now. We have to go now.'

The air became a penetrable mustard-gas mist as we followed him away from the sacrifice scene through the gambling quarter. As we neared those forbidding mountains the streets were creeping all the more with those who would soon be dispossessed even of this dream-reality. Boys no longer signaled to red-light rooms. Courtesans gazed in their hand-mirrors, wanting to look their best for the showdown. The gaming tables here were already deserted. I spied a temple surgeon in a corner. He was saying there would be no business, as if that was the worst consequence of the looming catastrophe. I couldn't get any sense out of anyone. Due to some reversal the words that had made me comprehensible before, now caused looks of interrogation and incomprehension. A boy-whore addressed us: 'You wantin?'

Xanjal spoke: 'We're wanting for Archaea.'

The marble valleys were no longer accessible, and plenty of villages had been destroyed in the Flood, but Archaea existed for them, if only in their imagination. Archaea was the sacred hill. Some said the holy types there entered each other in an eternal circle.

'Love me? Do weird act?'

'No. Archaea.'

Archaea wasn't in his repertoire. Stalactites, decorated, delicate flutings, were snapping from the eaves of the temples. They must have had some sweet flavor as mothers gave them to their babies to suck on. A thaw was underway. A crowd of ragged children was soon delirious and violent with sugar and salt poisoning. We continued towards the mountains. Legend had it they were unassailable.

We turned into a hangout where fish was smoking above a freestanding earth-fire, ordered chewing tobacco and threw back raw liquor. The kids were crying out and their games in the street were becoming violent. The owner shoed them away from the door, saying 'It's a-happen every saiz'n.' Out the back was a three-sided lean-to with a crowded gaming table beside a fire pit where black kettle coffee was brewing. Xanjal moved like a shadow from table to table, seeking guidance among the ones known as leperos. Enola took a seat near the gaming table. I went for the coffee. Tips of thorns were visible in the hair follicles on the backs of the barman's fingers — green, poison-tipped thorns. He passed me two dishes, one of sweet pickled lagoon cockles, the other red-gilled mushrooms.

'You not like boys?'

'Had my share when they were illegal.'

He flipped two dice on the bar and looked at me inquiringly. When I hesitated those thorn-tips pricked further out, but when I nodded they retracted. The dice came up three and four. I scooped them up and threw again. They were fair.

Three cups of coffee boiled beyond chemical definition and a grand loser who had been betting with phials of opiates threw in his chips. Opium had a value higher than money in those parts. Pain relief in any other form had no effect. Losing was like winning for him. He was dressed in a suit, the

kind gamblers used to wear in the century of drive-ins. He stood with a dignified beaten air and left for the showdown. He was loaded. Escorted by his bodyguard, he would die holding all the jewels that he possessed. Most of the gamblers had them, bodyguards, armed with pump action shotguns.

The gambling table was oval. Its basalt top was walled with segmented blocks of painted aluminum. The game depended on the fall of metallic leaves of different colors and sizes. A master of ceremonies placed the leaves into an earthenware bowl, which he rotated in a circular wooden frame. He slid away the lower panel of the cubic frame and the bowl opened in four segments like the quarters of an orange, causing the arrows to fall out. You placed your bet on which aluminum block the majority of the darts would be facing. The only forces that should have been acting on them were either shifting ones created by the intense activity in the core of Archaea, or weak ones set in the aluminum blocks, but the needle of the bar clock slowed sometimes when the darts were released, and on these occasions the house always won. The master was activating his own magnets under the surface of the table.

If the bar clock didn't slow, unpredictable electromagnetic oscillations taking place at any moment in the core of the mountains determined the spread of the darts and I concentrated on these. When Chip and I were at techschool we used to sit on the roof of the college gymnasium and get high on the microwaves blasting from the transmission towers. If you concentrated hard, you could hear the music of your own neurons bubbling. I took note of the relationship between this music and the fall of the darts, losing all the time, then bet all I had left against the house as if I was

through for the day. The master was so sure I would lose, his hand never went near his secret button. He paid out, but slowly, with funereal respect you might say. There were shouts in the streets that the time had come. Even the hardened gamblers prepared themselves to go out and face Cadeba's army. Some took things that were precious to them. Some went with nothing.

Xanjal, meanwhile, had found us a guide who would show us the correct path among hundreds that zigzagged the bottom of the mountains. Villagers were descending. It seemed that every woman was carrying a baby and every girl-child looked pregnant. Our guide hailed the cousin of his father, an old rope weaver with knobby hands.

'How's the urine?'

'The color of straw.'

'And the gut?'

'Well-cured, uncle!'

This was their traditional greeting. Failure to give it invited *destrudo*. 'Cured' meant not 'healed medically' but 'hard and resistant like leather'. He used to sell rope to inner-city families needing to tow their aged ones if they lost the use of their limbs.

'How is dad?'

'Defiant of the three-toothed skull.'

'And our mother of the gas inhalation?'

'Polishing stones.'

'Your daughter, the one they call Mirage?'

'Still not an Emp's concubine.'

It was routine to run through all members of the family, though it was impossible for me to know which members actually existed and which names were symbolic of the departed, of a hope, a task, or an aspiration. The guide ges-

tured to give the old man some money, which we did though I couldn't see any point in it. He accepted it as a defining gesture, the perfect conclusion to his life. He placed it first on the palm of the hand and then on the knobbly reverse, saying some phrases before feeling for his jugular and placing the bill flat against his neck. It remained there under a twined hemp necklace. The noun for money in their language was a homophone for the verb 'to honor'. He handled it as if it possessed a terrible power.

At the last roadside icon before the treacherous mountain climb a cripple rolled his trolley aside for us to pass. She did this with great respect, and with the same funereal slowness the master of the gambling table had displayed. She was sure none of us would be living at the end of the day.

I hoped she was not right.

Xanjal gave us strap-on teeth for our shoes and veils for our faces made from thin but durable green vellum. The spikes of our crampons were curved and V-shaped, like shark's teeth, whereas those of the guide were needle-thin because of his different way of walking.

'I go back. No further. You?'

Xanjal pointed to the top of the cone. 'You take us up there... over the rim.'

'No one return from there. Goodbye. I thank you.'

He was looking at us as if 'Thank you' had another meaning. We had forgotten something, the only thing with meaning at that moment. He could ask us for money for another, for his uncle or his father, but never for himself. Even though this the bills no longer had any monetary value for us nor for him, I became aware just in time that if I didn't reach into my sack myself and give it to him, he would kill us before

being reduced to asking for it.

His spikes retracted and he clutched the money in his hands. He told us again that if we went ahead, we would die a dishonorable death. Only the dead were brought there, the ones who had died by accident or illness before their thousand moons were up. Their bodies were slipped over the rim of Archaea. He urged us again to return with him and to die with dignity. He nevertheless made us the gesture of amity, his fist closed across his chest and we watched him return to the city, disappointed for us.

We hit the scoria and were soon on the major ascent up the steepest slope towards the place of those who died before their time — Archaea “the beautiful”. The light grew stronger as we rose, and the temperatures were rising too. As soon as crumbled lava had given way to bright-hued sand, we removed the crampons and left most of our protective clothing behind us. Xanjal moved effortlessly before Enola and me but I was finding every step difficult. My lungs were heaving and I was about to abandon my pack when Xanjal stopped at a lookout ledge and signaled to the valley below.

A glitter of headlights was snaking down the slopes of the far-off mountains. ‘Mankind’ had begun to penetrate the forest on foot. They would have all that was necessary to capture their non-people: tranquilizer guns, rope, chains, and money to bribe the disloyal. They had all that and more, and none of it would be of any use. The Tribe, by now, was also on the move, not away from their hunters, but towards them. There would be no five per cent. To the last man, woman and child the Tribe would die honorably. Some of them were aware that this would deny their enemies life. A few, very few, understood that all of their enemies kind would vanish as the dinosaurs and millions of less noticeable

species had already done.

The vast forests below the approaching hordes were now glimmering with serpentine river-courses and lagoons swollen like glands with the rains, set alight by the Tribe. They were carrying their own flames through the forest so the entire valley seemed to be aflame and to mock the single snaking line of torches that defined Cadeba's forces. The two armies would meet at dawn on a burned-off plain where hunted would confront hunter and fall out of range.

There was no climbing higher. Xanjal took us into the earth, using light-emitting crystals as lamps. There were streams and paths in every direction and sporadically the earth shook.

In a wide area moistened by slow dripping helictites, we came upon signs of other human travelers. Fires had been lit there, there were fish bones, some tools rusted beyond definition, and skeletal arms and legs projecting from the dense clay. Xanjal knew immediately who they were: 'The seven who fled. It's the family of the surgeon who trained my father. This one here, I would know his skull from any other.'

The thorny discarded skins of Jurassic worms lay about, roots of former trees ran among aragonite formations, thongs descended into the underground, desiccated, instructed, seeking. Xanjal put his finger to his lips and we followed one of the roots. It led us into a high-vaulted cavity containing a little spring. The water flowed into a tiny pool, which in turn overflowed silently down miniature pink terraces and away to other inaccessible vaults. Xanjal pointed to the ground which was littered with long needles, and then he pointed up: long sharp angel-hair crystals were hanging from the roof of the cavity, so fine, a breath of air might have broken them. One sneeze and a shower of them would have

rained. We drank noiselessly and returned to the subterranean tunnels.

Xanjal's crystals had lost their luminescence but another faint light was glimmering from above. The rising sun that morning, and perhaps only that morning because of the tilt of the planet and other factors, had betrayed a portal in the rock. The hole was out of sight but its reflected light led us to it. A plaited vine rope descended a few meters to us. I went up first and the others followed. We emerged at the top of the mountain.

Before descending to our own future, we watched the scene below, smaller than before, and less dramatic in the daylight than the torches and burning lagoons had appeared the previous night, but many times more terrible. How long did we stand there? If life is a dream, as some believe, these moments of our escape were a common waking for thousands. We felt it and knew it had been true. There had been a battle. The Tribe had stood solemnly and fallen into the mud, adopting as they did so, a characteristic curled-up-in-death posture. They fell in ones, in twos and in groups, until there were only a few on their feet, out of range of the tranquilizer guns of their ailing foes. Even the great Cadeba was there, leaning on his stick, cursing the Tribe, cursing his imminent death. The chiefs had fallen. The musicians. Our guide had fallen. The gambler with the dignified, beaten air. The barman. The temple surgeons. The mothers. And by immediate thought transference, the children. Soon those who had unconsciously held on the longest let go of their faith in existence. The Tribe had died, and their death was that of their enemies. A cry rose in my throat and died in a tight grasp, as if hands were strangling me.

We descended into the future. Forms had been twisted

beyond function. Wheels were no longer round. Everything had lost its desired line, function and attributes. We picked our way among reflecting vitrified puddles. We dared not test our weight upon any of them.

If we had met anyone, I would have asked what year it was, who was governing? How were people managing? But there was no one, no survivor of any of the sub-sects, no hunters, no figment from the past. I understood that the universe is something that does not exist unless it is seen. It is as it is witnessed. It existed still, seen and heard and felt, by life, by our lives.

The madscape of ever-widening lakes terminated in a distinct line, like a shelf, middle blue met dark green due to a gigantic shadow. When we crossed the line there was a flash, and the feeling that we were travelling, not upwards as in a tornado, nor across land and lake as in a hurricane, not backwards into the past, but backwards nevertheless, physically, as if we were being sucked into the empty veins of conceivable existence. And this, that restraint was to rule us, fire after fire.

At the top and the bottom the ice caps had melted, but this place, independently of geology, this vineyard of light, was a means beyond creation. It lay open, a page from a madman's dreamery, which we could not have deduced from experience nor training nor by diagnosis nor reasoning — this page was the first.

Far out beyond the breakwaters and striated divisions, a true ocean differentiated itself from the heat mirages. This was the beginning, the primal wound.

Kestrels that seemed to be testing their wings for the first time circled above us and some even dared, in the immunity

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of their numbers, to swoop towards us.

We had arrived at the site of the first settlement. I, who could only die from illness or old age, took the hands of Xanjal and Enola, who could only die from enslavement.

Xanjal opened the doctor's bag and sorted through the phials. There was anaesthetic there, and antibiotics. His hand was sure. Within a few minutes the bullet-tip was on the stone.

In a derelict tower overlooking the port we burned the chip into the brain of an abandoned console, and Myra spoke to us for the first time if not the last:

No civilization, not the factory system, not the inventor of the mag-neto line, the finished Ford, the Nickelodeon, not the lady with the first laptop, no invention or edifice is greater than the spindle and the spindle is less than the moment of its dreaming.

Those who would cage us advance towards their finite. There is an edge to their plane, a wall to their prison.

Seeing in space, in consecutive time, though they see with all care, they see and they are blind.

No place exists as it existed when you left it, no place except the beginning of time. At the beginning of time there is beauty without brutality. There is future without end, because this time is an eternal beginning.

As a road can end at an expanse of desert or of ocean, we have to arrive.

The poor imagine wealth, the abused, virginity or revenge. Deprived of significance, they invent a second significance which is the source

of their pain, at the source of their old pain and the source of their new. Though they defend it through violence, though they disperse the fortunes of the great families, though they win wars to end all wars, their ideas germinate on the grounds of misfortune.

Let us learn, science from the musician, the economist from the poem. Take each route to its conclusion, know as much as you care to know, do not scorn knowledge, but honor only unknowing.

We will be nomads, believing in what we can not know, never pitching camp in the same place twice.

There are those who plant, never tasting the fruit. So shall it be.

We walked down to the shore, where Enola drew a circle in the air saying, 'We are the last. The journey is over. We are the original eternal, the last of a fragile strength, let us die in manifold oneness.'

As if walls had closed around her, the color drained from her cheeks and she fell. We rubbed her and implored her but her eyes had lost their fire and her skin was growing colder. The life actually passed out of her, I believe, but Xanjal forced her heart to recommence by quickly compressing her rib cage, reminding the heart of its function. Or did she find the will to live?

When she regained consciousness — or was it volition? — it was night.

*There is captivity ahead
the more terrible for our belief
we can escape it*

I have not died because of you

Though her words were warming a dry cold overtook us. There were no materials with which to make a fire so we huddled together, staring out over Flood waiting for dawn. Which way should we go? The faintest of new moons illuminated the wider terrain. A few stars were glistening vainly. The sands themselves began to blink with pin-points of light. Xanjel knew of these creatures. The sparkles were phosphorescent beacons of slubworms poking their tails out of the sand to attract miniscule insects. There were pairs of them, always two slubworms, one poking its tail in the air, the other ready to strike with its long sticky proboscis.

A brushing sound grew louder. It circled, echoed about us and dissipated: a mating group of giant moths rebuffering, shoving, revolving in flight. A single cry was answered by another from the opposite end of the bay. The silence after that was rich and deep. It was like the silence of a river, of an enormous volume flowing swiftly but smoothly. It was the sound of order re-establishing itself after inundation. This sound dissolved into a second one ahead of us, which grew louder as the light developed. This was fierce, like the sound of fire, and inseparable from color: metallic blue like the heart of flame and thereafter orange-red. A wave of heat threw us back upon the sand. We were tumbling backwards, away from Flood, tossed away by the force of this light, not sunlight, but a heavy, nullifying, stupefying light, dense with humid sweetness and rich with putrefaction yet ultimately sterile as flame, as the metal of the old cars. Enola resisted. She offered us her hands. Her defiance instilled confidence

in ourselves and confidence gave us strength. We were no longer reeling backwards, lifeless as leaves in a gale; we were facing the sound, the heat, the stench, the fire. We were moving into it. No sooner had we begun to move than the repulsive light snuffed out, and we sensed the fathomless depth one feels in absolute darkness. It was no easier to move forward than before, but our objective no longer repelled us. Was this the future then? In this medium neither hot nor cold, medium exactly the temperature of our blood, nothing was familiar. If form was the facade, this was the amorphous interior, a sense of female enveloping, of male competitiveness, and of adolescent trouble, a combination of positive, negative and inheritance or the exact opposite of inheritance, inherency.

Nothing was as before. Nothing. We heard speech acts of a complex language. We saw, a way off, a wild center, a hub configuration contaminated with a milky hue. Shapes melted into one another with the agility and speed of mental images. Turns of speech could be made out from the language of Cadeba and the language of the Tribe. They had lost their literal meanings but were spoken in such a way as to suggest new short-lived meanings. If these meanings were valid, they were increasingly difficult to communicate. More languages, those of ghettos and of the street, of the suburbs and of peoples set apart, flitted and swarmed and were expropriated by those who would exploit them, so that each language required all the more the voice of one who would not only not exploit them, but of one whose arrangement of these words, old and new, would stimulate and liberate them — the voice of the poet.

Enola could no longer be ill. Her heart was strong, and her poetry was rising. I craved the mind that would explain her to me, that would enable me, however briefly, to distinguish the elements of our story, even if such ability entailed my extinction as the being known as Brakeman.

Though we were not yet out of the past, there was only forwards now for us. We heard a new sound, a note long and shrill like the cry of a bird or beast of prey, but the creature was not hunting — this was the cry of that creature trapped! We pushed our fingers out from our bodies. They extended from the ideas of our selves into new reality, coming up against a glass wall. The medium on our side of this wall, created by the compression of the melt, gave. We were breathing it, our rib-cages expanding and contracting, obliging us to ingest an igneous soup and to expel it from our lungs, which filtered out the elements compatible with our beings. There was a series of explosions and the air became thin and manageable. The fluid trickling down our legs was hardening quickly. We had to pick it off or we would have been encased, fossilized in our own magma.

The cry of the ensnared predator increased in volume. The barrier, the border with the recent past, was dissolving. Stasis was behind. The cry of the predator ceased and a similar wail erupted from our mouths, from within. Our voices had been released. We were screaming, the three of us, releasing our fear, our disgust, our satisfaction and our belief: we can escape it. Our tears turned to crystal and the glass-like wall at the end of our fingers cracked. The present no longer existed. A fissure resplendent with a grand-scale aurora concluded in absolute movement.

There was a flash of sun off metal, bright, the sensation of a tongue touching steel, light as sound. Salts separated out within us. Flavors returned, and when we embraced we tasted each other through the skin — compounds silicate, metallic, in the field of an attraction magnetic, polar. Earth had found north.

We were again but as never before, the living part of the universe, carbon and oxygen and hydrogen and all elements, but—once again and for the first time—realizations of life in a delicious putrefaction, a concretion at once celestial, luminescent and desirous, maculate. We were triplets, and opponents, orbiting with millions of uncollected, dispensable, proud and dependent molecules in spectral ellipses.

I found the others beautiful, as they did me. We found ourselves — accepted and accepting. We did not try to comprehend it, we felt it without defining its proportions.

Time had lost its dependence on consecution. Moments were no longer brief, elongated nor elastic. No passage of time, not even those measurable by the sun and moon, the rise and fall of objects, and the operations of the body, endured. Moment had become severed from space. An enormous sheet, translucent and flexible, and itself a medium to be penetrated not by perception, but by penetrating beings, spread before us.

Space remained contiguous in the way that a polygon with transmuting contours and varying numbers of sides remains contiguous. We were the idea of a poem governing the episodes that would lead to its creation.

Seed-heads of light from a new-born aurora passed in clouds overhead staining the ether. Needling isometric gradations had turned all straight lines into snaking bands. More tremors came and went as if the earth itself were experiencing pleasure at the conclusion of subterranean anxiety. Our progress had been linear. We knew more than before. Our moment would know no end. We would bear a power that would inspire no enemy, a people who need never fear capture.

BRAKEMAN—END OF THE PRESENT

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