



Dreams that Burn in the Night

"[Strete] can construct a universe within the skull
to rival the real." — Jorge Luis Borges

CRAIG STRETE



Doubleday Science Fiction

DREAMS THAT BURN IN THE NIGHT

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CONTENTS

Secret of the White-Head Hawk
Dancing the Dead Safe into Their Beads
Love Life of the Leglorn
Mother of Cloth, Heart of Clock
I'm a Spy in the House of Love
Menstruation Taboos: A Women's Studies Perspective *{with Jim Morrison}*
Love Affair
Last Wish Fulfillment and Testament
Into Every Rain a Little Life Must Fall
Gods Who Could Not Stay
Closely Watched Urinals
A Wounded Knee Fairy Tale
We Are the People Our Parents Warned Us About
Three Dream Woman *{with Michael Bishop}*
A Sunday Visit with Great-grandfather
Sleep Is the Only Freedom
Report on the Recent Outbreak of Entertainment from Earth
Red Beauty
On the Way Home
White Brothers from the Place Where No Man Walks
We All Lived in the Warm Aquarium
Nocka-Nocka and the Dirty Old Man
The Night Xenex Sanurian Took a Wallflower to the Prom
The Second Team

SECRET OF THE WHITE-HEAD HAWK

1

He moved like a secret no man would ever know. His steps were quick and light as he moved down the mountain. He was sure of foot as if he had spent a lifetime running. He had the frost of winter in his long unbraided hair and the slowness of cooling ashes in his blood. His skin was dry and wrinkled from a lifetime spent in the sun. The old men in the village did not know where he came from.

One day he was there, like a sudden summer storm, standing under the meat-drying racks, silent, mysterious, his burning eyes like two soaring hawks as he watched the children at play. Old Bear went up to him, words of welcome on his tongue but a great feeling of disquiet in his heart.

"Who are you? How do you come to be here?" But the old one did not speak, gave no indication that he even heard. He turned abruptly and walked back up the mountain. The old one gave no answers to the questions shouted at his back.

Old Bear felt a coldness in his stomach, as if the breath of a demon had passed across his body.

The old one came back again and again.

He spoke to no man, this strange one who watched the children at play. The old chiefs spoke of him, and they were frightened of this old one who would not speak and whose purpose was unknown.

"He is demon-touched," said Domea the shaman. "I feel it in the crackling of my bones. He is here for a secret that is deep within his heart. It is not good. It is well to fear him. Perhaps it would be wise to drive him away from the camp. But then, the world is touched by wind from all directions. One cannot know all. His coming may be an omen of good. We must not act before we know the weather, bad or good."

"He is a spy sent by our enemies," said Rainmaker. "He counts our bodies, our women, and weapons. Our enemies sent him. We should capture him and make him tell us what he knows."

"A spy would not stand in plain sight," reasoned Domea. "Instead of that, I think there is something of another world in him. Can you not see it in the way he moves? His body shows him to be of great age, yet he moves like a young deer. He belongs to a bigger world. Let us wait and see. He dances outside in his own dark night, but we shall see his fire in time if we but wait."

Rainmaker stood up by the council fire, his face red in the dancing light. "He seems evil to me. We should drive him away before he does us harm."

Old Bear also stood by the fire, but his face was in shadow, smoke rising toward him in the chill night wind. "Let us ask him to eat with us, to sit by us and tell us of the thing that is inside him. If he is not human, we will drive him away."

Rainmaker held his hands out, palms down. "Better we should kill him and be done with it. I say he is a Dark Walker. He is kin with the eaters of souls. Let his name be lost to the world. Destroy him."

There was a shout in the darkness, the sound of people scurrying hurriedly to one side, breaking the great circle around the fire. A figure dressed in dark skins moved slowly toward the center of the fire. It was the old one. In his arms were branches and dried bark. He moved to the fire.

With great fear, those sitting around the fire gave way, moving back into the darkness.

The old one looked neither to the left nor right, standing at the edge of the great council fire. His eyes had been closed, but he opened them now and stared deep into the great fire. Slowly,

he bent to his knees and carefully put the wood and bark into the fire. The flames crackled and popped, rising red with new heat and flame into the night sky.

Great was the fear that ran through the people. Children hid behind their fathers and mothers, and knives and spears were held tightly by warriors ready to attack.

In the sudden flare of firelight, the old one stood plainly revealed to the people. His face was painted with their clan sign. He said no word, stood up, putting his hands out toward the fire. He bent so close to the fire he seemed almost to be in it.

The strange one turned slowly, his arms outstretched before him, as if reaching out to the people. In sign language he made the words for "Great Spirit Bless You," his hands moving like great talking birds.

The flames shot high into the night sky.

Then, as silently as he had come, he dropped his arms and walked back through the broken council circle and disappeared into the mountains from which he had come.

The people wrapped their robes about them and muttered to each other, whispering about this thing of great strangeness that had been visited upon them. No one could tell if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

The mystery grew with each passing day.

The old one came again and again.

Each time it was the same. He stood somewhere quietly in the shadows, watching the children of the village at play. It frightened the mothers of the village. It scared the children too. They felt sometimes like field mice with a large owl in the sky above them.

And as the mystery grew with each passing day, so did the fear grow in the people's hearts until there were many who would kill the old one. On the day they decided this thing, chose that this strange one must die, the old one came down out of the mountains dressed not in the rough skins, torn and dirtied, that he had always worn, but in a much faded robe of their clan.

Old Bear went up to the strange one again. "Who are you, old one? Why do you come among us, dressed in the robes of our clan?" He felt the need to ask because he had been chosen by the people to kill the old man and the task did not rest easy with his heart.

The aged one from the mountains looked into the eyes of Old Bear. His voice was thick and uneasy upon his tongue, as if he had slept a long time.

"You ask my name? It has been long, long since I have used it. So long since I have spoken to other beings of blood and skin. I once lived in your world, and I was then called Long Deer."

"Hai!"

Old Bear stepped back, fear like a cold knife against his throat. "Long Deer was from this village! There was a child of that name. We played together as children in the days long gone by. But Long Deer was taken as a child from this place by a demon! Are you a demon, old one?"

The old one's eyes seemed to burn like the sun, bright enough to see the whole world. The words came slowly, uneasily, as if each word had to be frightened into coming out. "I was touched by demons. The demons that touch all men in their deeds and their sleep. But I am no demon. Do not be afraid of me." "You are strange to us, and we fear what is strange." "And so they choose you to kill me. That is why you speak to me this time with a meaning different from the last time you spoke. I know this to be true, but you must not fear me. The purpose in my heart will harm no one who fears me or any that could love me."

Domea the shaman came then, wrapped in his robes of magic, carrying a spirit bundle to ward off evil. Rainmaker came behind him, carrying a spear in one hand. Fear was a war mask on his face. They had heard the strange one's first spoken words, and now they came closer that they might hear more.

Domea came closest, feeling safe, protected by his own magic. Rainmaker stayed at what he thought was a safe distance, a few careful steps beyond immediate treachery.

The shaman stared at the old one's robe, much faded, tracing the old clan signs with his sharp

eyes.

"You are of our people. That is the message of the wood you brought to our council fire?" The strange one did not answer.

The shaman said, "First you come painted in the way of our people, then clothed in a robe of our clan. We see signs that you are of our people, but we do not recognize you. You are a stranger with some secret purpose, yet you do these things. Why? What is in your heart?"

The strange one smiled, like a cougar showing its teeth to an enemy. "I am one with you. But I do not walk your paths through this world. My heart belongs to this clan, and I make it known only because your fear makes you want to kill me."

Rainmaker held his spear tightly, fear and surprise in the dark planes of his face. "He knows what we think," he whispered. He turned the spear so that the stone blade faced the strange one. He was a brave man, but the demons could not be killed and his terror of them made him a child.

Domea shook his head slowly. "It is a thing beyond my understanding. I would learn more."

But Rainmaker pressed forward, spear upraised.

"Kill him!" he cried and lunged forward.

Domea whirled around as Rainmaker attacked. His hands came down hard across the front of the spear, knocking it down toward the ground. The stone blade bit deep into the earth and Rainmaker, taken completely by surprise, tripped and fell heavily to the ground.

With a curse, Rainmaker tried to rise, raising his spear again, aiming it at the old one.

Domea put his foot on Rainmaker's shoulder, forcing him back to the ground. Rainmaker struggled to rise.

"Fool! Old woman!" said Domea, his face dark with anger. "Is killing the only thought you have? You must let us learn what we can. To fight blindly in the dark is a sickness that takes the heart out of a man."

Rainmaker stopped struggling. "Let me up." His face was still flushed with war madness. In his mind was only fear and killing.

"Let him go," said the strange one. "He is fighting to be brave against what he does not know. It is not wisdom, but it is what he knows."

Old Bear knew Rainmaker well. "If the shaman releases him, he will attack again."

"Let him go," said the old one again. He smiled and it was a smile as cold as the icy heart of winter.

Domea regarded the old one thoughtfully. He drew back his foot, and with a shrill cry Rainmaker leaped to his feet, the blood still hot in his face and warrior's heart.

The old one stood calmly in the sun as Rainmaker thrust the spear at his heart. Old Bear and Domea looked on, expecting to see the old one killed at their feet.

Rainmaker keened the war cry. He charged at the old one.

The point of the spear thrust against the old one's chest. The old man did not seem to notice it. As swift as a diving hawk, the old one's hand flashed through the air. It caught the spearhead as it hit his flesh and, with one violent yank, broke it from the wooden shaft. Nothing on earth moved as fast as the old one's hand. Rainmaker collided with the old man, carried into him with the force of his charge. The strange one was like an old tree so strong even the wind could not move it. Rainmaker fell to the ground, the broken spear falling across his chest.

The war anger in Rainmaker was gone. Only fear, stark and terrible, remained. He cowered at the strange one's feet like a dog too long without a bone.

Old Bear looked deep into the face of the old one. His dim eyes probed the lines and seams of the old one's face. He tried to see someone he knew of old, but time had traveled many miles across the old one's face.

The strange one looked at Old Bear, Rainmaker forgotten at his feet. He said, "You know me

of old. As children, Old Bear, we ran through many summers together. You must look deep in my eyes and you will see it is true." He watched Old Bear's face, as old as his own.

"Yes, it is so. I see that child of summers long ago. You are Long Deer. The old man now who was once that child I knew. You are Long Deer. But were you not taken by demons?"

Old Bear backed farther away. He had seen the eagle swiftness of hand, the great-bear strength in the old one's hand that had caught and snapped a spear like a little twig. These were strengths and powers not of the world of men. The cold ache of fear was tight in the muscles of his face and the hollow of his stomach. His legs wanted to turn and run.

"You need not fear me. I can hurt no one," said the old one. "Are you a demon? Do you breathe? Do you sleep? I am afraid of you, old with the name and aged face of one who went away with the dark ones of the mountains. Your words do not ease my heart," said Old Bear.

"Why are you here, aged one? What do you seek?" asked Domea, huddled deep within the protective folds of his medicine robe. The shaman turned his head slowly from side to side, listening for the sound of dark things, creatures of the night, but he heard nothing, felt nothing rustling with dirty noises in the world around him. There was only the old one, who smelled strongly of evil but felt none of the toundi that bespoke its presence.

Evil never comes with great silence.

The old one sighed and shook his head. A sad smile appeared, and it was full of black meaning. It was the smile of lizards watching with hidden eyes in the rocks below the graves of the dead. Old Bear pulled his robe tight around his shoulders, feeling the cold season in that smile, and he turned and hurried away. In that smile was more than he wanted to know.

The shaman made Rainmaker get up. Rainmaker had lain upon the ground as a small child crouches, expecting to be hit by a punishment stick. Rainmaker kept his face turned from the eyes of the old one. He felt shamed, dishonored. The old one had bested him as a buffalo scares a rabbit by his rear step.

"Why are you here?" said the shaman. Rainmaker got up slowly, shame bowing his shoulders with a great weight. He turned his back on them and walked back to the village, to blacken his face with ashes and his shame. "You have shamed our best warrior. But it does not tell me the secret in your heart that brings you to our village. You are demon-stolen. You may mean us great harm. You must tell me."

"I have no hate in my heart. That is all you need know. It is enough."

But Domea was not content with that. The shaman asked again, anger rising in him. The old one said nothing, looking into the wind, seeing nothing. The shaman shook his spirit bundle threateningly at the old one, but the old one was unmoved. The shaman called on spirits to protect him, to watch over the village. He called up his greatest magic, a force of air and being. The voices of his ancestors sang in the spirit wind.

The old one smiled then, the same terrible smile that watched everything from the cold places beneath the graves of men.

And it was the shaman who turned and ran back to the village, more terrified even than Rainmaker had been, for the death of his own magic and power had been in that smile. It was his spear, and the old one had broken it as surely and as easily as he had Rainmaker's.

And the old one came and went.

With the patience of a snake, the old one stood silently in the village, watching the children. Watching them all day, day after day.

The village was full of talk about this strange one who came and went. But no one spoke aloud that they should kill him or drive him away. The mothers of the village still feared for their children.

But none knew why until the day of the death of the crippled bird.

The first few days of summer had warmed Natina's bones. She was painfully thin, winter-starved like the rest of her family. The season's hunting for Elk Dancer, her father, had been bad throughout the long cold winter, and there had been little to eat.

All winter long Natina had dreamed of the warm sun and food, enough to feed herself and her family. Now that summer was finally here, she had the warmth she so desperately wanted, but the food was another matter.

Her father was sick with a white man's fever. It had left him crippled, half a man as he himself said, and so the winter had been particularly bad. The sickness had affected his eyes. They seemed to get weaker and weaker. With each passing day, he could see less and less of the world around him. Soon he would not be able to see at all.

It was Natina's thirteenth summer, and she hoped it would be a good one. But in her heart she could see nothing good for her and her family.

Her mother had been sick too with the fever. She was very weak and spent most of her time sleeping. Most of the work had therefore fallen on Natina's shoulders. It did not seem to her that she had ever been young or that she had ever played. Mostly it was work from sunup to sundown. If her father went blind, she did not know who would hunt for them. Her brother, Arrow, was only six snows old. It would be years before he would be old enough to hunt for them. Without fresh meat, the family would slowly starve to death.

Natina shouldered her berry basket unhappily. It was early in the year for berries, but there was a place she knew where a few early berries might grow. It was very important that she find food.

She had already picked half a basket of edible roots, none of them very good-tasting, but they filled the belly and helped stop the aching. She had set some snares for rabbits, but they had all been empty.

Natina had gone far gathering the roots. In her eagerness to fill her basket, she left the women and other small ones her age far behind.

As she scrambled over the ridge, pulling roots as fast as her good strong hands would allow, she heard a little cry.

Crawling over a steep rock, she found the crippled bird. It was a young hawk with a broken wing. Natina cried out, seeing him suffer. It was a white-head hawk, lying on his side, crying at the sky.

She sat her root basket down and gathered the crippled bird up in her hands carefully. The bird did not fight against her. She walked back down the ridge, the bird held gently in both of her hands.

As she came upon the women of her village, they made noises and gathered to look at the crippled bird. The hawk, angry with the noisy women, hissed and spat at them, trying to peck the ones that tried to touch him.

Natina pushed the women away, shielding the bird with her body. The hawk was well settled within her touch.

"Bring the crippled bird to me!"

Natina turned in surprise, hearing the harsh words.

Domea, the shaman, beckoned to her. "Come. I want to see this hawk." His tone of speaking was harsh, but he was kind behind his eyes.

Natina walked through the women and set the bird gently down at Domea's feet. "I found him in the rocks," she said.

The shaman bent over and examined the crippled bird. He spoke softly, trying to touch the bird as Natina had touched him. But the hawk shrilled fiercely and scuttled back to Natina, dragging his broken wing on the ground.

The shaman smiled at Natina.

"You have not found him, he has found you. It is an omen of good. See how he comes to you for protection. He has called you to him. It is a spirit omen," said Domea. "The white-head hawk will watch over you and protect you as long as he lives. It is a very good sign."

At the shaman's words, Natina felt brightness and warm sun flow through her. There were not many good omens for Natina and her family.

"Perhaps the hawk will cure the darkness in my father's eyes," said Natina hopefully.

The shaman held little hope for that in his own heart, but his hand rested gently on Natina's shoulder, reassuring her. "May it be so, little one. Your father has too much darkness in his life."

With the coming of the crippled bird, in a way that none could foretell—not even the shaman with his magic and strange powers —Natina's world began to change. It was a change that would touch the heart of all she knew.

This change was a thing of great strangeness, a thing of much magic, and Natina was to discover it all quite by accident, one shining summer gold day, unlike any other that had gone before.

3

It was the day Elk Dancer lost the sun forever.

It was the morning that first brought the sadness. The sun rose in the sky, painting the world with warmth and light, and Natina woke first, sticking her head out of her blankets. The white-head hawk woke as she did. He had slept in the crook of her arm, calm as a nestling with its mother. Natina had tied up his wing as best she knew how, skillfully binding the broken wing into place. The bird seemed no longer to be in pain. She kept the bird near her all the time. It seemed to make him happy to be near her, and she was just as glad to have his company. Having the hawk close-by made her heart sing like spring. The bird was a friend to help her pass the long hours of work that every day meant.

Natina was thirsty. She had forgotten to fill the gourds with water so she got up and dressed quickly. She thought maybe she could get down to the creek, fill the gourds, and bring them back before her mother and father woke up. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. She thought she remembered a strange dream, something about a strange old man who talked to demons, but she could not recall much of it and it soon faded away.

Natina eased out of the blankets, careful not to wake Arrow, her little brother, sleeping next to her, all curled up in a ball like a small puppy.

Natina looked at him and smiled. That was the way she liked Arrow best. When he was asleep and couldn't cause any trouble. Arrow could really be a nuisance sometimes, always underfoot when she had work to do.

She put the white-head hawk on her shoulder. The hawk held on tight with his claws to the thick deer hide of her shirt. The weight of the hawk on her shoulder was a comforting presence. He seemed to be content to perch there.

All around Natina, as she crept out the door of the lodge, the camp was slowly coming alive. Some of the women were bringing in bundles of wood for the cooking fires. Dogs and sleepy-eyed children raced between the lodges, chasing each other, playing games.

Kawina, one snow younger than Natina's thirteen, came out of her family's lodge just as Natina crossed in front of it. Kawina was short and dark like her mother, who was from another tribe in the north. Kawina had too much weight on her frame for her height. Her family had not gone hungry that winter.

Natina shivered, remembering the winter. When one could not get enough to eat, the cold of winter stayed in the bones all the time.

"Natina, where are you going?" asked Kawina.

"To the creek for water. Want to come?"

Kawina frowned, glancing around quickly to see if anyone was listening. She said, "You aren't supposed to leave the camp alone."

Natina ran her fingers along the soft feathers behind the hawk's head. The hawk put his head close to hers affectionately.

"I'm not alone. I have my hawk to protect me."

Natina kept on walking, trailing the water gourds over her shoulder.

Kawina fell in step beside her. "The old men say the enemy is near. Six days ago a war party was seen. Rainmaker says an evil lhaman makes war on us from the north."

Natina smiled. "I am not afraid of the shaman. I have my own magic. I have my white-head hawk. He will protect me."

Kawina shook her head. "It is forbidden to go for water or leave the camp without warriors for protection."

Natina shrugged. "I'm not scared. Besides, I'll just fill my water gourds and hurry right back."

Kawina made one last appeal. "You better not go. You'll get stolen. They say the enemy is everywhere. You should stay and play kick-stick with me and Natje and the others."

Natina stroked the hawk's mending wing. He seemed to like it. Kawina stopped walking as they neared the edge of the camp. Natina turned and looked back at her friend and just shook her head no. She wanted very much to play, but she had to work.

Natina kept on walking until she had passed the last lodge at the edge of the village. The gourds banged against her back, all tied together with a long strip of deerskin. When all the gourds were full, she would hang them from her outstretched arms and walk back carefully so as not to spill the water.

No one noticed her leaving the camp except Kawina, who wouldn't tell. If someone had seen her leave the camp alone, they would have stopped her.

The long grass was alive with grasshoppers and birds in song. Butterflies danced in the air above her head, and the wind was fresh and alive with the smell of summer. It was too beautiful a day for trouble or worries about the ever-present threat of the enemy.

Natina and the white-head hawk moved slowly down the path toward the creek. Natina knew she ought to hurry, but there were so many things to look at, so many things worth looking at. She saw a snake stalking a bird in the long grass. Slowly the snake crawled toward the bird, which was seemingly asleep in the topmost leaves of a milkweed. Just as the snake lunged forward to seize the bird, the bird sped into the air like a hard-pulled arrow, leaving the snake looking silly and still hungry.

The bird made several passes in the air over the snake, as if teasing the already disappointed reptile. The snake hissed and then disappeared as quickly as it had come into the grass to wait for another victim.

Natina hurried on. The hawk on her shoulder had watched the snake and bird with as much interest as Natina had. He rode very comfortably and contentedly on her shoulder. His eyes were bright and inquisitive and seemed to take in everything around him.

Soon they reached the creek. Carefully, she unhooked the bird's sharp claws from the thick material of her shirt. The bird protested the separation, trying to retain his grip on her shoulder, but she gently and firmly removed him. She set the hawk on a limb of a fallen tree near the water's edge.

She had to bend over to scoop up the water, and she didn't want the hawk falling into the water.

She busied herself with filling the gourds. As she knelt beside the stream, unknown to her a pair of eyes, cold and hostile, watched her from the other side of the creek. A painted face, blood red, painted like a demon, belonged to the eyes that watched her.

Uhlat, the shaman, watched her. He was short-bodied and dark beneath the red paint that covered his body. A wolf's head covered his thickly braided black hair. He carried a medicine stick with the skull of a fox on one end and the skull of a human being on the other.

A clan sign was painted on a small stone tied to a hole in his left ear. He was dressed in white buckskin with quill patterns of yellow interlaced with red and blue. A small fringed medicine bag, containing ground-up bones and hanks of hair from his enemies, hung at his waist.

His right arm, from shoulder to wrist, had been painted black. His left arm was painted red and held a war shield painted with demon signs.

He was Uhlát, an evil shaman from the north, where they worshipped demons and not the Great Spirit.

Natina filled each gourd carefully, arranging them so that when she lifted the deerskin strap that held them together, they would not spill. Her mind was on her task, and she did not sense the approach of danger.

It was the hawk that told her first that something was wrong.

His shrill cry rang out frighteningly loud. Startled, Natina almost tumbled into the creek.

Uhlát stepped out of hiding, crashing through the dense underbrush. Natina saw the cruel figure and screamed. Not in terror but for help.

She was a long way from camp, but she knew sound carried well in the morning. She was frightened but not too frightened to act.

She picked up a rock, a heavy one, intending to defend herself as best she could. She wished she had brought her knife.

Uhlát laughed as he saw the puny girl, little more than skin and bones, pick up the rock. She held the rock over her head, ready to throw it at him.

Uhlát waded across the shallow creek, not worried by the rock she held. He did not expect much resistance from a mere girl. That was his mistake.

The rock flew with unerring skill and surprising force toward him. Before he could duck, the rock slammed into the side of his face and shoulder, almost knocking him over backward into the water.

The jagged rock tore his cheek and gouged his shoulder. A long cut opened in his neck. He howled with pain and rage. He stumbled toward her, running now in the shallow bed of the creek. Natina tried to dodge, to evade his huge grasping hand. The bird shrielled wildly at her back. She slipped on the bank, nearly falling in her haste to get away.

Uhlát lunged, missing her on the first pass. She stumbled to the top of the creek bank, tripped over a vine, and slid back down the bank a little way. Helpless, she realized she was falling back down toward him. Her hands seized upon another rock, much too small to do any real damage, but he did not give her a chance to use it.

Uhlát swung his arm and smashed his heavy wooden shield against the side of her head, knocking her completely over. She was stunned. His hand seized upon her arm and jerked her to her feet. She was dizzy from the blow, hardly able to stand.

Uhlát shook her savagely, angry at this small girl child who had hurt him. He was tempted to bash her head against a tree, but the shouts of men coming toward them in the distance stayed his hand.

Quickly, Uhlát lifted her up and threw her across his shoulder. He turned and ran back across the creek.

The white-head hawk hopped off the limb, running to the edge of the creek, his shrill cries filling the air.

Natina felt the hard edges of Uhlát's shoulder blades bite into her stomach. Her head spun, as Uhlát ran, bouncing her in a sickening spiral against his back. She felt the blood rushing into her head. She thought she was going to be sick.

They crossed the stream quickly. Uhlát, running as if unburdened, sped into the thick underbrush on the other side of the creek. Tirelessly the shaman ran through the dense woods. Branches and brambles whipped back across him as he ran, but he did not seem to notice them. Several times Natina cried out as brambles tore into her legs.

Uhlát ran for an hour, until the sounds of pursuit were no longer with them. He shifted Natina

from one shoulder to the other. She still felt sick. Her head was pounding; her stomach seemed to be on fire.

Uhlat rested for a few seconds, Natina still draped over his shoulder like a dead deer; then he started running again.

Sick as she was, Natina was still able to marvel at the strength in Uhlat. But then Uhlat was a shaman, and shamans often had powers unlike other men.

As Uhlat ran, he said a chant, a spell to make the way difficult for those who would pursue him.

Natina tried to think of ways to escape, but hanging upside down, jouncing with Uhlat's every step, it was all she could do just to breathe, let alone think. Besides, it seemed hopeless. Uhlat was from the north, a demon worshipper, and Kawina's mother, herself from the northern tribes, had said that Uhlat's people were eaters of flesh, soul-eaters. One look at the demon signs painted on Uhlat's face had told her from where he came.

Natina's heart was heavy. She thought her name would soon be lost to the world.

As Uhlat ran, Natina's heart walked upon the ground. She missed her father and mother. She missed Arrow, for all his contrary ways. She missed many things, things and people she thought she would never see again. She wanted to cry, but she couldn't; she wouldn't let her enemy know that she was afraid. Uhlat ran without letup, tirelessly, relentlessly through the forest.

With each mile, Natina knew with growing despair that no one in the village would be able to catch up with them. On and on Uhlat ran.

They came to a wide clearing in the forest where a fire from a lightning-struck tree had burned off some of the trees.

Suddenly there was a crash of thunder. It seemed to come from all around them, from the very ground itself. Uhlat stumbled and almost fell. Natina turned her head a little until she was staring up at the sky. The sky was as blue as a lake, without a single cloud anywhere. How could it thunder with the sun shining as bright as summer?

Uhlat lowered Natina to the ground, moving cautiously, his shoulders hunched slightly. He turned his head slowly, looking for trouble in every direction. Natina tried to stand up, but all the blood had rushed to her head and she was too dizzy. She could not stand. She collapsed in a heap at Uhlat's feet.

Something touched Natina's shoulder from behind. It felt like a tiny hand and Natina, startled, almost screamed. It was the white-head hawk, lifting his undamaged wing to her. He ruffled his feathers, clumsily trying to jump upon her shoulder.

Natina gasped in surprise. She had no idea how the hawk had got there. He could not fly. His broken wing was still folded as she had bound it. It must be magic, she thought. No hawk could fly with only one wing.

She cradled the hawk with one hand and, lifting him, helped him to a safe perch on her shoulder.

The hawk dug his claws into the tough deer hide of her shoulder, settling contentedly onto his perch. He rubbed his head against her neck like a tame dog wanting to be petted.

Uhlat took out a head cracker, a rounded stone tomahawk that hung from his belt. A loop of deerskin dangled from the handle. He tied the loop to his wrist so he would not lose the weapon.

The thunder cracked again, so close it seemed to shake the very ground they stood on. Uhlat covered himself with his shield, bending low behind it, looking in every direction for an enemy.

Natina heard an owl hoot. It was an unusual sound and very near. Not often did one hear an owl in the middle of the day. There was something strange in the sound. It had an unnatural rhythm. Natina was sure a human being had made the sound.

Uhlat chanted. The air around his head seemed to crackle with energy, with great power.

Uhlat danced in a circle among the blackened stumps of fire-ruined trees. His voice keened, knife-sharp, splitting the air with an eerie ululation.

Natina heard strange things in the wind, evil things. The sound of a thousand things moving, rolling, shaking in the wind, a thousand forest things marching all around them. She shivered, feeling suddenly cold.

She could feel the hair rising on the back of her head. The air seemed to be blue with strange power, as if lightning had just swept across the clearing.

The presence of the white-head hawk on her shoulder was comforting. While all about them, the world seemed angry with strange forces, the hawk was calm, at peace on her shoulder. He did not seem to be frightened, and because he was not, she was not.

Natina knew something terrible was about to happen, but she had no idea what.

Something was out there in the dark trees, something hidden from sight. Something powerful and maybe evil. Whatever it was, Uhlat had identified it as his enemy, and he was preparing to do battle with it.

Something moved, something tall like a man. Uhlat turned to face the presence. Natina heard the thunder crack across the sky.

The hawk on her shoulder cried shrilly. The sky seemed to darken as if a storm approached. Dark clouds rolled overhead like flights of angry hawks.

An old man dressed in ragged skins moved into the fire-blasted clearing. Uhlat raised his weapon in front of him, acknowledging the presence of the enemy.

Natina saw the old one clearly. The wind seemed to dance around his head; a swirl of leaves and dust spun around him. She had seen the old one before. He was the strange one who came to the village day after day, the demon-touched one.

Uhlat's face darkened with anger and fear. His chanting grew louder, becoming almost a shriek. A bolt of lightning struck the ground at his feet. Natina screamed, feeling a wave of intense heat wash across her. Uhlat stepped forward over her body, moving toward the old one. Natina pushed herself flat against the ground. She wanted to get up and run, but she couldn't make her muscles obey her.

Uhlat invoked his gods and spirits. His voice soared upward. The air turned fire red around his head. Smoke, black as night, rose from the ground at his feet.

Uhlat raised his fox-skull medicine stick over his head. The human skull and fox skull on either end glowed in the new-grown dark, pulsing with a power that was not of earth.

The old one marched calmly toward Uhlat. There was a smile on his face and a look of peace. He was dressed in tattered skins, torn and much worn. He had no medicine bags, no amulets of protection. In his hands he held no weapons. There was only the smile and the wind that spun as if at his command all around him.

The old one spoke, and his words were like summer lightning that made the night into day.

"My heart is filled with anger when I see you here, eater of flesh. I heard of your coming when I was many sleeps away. I know that you come to do evil to me and my people. I look for this evil, which would last forever, and so my face is a storm as I look upon you. I do not wish your evil upon my land. Leave now and return to the north, and I will not harm you. I want no blood upon my land to stain the goodness of the grass. I want it clean and pure, and I wish it so that all who go among my people may find peace when they come in and leave in peace when they go out."

Uhlat waved his glowing medicine stick defiantly. "Do not challenge me, old one. I will bring lasting sorrow into your land. I will rip the heart from you. Such is my power!" cried Uhlat.

"Your power is that of the flies that eat the eyes of dead horses. Your life is under my fingernails. Leave this place," said the old one.

"So strong am I that my breath would tear your flesh from your bones," said Uhlat.

The old one shook his head. "Go. Go while your legs are still under you and your bones still white with life in your body."

For an answer, Uhlat raised his tomahawk as if to throw it.

"You are far from your lands, child-stealer," said the old one, standing very still in the clearing. He stood behind the blackened hulk of a felled tree, plainly visible, unafraid. "You are not welcome in my lands, eater of flesh."

"I do not fear you, shaman. I will pick your bones!" said Uhlat, and he stretched forth his glowing medicine stick. A tongue of white-hot flame shot from the center of the stick, straight for the old one's heart.

The old one laughed and waved his hand before his body. A great wind whirled out of the forest at his back. It roared between the old one's legs, ripping the felled tree up from the ground and flinging it headlong at the flame from Uhlat's medicine stick.

The flame bent back on itself, and Uhlat cried out as its heat came back at him, flames touching his clothes, singeing him in many places. The wind tore at him, fierce and burning, like a giant fist.

Uhlat bent against the force of the wind. The blackened stump sped through the air. Uhlat threw out his medicine stick, spinning it in his hand. The great dead log crashed against it, only inches from his body. There was a great flash of fire and smoke, and the great log broke against the stick and crashed at Uhlat's feet. A drop of blood appeared below each of Uhlat's eyes. His hair and clothes were singed. The old one was unharmed.

Natina was terrified. She tried to crawl away, willing herself to get to her feet. The hawk shrilled defiance from her shoulder. She stumbled, rose to her knees, and then fell again. She could not rise. She hugged the ground, trying to shelter the hawk with her hands against the great magic and forces of the shamans.

The old man turned his head slightly, looking down. Natina raised her eyes up to his, and she saw a deep cool river of melted snow flowing out of his eyes. It was a river that ran cold and clear from the heart of the high mountains.

The hard edge of terror in her subsided, as if washed smooth in the river. She felt something seize her, like a sudden tidal surge pulling at her. Her body slid across the ground back away from Uhlat toward the edge of the clearing. It was like riding a giant wave. The hawk shrilled. Uhlat turned and saw her moving across the ground. He threw a hand out toward her, palm open, and then closed it, fingers closing into a fist.

Natina shrieked, flattened against the ground. Something, a hand cold as ice, grabbed her by the hair, and dragged her roughly across the ground until she bumped into Uhlat's legs.

Uhlat laughed and turned to glare at the old one. "Do not try to rob me of my pretty thing, old one. I have her life in my hands. She is mine."

"She does not belong to you," said the old one.

Uhlat glared his hatred at the old one. His mouth flew open, and a high piercing chant of summoning rang in the air. The air above his head burned with green and yellow flames. Black smoke boiled in a tall cloud above his head. Out of this blackness, a black thing swooped, a creature of wings and night and fire red teeth. Its body had no shape, night black, its form changing as it flew like mist upon the river.

Only its great vicious head had shape, the blood red eyes, murderous beak, and wickedly sharp teeth.

The great black thing circled above Uhlat's head and a foul stench, an odor from the grave, came down out of the sky from the thing, a demon smell.

The old man smiled calmly at Uhlat. "You are too far from the lands that hold your black heart. Your power is dew upon the grass. I am the rains of spring. I wash the land of all evil. Leave while you still have breath in your body, flesh-eater." Above, the thing circled like death on the wing. "I will crush you. I will tear your bones out of your still live flesh," cursed Uhlat. "Who are you that dares to challenge Uhlat? I have the power of night. None can stand in my way!"

The black thing clicked its fire red teeth, and its eyes gleamed with evil. It flew close to the

old one, but he paid no attention to it, did not even look up at it.

"Let the child go free," said the old one, moving closer, taking two steps closer to Uhlat.

The icy hand that held her hair suddenly disappeared, and Na-tina fell back, away from the shaman's legs. She felt strength flowing through her legs and arms. On her shoulder the white-head hawk seemed to glow with warmth and light. "She is mine. I have taken her. What I take, I keep." Freed from Uhlat's power, Natina got slowly to her feet, still unsteady. Holding the hawk safely against her with one protective hand, she took a step and then another.

She moved away from Uhlat for the safety of the forest beyond. Out of the corner of his eye, Uhlat saw the movement and turned his head. He gasped in pain, and the hand that had seized her by the hair, writhed at the end of his arm. A drop of blood fell from each finger of the hand.

Uhlat spun quickly on his heel, leaping forward toward Natina. He seized her roughly by the shoulder. The white-head hawk struck, his fierce beak stabbing into the shaman's arm. With a cry of pain, the shaman lost his grip on Natina. The old one laughed. The sound of his laughter was as cold as the snows of winter.

"Even a small hawk can hurt you, child-stealer. You should heed this omen. Flee into the woods like brother rabbit with the foxes after you."

Uhlat grabbed Natina by the arm, jerking her to his side, keeping well away from the angry hawk on her shoulder.

"Use your magic on me and I kill the child," spat Uhlat. "I kill you, old one." Uhlat flung his medicine stick forward, spinning it in a glowing circle. The great black thing, from the grave and the world beyond this one, came swooping with a rush of deathwings down at the old one. The old one raised his arms wide, as if about to take wing. Behind the old man, the rain came, the great spring rain of life. It fell upon the old one, and he was like a small child in a storm. He turned up his face to the rain, opening his mouth, letting the rain splash upon his face and into his mouth.

The grass, brown and dead at his feet, burst into new life, sending up rushing green shoots of new life. From the ruined stumps of dead trees, new shoots sprang up, rushing into the air, into the sun and life.

"As death kills life, so does life kill death," said the old one. The great black demon thing came down at the old man, relentlessly falling like an arrow of death into the rain. Its mouth was agape with wicked teeth, hungry for the taste of human flesh.

Natina turned her head, sure that the old one could not escape. She did not want to see her mysterious protector, her last hope for escape, die.

But the raindrops were like drops of fire. The black one's wings, like great shifting leaves, were burned through and through. The demon spawn, writhed in agony in the rain of life, burning in the cold fire of spring. It lost control, wings burned and burning, and came plummeting to the ground, melting, shrieking as it died. It lay before the old one's feet, shriveling, eroding, the rain tearing it into tiny pieces with each gentle drop.

Uhlat screamed in fury. He dragged Natina in front of him, shielding himself with her slender body. His hand closed around her throat.

Natina struggled against his grip, but she could not break away. The hawk stabbed at Uhlat, but he held Natina far enough away from his body so that the hawk could not reach him. The hawk screamed in rage and frustration.

Natina's eyes were wide open with terror.

"Before you can breathe the next breath, I shall end this child's life. Her tiny life is in my fingers." Uhlat's rage burned in his eyes like the sun.

"To he who holds a child's yea to grow life as the dust beneath his feet, death itself is too swift, too gentle."

The old man's face was alive with anger. For the first time, the things that moved him, the great beliefs that moved in his blood and being, were upon his face. His eyes became the sun

on the water, and great pain turned his face into a mask.

He spoke one word. It was of a language not of this world. The word hung in the air like a dragonfly. The air shimmered as if heated by the force of this strange word.

Thunder crashed, the earth shook, and then the ground opened at the old one's feet. A ball of fire rose out of the hole. Flames as hot as lava rose from the center of the hole. The ball of fire shot straight into the air and then came arcing down, back into the hole.

A lizard, green as the grass of summer, arose out of the flames. It was longer than a deer in its body and had a great armored tail yet as long again. It had neither mouth nor eyes, yet it moved out of the hole with grace and speed. It raced across the ground as quick as thought, a green blur, a relentless reptilian wave that swept like green fire across the ground.

Its claws rasped against the broken log at Uhlat's feet, the log broken by magic against Uhlat's medicine stick. Uhlat screamed once and tried to tighten his grip around Natina's throat, to squeeze the life from her body, but the lizard, as quick as breath, leaped for the arm that held her.

Its fierce claws raked the top of his hand, and Uhlat screamed in mortal agony.

Natina stumbled and fell away from Uhlat's injured hand. He could not hold her. His hand, ceremonially painted black, glowed with green fire. He screamed in pain.

His hand writhed and distended, clenching and unclenching without control. The faceless one crouched at the log at Uhlat's feet. Waiting. Waiting.

Uhlat held the hand away from his body, as if it were no longer a part of him.

The finger bones pushed through his skin, came leaping out to tumble down on the ground.

Uhlat screamed and fell to his knees, the skin collapsing around what once had been his hand. The green reptile shuddered in anticipation, its tail lashing across the ground. It lunged forward. It gathered the fallen finger bones up in its sharp foreclaws.

The faceless one scuttled back across the ruined ground with its prize. The flames still roared from the hole in the ground. As quick as green lightning, the lizard shot back into the flames with its treasure.

With a mighty shaking of the ground, the hole closed over the lizard as he disappeared deep into the flames.

"Come to me, child," said the old one. "I will not hurt you."

Natina stood up slowly, the hawk now resting silently on her shoulder. She moved away from Uhlat with caution. His pain was such that he did not even seem aware of her presence.

Natina's face was white with terror. Her mind was stunned by all that she had seen. Her heart raced, and there was a great rushing in her ears as if she was coming upon the waves of the great sea.

She came to the old one slowly as if lost in a great storm, blinded by the flash of lightning.

Uhlat thrashed in pain upon the ground.

Wordlessly Natina moved to the old one, letting him take her in his outstretched arms. As the old one touched her, he felt the pain and terror in her mind and being, and it was not a good thing, not a good feeling in one so young. His spirit went inside her and touched her life force. It touched the center of her being and became a dream that danced into life behind her eyes. It was a dream of peace, of a quiet river that flowed into the great forever.

He reached out and touched her face, and as he did this, the bramble scratches on her legs and back healed. The white-head hawk fell asleep peacefully on her shoulder, dreaming hawk dreams.

The old one went deep inside her life, touching all things and seeing great and deep and lasting things in her young Hie. Her spirit was fragile like a fawn, and his heart wept for the evil that had touched this life. And the old one could not allow it to grow in this young mind.

With his great power, he reached into her life even deeper, until he touched not only the moment in which she now lived, but all moments of her life. He reached into yesterday and saw the things that would take this evil away, that would banish it from the heart and mind of

Natina.

Yesterday was a part of the circle, and the old one saw the empty water gourds hanging in Natina's lodge. A small boy, who had once been the old one, snuck quietly into the lodge. Without making a sound, his feet as silent as the flying owl, this boy the old one once had been came into the lodge and stole away with the empty gourds. With great joy at the strength in his legs, the young boy ran to the creek, where the moon lighted the way for him, huge and full in a beautiful summer sky.

As quietly and carefully as he had come, the boy came back from the river, gourds filled to the brim with sweet river water. With the same silence as that in which he had come, he hung the gourds back in their places while the people in the lodge slept on, undisturbed. What had not been done was now done.

Because the old one traveled in yesterday, he took Natina with him, and she slept silently in the dark of her lodge as the young boy who was the old one himself long, long ago crept in and out with the water gourds.

And Natina turned restlessly in her sleep; a strange dream troubled her. There was an old one and demons that tumbled out of the sky. There was an evil eater of flesh with no bones in his hand and a long green lizard with no face. It was a strange dream and, like all dreams, it belonged to sleep alone.

The next day it would be gone, as the terror and evil she had seen would vanish as surely as the snows of winter.

Uhlat used his one good hand. He clutched his medicine stick tightly, digging one end into the ground, using it to pull himself up to his feet. His eyes were red with pain and hate.

"I will wear your bones around my neck," cried Uhlat. His eyes searched the clearing for the girl, but she had vanished as if she had never been there. "You deny me my prize. For that alone you should die." He held up the ruined hand. "But for this. Because of what you have done, I shall tame you. Cage you and shame you. You shall be my dog, cringing beneath the feet of my women, tormented by the children. Gnawing on scraps, eating food not good enough for people to eat."

Uhlat raised his war shield, and a lightning bolt crashed down from the darkened sky, striking the shield, turning it into a blue whirlwind which left Uhlat's arm, spinning in a fiery, sizzling hoop toward the old one.

The old one let it come close, then opened his mouth and breathed upon it. Winter came out of his mouth. Snow and ice and winds of winter caught the shield and froze it in the air. The spinning blue flame froze; the shield dropped like a stone to shatter into a thousand pieces upon the hard ground. Where it fell, the ground froze, frost blue-white upon the broken shield fragments.

Screaming like an angry banshee, Uhlat ran toward the old one, his stone weapon upraised. His hand went back, and he swung the hammer with all his might through the air. A dead warrior sprang out of the ground, its bones sticking through the skin, sharp as knives. It danced on rotten legs toward the old one.

Again the shaman from the north swung his stone hammer. A dead buffalo bull, reeking of death and decay, rose up out of the ground, its great horns red with blood, its eyes dead and sightless.

It pawed the ground and charged, smashing a fallen log to bits beneath its thundering hooves. It came rushing down on the old one like a great heaving mass of black death.

The dead warrior and dead buffalo rushed at the old one.

The old one drew his hand above his head. A spear made of writhing snakes, green and red with eyes of black and bodies hard as stone, appeared in his upraised hand. With a quick thrust, he threw the spear.

The snake spear hit the dead warrior, and the snakes wrapped around the moving body of bones. The body shuddered, its bone arms and legs pinned to its side by the mighty coils of

the great snakes. The body staggered and fell.

The snakes swarmed across it, pressing it down into the ground. The body seemed to sink into the ground. Grass shot up through it; roots reached up to pull the body down into dust and oblivion. The snakes vanished into holes that opened in the ground. The dust from the dead warrior's cracking bones blew into the holes, sealing them after the snakes as they vanished.

Alone, the great bull thundered down on the old one. The old man stood calmly in the path until it was almost upon him, the great horns flashing down toward him.

The old man waved his hands across his chest. A great tree shot up at his feet, between him and the charging bull. A thick tree as solid as the world. The bull hit it head on, its gore-bespattered horns driving deep into the living wood.

The tree grew and grew. The bull, its horns pinned deep in the hard wood, felt himself lifted off the ground as the tree went higher and higher into the sky. Branches shot out from the trunk, driving like hard arrows into the side of the dead buffalo. It writhed in agony, its rotten flesh pierced again and again by the living tree. The branches grew through the buffalo, leaves thick and shining, an avalanche of riotous green life.

The dead animal rose higher and higher into the air. The tree sucked the essences of the dead buffalo into its being. The dead flesh fed it. The hungry roots and branches stripped the buffalo of all its flesh. Soon only the moldering hide remained and the white bones. The tree stretched and grew, tearing the bones apart, until the white skull rested at the top of the tree, hidden almost by the great rush of green life that surrounded it.

The old one stepped out from behind the tree.

"You have lived too long upon this earth. I rid the earth of poison, and you are what was once poison. I now take your life and make it nothing. Your name is gone from this world." With those words, the old one flung his arms out, turning slowly in the wind, calling in all four directions to the four winds.

The living world danced in his song, which came tumbling from his lips like a raging mountain stream heavy with the melted snow of winter.

The wind danced around him. A great whirlwind raged on the palm of his left hand. Lightning and thunder raced up into the sky, splitting the dark, held like a great spear of fire in his right hand.

Uhlat drew his hand up into the sky, and out of the ground rose dead men and great beasts of ages past. They stood in front of him, rotten and decayed, creatures of the nightland. They stood before Uhlat, an unliving shield, a last desperate charm against the old one's magic.

But the whirlwind shot out from the old one's hand and tore the dead ones up from the spawning ground, sent them spinning like feathers in the wind. The great dark whirlwind leapt up into the sky with them, ripping their bodies into pieces, scattering their bones across the land.

As each shattered bone and bit of decayed flesh fell to earth, new grass sprang up underneath, its thick roots dragging the dead things deep into the earth, to the dust they would soon become.

Uhlat turned then, and with the last of his magic he would have become a great hawk, with wings as fast as thought. On mighty wings that could speed him back to the north faster than anything on earth, he would have made his escape.

But as the feathers formed on his arms, as he tried to leap into the air, the lightning and thunder shot from the old one's hand. It went across the ground like a great fire dance. It burned everything it touched, dead logs turning to ash, the ground heaving as it scorched the very earth itself.

Uhlat strove to rise, to fly above it, but there was no escape. The flame encircled him, went across him like a great wave of the big water.

For a brief instant a great bird-shape ringed in flame danced above the ground. All was flame; all was burning.

Uhlat did not even have time to scream.

The fire was so great, nothing was left, not even ash or cinder. The lightning took his smoke up into the sky. The dark clouds drank the lightning that carried dead Uhlat's smoke and disappeared as quickly as they had come across the summer sky.

In the fire-ruined place, where all was once brown and blackened and withered, new life arose, green and strong in every place but one. The spot where Uhlat had stood when the great fire overtook him was still black and ruined, still as dead as the creatures of night Uhlat had summoned.

The old one looked up into the sky and saw something on the wind very, very high in the sky. It came slowly and gently down toward him. It was a single great black feather, carried on the clean summer breeze.

The old one smiled. It was the last thing of evil that remained in this spot. The feather came closer and closer to earth. The old man cupped his hand against his mouth and blew upward into the air. His breath caught the feather and sent it spinning away from him.

The feather came down on the ruined spot where Uhlat had once stood. It turned to dust as it touched the earth.

Wild flowers with all the colors of summer pushed their way through the living earth where Uhlat the eater of flesh had died.

Their great beauty cleansed the place of the evil that had once stood there.

And Uhlat was only a bad thing, an evil thing in the mind of the old one.

"His evil and his name are gone forever from this world," said the old one, but in his heart there was a tiny doubt even as he said it.

4

It was the morning of the sadness. Natina was the first one to awaken. The white-head hawk lay sleeping in the crook of her arm. He awoke as she did, yawning and stretching his neck. She set him on her shoulder.

She rose slowly from her blankets, her mind still slow with a dream. What a strange dream it had been. It seemed that there were whirlwinds and fire and things of great magic and great evil in it, but it was only a dream. As her eyes cleared of sleep, so did her mind clear of the dream.

She was thirsty. Natina went across the lodge to the water gourds, thinking to herself that she had forgotten to fill them, the day before. But she was surprised to find the gourds full of sweet, cool water. Arrow must have filled them, she thought, looking down at the still sleeping figure of her younger brother.

She went outside and sat in the sun which was just beginning to walk across the sky.

Morning was her favorite time of day. The camp was coming alive all around her.

She heard voices from within her family lodge and knew the others were waking up. Her mother came out, carrying a cooking pot and a long-handled wooden spoon. Her mother walked very slowly, as if each step was a great effort. Like Natina, she was very thin and still weak from the winter.

Natina sprang up, took the heavy pot from her hands, and carried it over to the fire hole. Her mother smiled.

Suddenly from within the lodge came an anguished cry. Natina and her mother turned and looked back at the lodge. Her father came stumbling out, his hands over his eyes. He screamed and staggered out toward them. He took only a few steps before he tripped and fell.

At his shouts, people from the nearby lodges came running out.

"I am blind!" cried Elk Dancer, his hands clawing at his unseeing eyes. "All is blackness!" He moved blindly through the camp, the people coming from all around to stare at him.

Domea, the medicine man, pushed his way through the people gathered around. "Stand still so that I may look at you and see this thing," said the shaman.

Obediently, Elk Dancer stood still. He was a strong man, but there were tears in the corners of his eyes, tears of sorrow and self-pity.

Domea stood before him, his hands reaching to touch Elk Dancer's face. Gently, his probing fingers

brushed across the unseeing eyes. He stared deeply into Elk Dancer's dead eyes as if trying in his shaman's way to see deep into Elk Dancer's spirit-soul. Whatever he saw in Elk Dancer's eyes, it was not the gift of seeing.

"The blackness will not go away. You are blind. Nothing can be done about this thing," proclaimed Domea, with much sorrow in his voice.

Elk Dancer sank to the ground. His worst fears were confirmed. Without his eyes, his life had no meaning. He could not provide for his family, could not hunt, could not even defend them from the enemies of his people.

Natina ran to her father and tried to put her arms around him, but he pushed her away. He rose slowly to his feet, staring at nothing, his back straightening. He called out for his weapons, his bow and arrow and his war shield. They were brought to him. He armed himself.

The people moved away from him now, knowing what he intended to do.

"Point me to the north, to the country of my enemies," said Elk Dancer. "My life is without meaning. I go to my death now. It is a good day to die."

He raised his weapons to the sky and gave thanks to the Great Spirit for the life he had been given. He raised his weapons once in each of the four directions and gave thanks for his life which now must come to an end.

No one moved to stop him, for to do so would be wrong and improper. A man had to decide how his life must go, how it must end; that was the way of the world.

Without a word, Natina's mother had returned to the lodge. Once inside, she laid down on the soft earthen floor. She wrapped a deerskin robe around her head and wept with a broken heart for she loved Elk Dancer. Elk Dancer was already dead in her woman's heart. He would die this day in battle with the enemy, with an enemy he could not see. He would not live beyond this day to be a burden to his people.

Her father marched slowly toward the north, the sun on his face his only guide. It told him the direction in which he must go, but it could not tell him of the logs and bushes and trees and rocks in his path. He fell again and again.

Natina stood at the edge of the village, watching her father go out of her life, watching him go to a certain death. The white-head hawk on her shoulder shrilled and ruffled his feathers as if feeling a sudden cold wind.

He put his head next to hers, and she seemed to hear a voice. A voice that had once spoken to her but only in a dream, a strange dream that she seemed to recall. "Stare at the sun," said the voice. "Stare at the sun if you would make Elk Dancer see again."

I would go blind, thought Natina, blind like my father; but still the voice was there, urging her on.

"Stare at the sun." The voice was like a fire. Each word burned her; each word seemed to dance inside her like a fire dance.

The hawk brushed her face with his wing, his claws gripping her shoulder tightly. He seemed to be urging her to follow the voice. But she did not want to take her eyes from the stumbling figure of her father, making his uncertain way into the forest beyond the village.

But the voice could not be long disobeyed.

In some way she could not understand, she knew the voice was telling her the way in which she could save her father's life.

She turned around and looked up, up into the blinding yellow fireball of the sun. Her eyes watered, and the sun seemed to burn them, to set them aflame. Her eyes ached and she thought she might faint when suddenly the fire moved, began dancing, whirling in scarlet flames across the sky.

A face danced in the flames. It was the old one, the one who watched the children at play, the one who seemed to stalk Natina in her dreams. The old one's face was burning in the center of the sun. His mouth opened and inside, in the darkness within, she saw her father walking across the sky. On his shoulder rode the white-head hawk; in his hands he held a bow and arrow, ready to shoot. He lifted the bow and shot his arrow. It blazed across the sky and struck a wild goose in flight. The goose caught fire and plummeted to earth. He put another arrow to his bow and shot again.

The arrow found its mark, and a golden-bodied deer burst into sunflame. Elk Dancer raised his arms, his head became that of a white-head hawk, and he danced and spun in the air, falling gently, softly to earth. He touched the rich dark ground, and his footsteps burst into flame.

Elk Dancer ran across the ground, moving deer-fast through the great trees of the forest, and as he ran his hawk head seemed to glow with a thousand burning dances. He raised his arms and rose above the

trees like a hawk leaping into flight. Higher and higher he flew, racing up toward the sun. His hands touched the sun, and he burst into flame and came spinning back down toward the green earth. His eyes were made of ice but all else was fire, sun-born.

The visions danced forever in the fire red sky, and Natina stared into the heart of the sun as one made mad by the heat.

The pain stopped the visions. Natina stumbled, turning away from the intensity of the sun. Tears poured from her injured eyes. The white-head hawk thrust his beak gently against the side of her face. His one good wing brushed the side of her face as if he were trying to cool her, to ease the pain and heat of the sun's fire.

She smiled at his gentleness and turned to look at him.

Her tear-blinded eyes saw him only as a great golden thing, made of wind and sky and the fire of the sun.

Suddenly she understood what the white-head hawk was for, why this special magic had come to her.

And then, as if night had fallen, the darkness descended on her. She was blind now too. But the blindness was her way of seeing. Her own eyes were dim and lifeless in her head.

But the hawk sat on her shoulder, and his eyes flashed and saw the world as the hawk sees it, with great clarity, with the strength that sees far beyond the mountains.

She ran after Elk Dancer; her unseeing eyes did not slow Natina in the least. She ran with great confidence, never stumbling or tripping over any obstacle in her path.

The white-head hawk rode her shoulder like a second head.

Although her own eyes were sightless, Natina saw better now than she had ever seen in her life. It was a great vision. She saw the world with the eyes of the white-head hawk. The trees in the forest many miles away were as clear as if they lay at her feet. She saw the world as if she flew above it too, as if the hawk on her shoulder sailed across the sky and looked down at the world below.

She saw the world in a green and clear and swift way, better, a hundred times better, than she had been able to see it with her own eyes. And so she ran after her father, with this great gift of seeing perched on her shoulder and a great song of joy in her heart.

Elk Dancer heard her calling his name, and he stopped and turned to face her. He was angry. That she should follow him was not right or proper.

She must go back to the village, to let him face the thing that he and he alone must deal with. Death with honor. Elk Dancer's heart was heavy as stone. It walked upon the ground.

Natina stood beside him now and Elk Dancer spoke, "Go home, little one. The world has grown cold for me. It has grown cold for all of us."

Natina reached up and took the white-head hawk from her shoulder.

"No, father. The sun has not died in the sky. It is here within us." And she held the hawk out toward her father, who could not see it.

She gently set the hawk on her father's shoulder.

She almost stumbled in the sudden blindness that fell upon her as the hawk left her hands. For a second there, filled with a sudden panic, she wanted to put the hawk back on her shoulder, but she knew Elk Dancer's need was greater than her own.

Carefully, she stepped back. The hawk had been reluctant as she pushed him off her outstretched hand, forcing the hawk to step from her hand to her father's shoulder.

The hawk shrilled once, as a mother cries when her young is threatened, but settled there finally, using his powerful claws to hold himself upright on Elk Dancer's shoulder.

As it had happened to Natina, so it happened to Elk Dancer. He saw with the white-head hawk's eyes, saw again deep into the depths of the forest and deep into his own life again.

Soaring on sun-filled wings, his eyes saw the deer and buffalo dancing in the secret places of the forest, saw the trees moving in the wind as he passed high above them, saw the love in Natina's face, and his heart soared like a flying bird.

It was no longer a good day to die. It was a better day to live. This time when Natina put her arms around him, he did not push her away or want her to go back. He held her tightly to him, and the hawk's wings brushed their tear-stained faces as the world began again for them.

And indeed it did seem to be a new world.

Now, as each day traveled into night, Elk Dancer hunted the world with the white-head hawk's eyes. Many deer fell to his bow.

It was a thing of great wonder, of powerful magic. He sees as no one has ever seen before, said the

people; and indeed it seemed so.

Elk Dancer became the greatest hunter in the telling and memory of the people. It was all because of the white-head hawk that Natina had cared for with healing skill and love.

And for the first time, Natina's family enjoyed a time of plenty. Now they had meat where others had none.

And they shared their good fortune with others. Elk Dancer brought home more than they could possibly eat. Those who had not been so lucky in the hunt could always count on a rabbit or a haunch of deer; so it was that no one went hungry.

The white-head hawk became a symbol of hope for all the people.

And of all the children, blind Natina was the most honored. For blind she was, totally now, for the white-head hawk saw only for her father; still she had a heart full of kindness and a seeing into the heart of the world that made her wise beyond her years.

When she turned her unseeing face to the sun, it danced for her and her alone, and she was happy in her heart. The people praised her for she had brought good medicine into their lives. And they said she would someday heal with a touch. Perhaps it was so, because she had been touched with magic and magic moved through her days.

And thus things went until the day the magic died, the day the white-head hawk was killed.

5

The white-head hawk was a thing of wonder, of sun magic and summer dreams and the shining blue skies of youth that chase the sullen moon across the sky.

It was an unselfish and shared wonder. It had no evil in it, no harm.

And as with all things of this kind, there was one who wanted to see it end, who sought to destroy the white-head hawk.

There was one who had only envy and hatred for Natina and Elk Dancer and the white-head hawk. He was Blue Snow, two years older than Natina and blind to the world even though his eyes saw. His heart was cold. The love in it had soured like a black cherry. A moon shadow had passed across his face and stayed to live in his heart.

Every time Elk Dancer returned from the hunt with a deer, a small dark hatred grew like a black snake in Blue Snow's stomach. The more the people of the village praised this wonder and gave thanks for its coming, the larger the black snake grew in his stomach, until one day Blue Snow and the evil snake were as one.

One day while the other young ones were at play in the hills below the village, Blue Snow snuck into Elk Dancer's lodge and stole the white-head hawk.

The hawk would have cried out, but Blue Snow had foreseen this and had quickly thrown a blanket over the bird, muffling his cries.

Blue Snow put the bird in a basket and crept carefully out of Elk Dancer's lodge. He looked all around, but no one was looking at him. Tucking the basket under his arm, he turned and ran away into the hills, far from the others.

As he ran into the forest, something moved in the dark trees, and two eyes opened and followed Blue Snow as he ran.

Blue Snow came to a clearing in the forest. It was his secret place where he often went alone to plot out his hatreds and revenges against those he imagined had done him harm.

As he pushed through the trees into the clearing, Blue Snow cried out in astonishment. Ahead of him, instead of the fire-ruined ground and blasted trees, the dead brown grass, where no animals or birds or insects lived, was a green world. Flowers and thick tall grass grew in riotous abundance. New trees, slender and sturdy and eager for life, pushed up into new life, into the gentle sun.

Of the lightning that had once burned and charred and leveled this clearing in the forest long ago, there was almost no sign.

Somehow, this sudden change made Blue Snow even angrier, as if someone had stolen his

secret place from him. He had liked the charred trees, the dead brown grass. These things were like the way he felt, like the black and brown snake he grew in his own belly.

Blue Snow took the bird out of the basket. He held the hawk up before him, slipping the blanket off the bird's head. The hawk wriggled in his grasp, wings flapping, beak flashing forward to strike him.

Blue Snow laughed to see the hawk struggle. He had him firmly by the legs and cruelly twisted one leg until the hawk cried out in pain.

The bird beat the air with his wings, futilely trying to escape.

He knew he was in the presence of a great enemy. His broken wing was almost mended.

"I hate you, bird!" cried Blue Snow, and the snake in him tasted a meal. Loosing one hand from the bird's legs, he reached up and yanked savagely on the bird's mending wing. The wing broke.

And the white-head hawk cried.

"I hate you!" And he threw the bird upon the ground and killed him with big stones. The bird cried once before the heavy stones smashed him into the ground.

The black snake in Blue Snow, the envious curve coiled around his spine, hissed in reptilian pleasure.

Then Blue Snow ground his foot upon the bird, crushing the helpless body into the hard ground. He spat upon the hawk. He hated in as dark and black a way as the shaman from the north, Uhlat the eater of flesh, had hated.

Like Uhlat, Blue Snow's blood was cold with hate, unwarmed by the sun. He stared down at the dead hawk in triumph, proud of what he had done.

A hard hand closed upon his shoulder. Blue Snow jumped, looking up, scared to be found out. There was fear in his eyes.

The old one, the demon-touched one, the one who watched the children, towered above him.

"Let me go!" said Blue Snow fearfully, struggling in the old man's grasp like a snake caught by an eagle.

The old one looked at the dead white-head hawk and then he looked around him, at the green life, the eager young trees and flowers and grasses. All around him he saw goodness, yet as he looked down upon the boy and the dead bird, he found evil and death.

The old one turned the boy around, dragging him by his shoulder until he stared directly into the old one's eyes.

Blue Snow stared up at the old one with terror in his eyes and lies in his heart. "I didn't do it!" cried Blue Snow. "I found him like this."

"I saw you," said the old one, and his voice was heavy and sad. "It is no use lying to me."

"Let me go." Blue Snow struggled against the old man's grip, but the one's hands were as strong as a black bear's jaws.

The old one pushed Blue Snow ahead of him, forcing him to walk sideways until they stood over the dead hawk. Without losing his grip on Blue Snow's shoulder, the old one bent down and tenderly lifted the dead bird up.

Blue Snow snarled and tried to kick at the old one.

The old one paid no attention to him. The old one smoothed the damaged feathers of the broken wings. He straightened the broken neck, moved his hand slowly over the crushed body of the bird.

He looked up at Blue Snow, the dead hawk cradled like a baby in his hand.

"You enjoyed killing the crippled hawk. This is true," said the old one. "I know it is true, but my heart does not know why it is true."

"Let me go."

"Answer me. You enjoyed this killing!" said the old man, and his voice seemed to ring with thunder. "Say it is true."

Blue Snow looked into the old one's eyes. The lies he would have said melted in his fear of

the old one. Like the snake that knows its fate in the claws of the eagle, Blue Snow could not lie.

"Yes. I liked killing it! I hate it! I hate it!" Blue Snow swung his fists at the old one but could not hit him. "Let me go!"

"You knew what the white-head hawk meant to Natina; you understood the magical gift of seeing that this white-head hawk gave to Elk Dancer. You knew about the good magic, and yet knowing it you did this thing." The old man looked away, deep into the forest. He seemed to see some place far, far away. "I have come seeking you. I have been waiting for you, watching for you."

Blue Snow was frightened at those words. "You better let me go. They'll miss me. They'll come looking for me. You'll be sorry when they catch up to you. You better let me go."

"The way you are, the only ones who will miss you, are the ones who do not know you," said the old one. "Have you no shame in your heart for what you have done, for the darkness you bring into the lives of those who loved this white-head hawk?"

"I don't care!" screamed Blue Snow, and he struggled desperately now to break free from the old man's grasp. He was sure the old one was going to kill him. "Let me go!"

If the old one noticed Blue Snow's attempt to escape, he gave no sign of it. He stared down tenderly at the dead hawk.

"Such beauty should not leave this world," said the old one. "We find enough bad things in the world, but good things are rare and we cannot let them die."

The old one lifted the dead bird up to the sky and, chanting, raised the hawk once in each of the four directions. The dead wings covered his hand like a feathery fan.

He lowered the bird and held him to his chest.

"Hear my heart, and its dance shall be your dance. I look at the sky and hear the wind your wings have loved."

The thunder crashed across the blue sky. The dead wings moved, slowly, ever so slightly until they moved away from his hand, until they spread out like a bird soaring through the air.

Blue Snow trembled with fear.

The old one lifted the bird to his face and gently put the bird's head in his mouth. He blew softly, his breath ruffling the tiny feathers behind the bird's head.

He took the bird away from his mouth and held him out to the sky. "With my breath, you will find the wind again."

The hawk trembled in the old one's hand, the wings still outstretched. His eyes opened and his mouth moved and his legs slowly unbent until they were straight and strong beneath him.

The broken bones mended and went back into place. New feathers grew to replace some that had been torn out. The bird seemed to shudder with new life.

The old man opened his hand, and the bird stood proudly in the center of his hand, his strong claws wrapped around the old one's fingers. The hawk's wings were whole and beautiful.

"My heart rises to see your beauty back in this world," said the old one. "Go. Do not wait. Natina cries for you, and Elk Dancer stumbles in the darkness your leaving has caused."

The bird turned his head and glared at Blue Snow, just for a second, and then like lightning, wings flashing golden in the sun, he was gone, flying straight as an arrow back to the village.

The old one watched the hawk fly with joy in his heart that did not melt until he turned to look down at Blue Snow.

Blue Snow cowered before him, shaking with fear, certain he was going to be killed.

The old one squeezed Blue Snow's shoulder tightly. But he was not angry. He was never angry. His heart lived in a place between worlds, and anger did not live in that place.

"Come." He jerked the boy toward him, but behind his roughness he was as gentle as a leaf in the wind and sad like the end of summer.

"You hate me! You're like all the others! They hate me! They all hate me! I hate you. I hate you!"

"Walk," said the old one, pushing the boy, kicking and struggling, in front of him. "We will talk later when we are where we must go."

"Where are you taking me?" cried the boy as the old man led him through the forest toward the mountains, away from the village.

The old one did not answer. They walked until the darkness closed about them. The boy, ever fighting to be free, resisted every step of the way, but the old one was strong beyond his years and held him firmly.

As they left the forest and began moving up into the mountains, the boy said, "You are strong, old one. Your magic is strong. I am only a little boy. You do not want me. I can't hurt you. Let me go back to the village."

The old one said nothing. On and on they marched.

"I am tired. I want to rest. I want to go home. I can't walk anymore," cried Blue Snow.

"I cannot stop," said the old one. "It is not my power that moves me. Keep walking. You cannot escape."

As the way became dark for the going, the old one led, dragging the boy behind him. He neither turned aside nor hesitated. It was as if the old one saw as well in the dark as in the day. All night they traveled and far into the next day. The boy grew hungry and tired, but the old one was unmoved by his pleas and seemed to grow neither tired nor hungry himself.

They reached the valley of the Aomi when the sun was at its highest in the sky.

Blue Snow looked upon the valley with dark fears growing through his shoulders and legs. A sickness and a chill came upon him, and his teeth touched ice in his mouth. A cold wind and the smell of old things in the ground blew in his face.

"What is this place?" asked Blue Snow.

"This is the valley of Aomi. And there, coming alive in the rocks, is Aomi." The old one pointed, and a bright but dull thing rattled upon the rocks. It rose and it slithered and it rolled and its shape changed. It grew and it went little and it was a small animal and it was part of the ground and the wind across the grass and the insects whirring up in summer.

It flew like a bird and it went whipping along like a black snake and it did not move at all and it got closer and stayed where it lay, a demon trapped in the rocks.

Suddenly it became a rabbit and hopped across Blue Snow's feet, dragging a lame leg.

"Catch it and kill it!" suddenly cried the old one, with a strange, terrible voice that commanded, that could not be denied.

And forgetting everything, Blue Snow chased the crippled one across the ground. He forgot who he was. His fears and aches and pains and tiredness were forgotten in the run of the chase as he smashed at the rabbit with a rock. His face was hot with a fever and a wildness. And he struck again and again, and his muscles raced with the good feelings that swam in his blood.

The rabbit, its head smashed into jelly, boiled over and became a small bird fluttering across the ground with a broken wing. "Kill it!" commanded the old one.

Again Blue Snow gave chase, battering the bird down, crushing its frail body in his hands. The bird poured out of his hands and became a fawn without eyes, and Blue Snow sank his teeth into the fawn's neck, seeking the jugular, loving the blood taste of the hunt and the animal heat. And the old man stood and watched, and Aomi died many times.

And the valley of Aomi filled with the excited hunger of the chase and the quick snap of torment and death. Finally, exhausted with blood and hate, Blue Snow lay on his back.

The old one stood above him, not smiling. His face was grim and filled with the wisdom of one who asks questions that are not mysteries.

"You cannot leave here now. You must stay." Blue Snow sat up, his breath coming in gasps.

"I will leave anytime I like."

The old one shook his head. "There is no way out for you until there is no hate left in you. If you do not believe me, try to walk away."

Blue Snow got to his feet slowly. He looked at the old one and then back at the valley where

Aomi waited. He took one step in the direction from which they had come. The old one made no move to stop him. Aomi rested quietly on the rocks.

Blue Snow took another cautious step. Nothing happened. With a cry of triumph, he began running, speeding past the old one into the forest.

As he came to the forest, there was a flash of light, and he felt the earth move beneath his feet. Blue Snow stumbled, his eyes on the ground, but he regained his balance and lifted his head. He was still running but not toward the forest.

The old man stood in the valley, a sad smile on his face as Blue Snow ran toward him.

Blue Snow stopped running, confusion and terror on his face. He looked back at the forest, so near and yet so far away. The old one motioned for him to come forward, and reluctantly Blue Snow walked back to the old man.

"Will that happen every time?" asked Blue Snow.

The old one nodded. "You will not leave until your hate dies. At the edge of the forest, every step away from the valley is two steps back into the valley."

"I don't understand. I want to go home," said Blue Snow.

"You use empty words. You are home. Aomi, the demon, is your home."

"Why me?" said Blue Snow. "Why was I chosen for the demon?"

"Because you chose," said the old one. "I watched you. I watched the children of the village play cruel games upon each other as children sometimes do. But you were different. You are the kind that goes deeper than the small cruelties of the small ones. You are a killer whose inside is rotten with hate like a dead tree. And because your kind never tires of hating and hurting, you are here."

"I want to leave. I am frightened. I don't want to stay with demons!"

"Aomi eats kindness. It cannot harm you. There is not a kind bone in your body. The beast demon will give you all you need. Eat of Aomi's flesh for hunger, drink of its blood for thirst. All that you love is here. For Aomi can be tormented a thousand ways and never die. Go. Aomi awaits the chase, the feel of death snapping its jaws. Use your hate. Go. Aomi grows restless." The old one put his hand on Blue Snow's shoulder and gently pushed him forward, toward Aomi waiting in the rocks. "Give Aomi the pain it loves and hates. Hate is the love that is not a weak pain. Aomi waits for you. Only the strong fight demons."

And the old one pointed to the flowing strength of Aomi gathering upon the ground. "Hurry. He waits."

"How long will I stay? How long will I do this, old one?" asked Blue Snow, his eyes on Aomi, feeling the fever rising in him again, tearing him away from the questions that tumbled in his brain.

"Until you become gray-haired like me and dried out with the fever and the hating. Who can say how long that will be?"

"How will I know when it is time to stop?" said Blue Snow, his body alive and trembling with the fever and the wildness.

"You will know neither a hunger nor a thirst that Aomi will not fill. That is all you need to know. You will live a long time, but when the hating stops you will stop. You will know when the hating stops, just as I knew when my time to stop had come. For you see, I was once the Aomi's keeper."

"Because you hated?" asked Blue Snow, and then he was gone, forgetting the question, no longer seeing the old one or living in the world he had once belonged to. Blue Snow saw only the quick coming and flowing of the demon Aomi. And he killed and killed, and the old one was forgotten.

"No," said the old one, talking to himself as he watched with sad, knowing eyes. "No," said the old one, the rustling leaf that blows gently and crumbles. "Because I could not love."

DANCING THE DEAD SAFE INTO THEIR BEADS

There is a mountain. The white people who came later had a name for it but the real people who came first knew the mountain's true and everlasting name. They called it Old Woman Mountain. The mountain was a woman and the Great Spirit was weary of her. All through the ages of the great hot, through the ages of the great leather skins, in the ages of those who had walked like men, the eyes of the Great Spirit had looked upon Old Woman Mountain.

Hidden rivers ran through Old Woman Mountain's stone heart and she stood against the sky, proud, facing each sunset with the same fierce beautiful smile on her face.

The Great Spirit could remember when she had been young and he had loved her, had loved her even as he had shaped her. Yes, the Great Spirit had loved her as his mighty hands painted her face and put her between the great sea and the ocean of sand and wind.

She was Young Woman Mountain then. Her face had been fairer then, the centuries of living had not yet scratched her proud face. The mountain rose above the land like the Great Mystery. And those fashioned upon the plains below her were created that they might love her.

But even then, Young Woman Mountain had troubled the Great Spirit. It was as if her heart was too fierce and too proud. Her beauty was too great, and as with all things past understanding, she became a creature of the nightland, a thing of secrets and terrible passions.

And so through the ages, as the creatures of the plains gathered at her feet, she burned through the night of her life with a strange and terrible beauty.

Cities, humble and great, rose on the plains beneath her. First came the cave dwellers that dwelt in her womb, scouring her cavern walls with the birth flame of their cook fires. Then rude huts that dared the wind and sun, until they gave way to dust or something greater, an ivory city soon to become an echo on the wind of the great things yet to come.

And the splendors therein did rival the painted face of Young Woman Mountain. Great buildings rose like peacocks, housing the mighty and the profane. And always there are those who loved her, who built webs of jeweled veils through which they might always peer at her face.

One city rose as if it would live forever, only to die as another grew out of its ashes. Her stone heart nursed them, challenged them to greater heights and deeds as if they courted her favor with each dazzling new civilization. The hands of Kings caressed her face and, for a time, believed that they captured a part of her terrible beauty. But it was not to be so.

She was fashioned out of a great mystery and none could tame her, none could truly possess her. Perhaps not even he who had made her so mysterious as she became in the night of her life.

The Kings had their season and then they were no more. New ones came, and like those who had gone before, they too tried to possess her.

It was not to be and in time the Kings grew tired of seeing that uncaring face which would not surrender to them and their caresses turned to blows. Their hands fell heavily upon her painted face and they tore great wounds in her body. They tunneled deep into her belly, seeking the uncaring mysteries of her heart.

They cut pieces of her and took them far away and fashioned strange buildings and devices of her skin and sinews.

Ragged gashes and scars appeared on her sides, but through it all, she smiled her secret and terrible smile, staring into the sunrise at things her desecrators could not see.

In time her strangeness became too much even for the Great Spirit. What was once loved, now became an enemy to him who had made her. In her uncaring stone face, the Great Spirit saw that he had failed in the making of her and in his dreams he began seeking ways to destroy her.

LOVE LIFE OF THE LEGLORN

The little purple-headed boy of summer squatted in a semi-military position beside the path and watched the ants falling down the sides of anthills. He had come before daybreak to sit by the path in the hopes that he might speak with the master. His little purple head was filled with visions of material gain.

If he brought his master the tongue of a human being, would not his master be pleased? Would not his master give him a wondrous gift if he could bring the master a naked lizard shaped like an aircraft carrier? Rappi's head was full of such thoughts. Most of all he desired to please the master, which was not an easy task.

First one had to meet him. In order to do that, it was necessary to hide in the bushes beside the path, keeping a sharp lookout for the master, all the while hoping to catch him in a good mood. When the master is ugly from the toes up, you will be underfoot, was one of the sayings in the village. The day the nine-legged horse steps on the master's foot is not a good day to kick the master's dog. That was another saying in the village. When one dealt with the master, one had to watch out.

The ants were busily engaged in dragging stuff up the anthills so other ants could push it back down again. There was a saying in the village, as busy as an ant and twice as nuts. The village was full of good sayings. Rappi was trying to turn an ant over with a dead cone pole snake he had found in a bush by sitting on it.

There was a wild, crashing noise off in the distance. It sounded like two semi-elephants mating through a knothole in a wooden fence. It sounded like a flamenco dance troupe being raped by a Salvation Army band. It was loud and seemed to be heading in Rappi's direction.

Rappi jumped with fright and dove even farther back into the bushes. Perhaps it is the whistling moose that swallows little boys, thought Rappi. Perhaps it is the big old wild man of the mountains, the toothless one who gummed little children to death whenever he caught them. Perhaps.

Rappi crouched flat against the ground in terror, his primitive mind filled with childish fears and superstitions. A gray-and-white thing with a sunburn and a peeling nose smashed through the bushes and onto the trail right in front of Rappi. Rappi allowed himself to relax a little. It was only the master.

And the master was being very much ugly from his feet on up. He was yelling like he had needles through his shirttails and he looked like he had been dragged across the jungle by a slow snake. His shirt was three colors, two of them dirty, and his pants were dirty here and there, being clean mostly in the places where they had holes. The holes were very clean.

It was not a good day for the jungle. He was tearing it up left and right and scorching the air with his language. Rappi decided he would stay in the bush and not bother the master today. Rappi could not think of any saying in the village that covered hiding in the bushes when the master was like he was, but he thought to himself that there sure ought to be one.

Ideas went through the master like a hiss in his brain. There was a ringing in his ears and a constant pounding at his temples. He smashed through some reeds near the riverbank and his shirt caught on a thornbush and came off in two big hunks, an armhole for each hunk.

He swore and swung at the bush with his fist. The blood that started flowing out of his hand sobered him a little. It hurt like hell and that brought him a little closer to rationality than he had been all day.

It reminded him why he was mad. It was that damn Rappi who had used the last of his shirts to clean out the lizard cages. Or was it Bappi? All those damn aliens looked alike. They even had the same sort of name. Whoever it was, if he ever caught him, he'd flay him to the bone.

Of course, that wasn't the real reason he was upset. No, it went deeper than that. It was rain and the legs of a stripper named Candy Boxes.

It hadn't rained in seven months. He would have sold his mother for a cup of water. How long

had he been drinking the muck the natives of Mintfrappe siphoned out of trees? Had it really been seven months? Seven months of virpa sap, which tasted like something the dog brought home instead of depositing with upraised leg on the fire hydrant.

And one of those crotty aliens, how the hell did he know which one, had tried to take the tacks out of the picture of her he had nailed over his bed. Enrico Fermi! Those idiots would eat anything with metal in it! One night he woke up and two of them were under the bed, chewing on his bedsprings. It was one hell of a life.

And Candy Boxes, did she care about him? If he wrote her a letter, saying, "DEAR CANDY, THE DOG ATE THE TOP HALF OF YOUR PICTURE BUT I STILL HAVE YOUR LEGS ON MY WALL," would she care? No, she wouldn't care. She'd just laugh and jump on top of an astronaut. It was depressing. He knew she was laughing at him and running around jumping on astronauts. That was what sent him in desperation into the Planetary Foreign Legion and to this godforsaken planet. She had an uncontrollable urge for astronauts, planetary explorers, and spacemen of all types. He could never quite reconcile himself to it somehow. He was always tripping over a spacer's tote bag in the bathroom. There was always somebody shaving in the mirror before he got up in the morning. And they all had tattoos on their arms that said in old English script: MOTHER.

He would have had himself tattooed too if he thought it would have made any difference to her. It wouldn't have. Candy Boxes liked only what was fashionable and what was fashionable was the brave men who explored space, roaming the galaxy to come back to earth after months of celibacy, hornier than hot rabbits with socks on. The in thing to do was relieve these brave men, to comfort them after their prolonged abstinence. After all, said *Women's Bare Daily*, what greater reward could the women of earth offer these returning heroes? Candy Boxes agreed with that sentiment entirely. She agreed with it everywhere and with everyone. She agreed to it in a variety of positions. That was why San-derman retired from chiropodist work and signed up for space duty.

Did Candy Boxes know her legs were on the wall? Sanderman the master used to beat the little alien girl called Dunchfito because she didn't have Candy Boxes' legs. Dunchfito had her name tattooed on each of her legs, hoping it would help him figure out that he was certainly right about little Dunchfito's legs not being Candy Boxes' legs. It did not seem to help in any way or clear up the confusion. Dunchfito always got her revenge, though.

She always waited till he fell asleep, then cracked him over the head with a rubber-headed mallet. He always woke up the next morning with a blinding headache and a fuzzy spot on his head that was beginning to soften after several months of nightly poundings. He never woke up when she hit him but he did have reoccurring dreams. Sometimes he dreamed he was a tennis ball, sometimes he dreamed the entire chorus line of a musical variety show was kicking his head in.

His dreams did not terrify him but he did wake up a lot of times in the morning with the feeling that the entire population of Mintfrappe had walked across his tongue in their socks.

As blood dripped from his thorn-damaged knuckles, waves of gray matter fluttered like clouds in his brain. He just had to mangle something, to bash its stupid breathing face in. Tear its legs off, get hair between his teeth, see pulp, pulp. The more he thought of it, the more he felt like going berserk.

He cursed like a madman and went boiling off into the jungle again. He smashed through a particularly thick clump of bushes and fell like an old stuffed duck with loose wings into the river. The river was dry, choked with dust and boulders. He missed the dust.

He sat there, numb from the bruised hip up, numb down to the toes too. There he was, a once reasonably intelligent chiropodist, living a comfortable life among the feet of other people, maybe a guy a little too hung up on ... Who the hell was doing all that screaming?

He looked up on the bank and saw a dimpo bird shrieking like a five-alarm fire. Oh Christ, if he only had a gun! He used to have a gun but one of the damn aliens ate it. He'd found the

pearl handles with teeth marks in them. That was all that was left. He picked up a rock and heaved it with all his might at the bird but he missed it completely and it flew off screaming even louder. Sanderman gave it up.

Every day Sanderman went a little bit berserk in the jungle. All it had to do was rain. Just once. Just one little, insignificant day of rain and he could get out of there. The river was the only way out and the only way out was dry. The time when the rains should have come was already gone. Long since gone. The only way into the village of Mintfrappe was down the river after the rains came. He had been assigned there until the rains came and his replacement could boat in as he, Sanderman, rode the river out.

The village he was stranded in was surrounded by impenetrable jungle. A hundred times he had set out to beat his way back to civilization only to find himself back at the village of Mintfrappe. He had tortured dreams of being stuck there forever. What if it never rained ever? What if Candy Boxes ran off and married a lunar-module salesman? His life was a nightmare of just those sorts of hideous possibilities, all the more hideous because he was, so to speak, up the river without a river.

His anger spent, his hip bruised, he limped back into the village compound with his hands over his ears. He was unable to shut out the inevitable sound of the nutcracker birds the natives kept as pets. There was a continuous cracking sound. Crack. Crack. It continued unabated twenty-four hours a day. Crack. Crack. When they ran out of nuts, they did impressions. Crack. Crack. It brought tears into his eyes.

An old purple-headed man crawled out of one of the doorways to the huts. One of his legs looked like a CARE package for Dr. Frankenstein.

"I hurts my hooper," said the old man, smiling like he deserved praise. "Will Master look, see, view, get eyeball of, leg?"

The old man shook his purple head from side to side like a dog suppressing a sneeze.

"Nuts!" said Sanderman with a look of disgust. "Can't you see I'm crazy?"

"Eye is twenty-twenty," said the old man. "You describe, I tell you if see it. What colors is it most of?"

"Nuts," said Sanderman with very little feeling left in the statement by now.

"Colors of nuts, most sure," said the old man, and he fell over when his bad leg collapsed under him without warning.

Sanderman bent over him and unwrapped the strip of bark that one of the native women had tied around it. An old dead rat fell out of the wrappings. It was a dead rat of the long-dead variety.

"What the hell is this doing in there!" screamed Sanderman.

"Lunch," said the old man innocently.

Without a moment of hesitation, Sanderman turned around and tossed his cookies all over the ground. He tossed them in one beautiful, continuous stream that splashed merrily over his shoes.

The old man stared at the remains of Sanderman's lunch on the ground with the respectful eye of the gourmet, with the speculative eye of the comparison shopper. Fortunately, Sanderman was unaware of it or he would have been bent over even longer, pumping long after his well was dry.

"What you say, Master? You cure leg up? Put the fix cure up?" said the old man, wanting to know.

Sanderman, holding his stomach with one hand, picked up the rat with the other and tossed it over his shoulders.

"Lunch," said the old man sadly as it flew over Sanderman's shoulder.

Sanderman ground his teeth together so hard his gums got flesh wounds and bent over to examine the wound again. It reminded him of a girl he knew in New York. The city, not the

state. She always wore red socks. She had a pimple on her right knee. Or was it her left? He couldn't remember her face but the knees were very familiar.

"Filthy!" said Sanderman. "You're dying! I told you! I told you! How many times did I tell you?"

"At least," said the old man calmly.

The whole leg was rotten. It was falling off. It was so rotten moss was growing on one side of it. It was so rotten the woodpeckers would be after him in a week or two, thought Sanderman with what was hardly a rational thought since there were no woodpeckers in Mintfrappe.

Everybody was sick with something. It was the national pastime. The climate of Mintfrappe was lousy. The weather featured mild and balmy diseases, festering tomorrow with fever highs in the low hundreds. The village idiot used to have worms in his ears. He had put them there himself. They kept crawling out. He was the only one too stupid to catch something. He was the only healthy one in the whole village and was universally despised. The village idiot was the old man. He finally settled on a surprise amputation which didn't work. At least not completely. He fainted before he got halfway to the bone of his leg. In that sense, he had failed, but the resultant infection had brought him into his own socially. The fact that he was dying of it was the height of fashion. Of late, however, the old man had begun to show a markedly hostile attitude toward the prevailing notions of what was considered fashionable. That was why he was the village idiot. He had a short attention span and could never finish anything.

"Will you cure, fix up, me with the stinger in seat box?"

"Get out of here!" roared Sanderman. "I hope the toes on your other foot fall off too!"

"Why, thanking you most much," said the old man, smiling happily at the thought of further deterioration of his body.

Sanderman watched him limp away and he didn't know whether he was supposed to be angry or disgusted or depressed. He worked at trying to be all three but then he thought about the picture on the wall of Candy Boxes' legs and he settled on being suicidally depressed.

He still had the urge to kill something, a feeling in no way dampened by the legs on the wall of his cabin. If anything, Candy Boxes' legs were a further incitement to riot. Aren't legs always what cause riots? It seemed that it must be so to Sanderman.

A drop of moisture splashed coolly against his forehead. It struck softly but had the effect of an explosion on Sanderman.

He leaped into the air, head reared back, mouth open to receive the liquid. Rain! Rain! Rain! His blessed rain! His ticket back to Candy Boxes! A drop of liquid melted on his tongue and his eyes sunk into his head. He looked like he had just been mounted and stuffed. His eyes looking up, his ears hearing that sound. He gagged. Crack. Crack. He threw up with nothing left to throw up. Those damn nutcracker birds! He fell to the ground, completely fagged from gagging. He'd had quite a day. Sanderman closed his eyes wearily. He could just see it

At this very moment, Candy Boxes would be putting a slug in the jukebox back on earth, U.S.A. Back there in Mother Flicker's Bar and Billiards room. She'd be shooting pool, leaning over the table, her boobs sometimes hanging right down into the side pockets when she was lined up just right. It drove him crazy just thinking about it. And she had a pitcher of beer at her table. Ice-cold beer and the glass she was pouring it in was almost clean by at least two days. It was driving him crazy.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. It was the old man again.

"Can I eats belt buckle?" asked the old man.

"What?" screamed Sanderman, his hand unconsciously straying to the worn metal buckle of his Planetary Foreign Legion-issue belt. "What!"

"Owed me for lunch rat throwed without being to find," said the old man, teetering on one leg in front of Sanderman. The old man looked determined.

He left Candy Boxes with one of her breasts in the side pocket. He tore the belt off with a

kind of lethal frenzy and thrust it at the old man with a vicious swing. The old man fell over sideways with the belt wrapped around his neck. Sanderman seemed unaware of the old man's tumble. Just as the old man began gnawing on his belt buckle, Candy Boxes sank the eight ball and an astronaut reached out and dragged her under the table.

Sanderman screamed with impotent fury and went dashing madly off in the direction of the jungle again. He ran headfirst into a tree and that brought him back to his senses, in the sense that he imagined that it knocked the astronaut out. He slid down the side of the tree and rested.

Almost in front of him, the bushes parted and a lizard shaped like a Volkswagen with a tongue stepped out into the sunlight. The perfect victim. Sanderman's hands squeezed imaginary pulp in anticipation of the lunge. Just as he was ready to spring all two hundred pounds of him on the helpless lizard, his attention was distracted by a rather large snake of the unkissably poisonous variety. It was one of those snakes in the who-to-avoid-and-what-not-to-touch category. It had an unpleasant talent for being fatally poisonous. It was a foogi snake, the most dreaded reptile in Mintfrappe.

The snake oozed toward the lizard, which promptly froze in its tracks, its tail going limp like a stock market quotation.

"Kill it," shouted Sanderman, aware that the snake needed no cheerleading section.

The snake moved on oiled gears, coiling like a crocheted doily just inches from the doomed lizard's snout. The snake moved its head from side to side in a hypnotic, sleep-inducing rhythm.

"Kill it for me!" whispered Sanderman.

Suddenly, a shadow fell over Sanderman and he looked up at the sky. For the first time in months, the sky was full of clouds.

"The rain!" he shouted. "The rain!" He was in an absolute delirium, overjoyed to tears.

He brought his head back down, taking his eyes off the sky, and looked once more at the doomed lizard and the foogi snake.

The foogi snake had fallen asleep and the lizard had already ingested a third of him.

Two days later, Sanderman pulled what was left of the roof of his shack off of what was left of the rest of his body. It had been one hell of a storm. It had been a real frog strangler. Yes, sir, a dust storm like Mintfrappe had never seen before and gale winds up to ninety miles an hour. Dust and more dust and nothing but dust. He spat out dust like an upchucking Sphinx.

If there had been something left standing, he would have hanged himself from it immediately, but the whole place was flatter than Lizzie Borden's love life. He crawled out from under the building slowly. There was a persistent buzzing in his ears. It was increasing in volume.

It seemed to be coming from above him. He was afraid to look up for fear his head, when once bent back, would continue backward until it fell off. He took a chance anyway.

It was a spaceship. It was preparing to touch down. He blinked his eyes to make sure it was real. It was real. He let out a whoop, staggered to his feet, and began tottering in the direction of the ship.

It touched down in a great uprush of dust as the jets fanned the ground, easing the big ship to a soft, near-perfect touchdown.

The ramp was down before he got there. The hatch opened as he hit the edge of the ramp. Candy Boxes stood framed in the hatchway, her head the only thing visible.

Sanderman's head stuck to the roof of his mouth. He had her legs etched indelibly on his mind. How he had ached for the touch of them! The sight of them! Glorious legs, wonderful legs of the evening! Like two poles of pearls shifting toward the center of the universe! Legs! Legs like drink-stirring rods made out of honey and satin! Legs that were win, place, and show at the hundred-dollar window! Legs that played the tuba in the back seat of his mental car! Legs! Legs!

He stood paralyzed at the edge of the ramp. Her face didn't exist. The dog had eaten it away much too long ago. It was her legs that were his memory of her. How he longed to tie his tongue around her dimpled knees! How he ached to encircle her ankles with his socks!

She stepped through the archway and came toward him. She seemed taller. She was. She stood on two shiny aluminum legs that gleamed brightly beneath her. Her steps were smooth and fluid.

"Sanderman!" she cried. "I've come back to you! My long-lost lover! My spaceman hero! Rescued at last!"

His mouth fell open in an imitation of the Grand Canyon.

"Your, your . . . WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR LEGS?????????????"

"Oh, you noticed!" she said coyly. "Why, artificial legs are all the rage back on earth now! You know me, always keeping up with the latest fashions. How do you like them, dear? Don't you think their gleam is positively sinful?"

He fainted and fell back into the dust like a meteor entering the atmosphere. There was a burning finality to his faint

He died right there of a broken heart.

"Jeez," said Candy Boxes, "he was overcome with emotion."

Actually, he was underwithheld.

MOTHER OF CLOTH, HEART OF CLOCK

I meant to kill him but I had no idea I could do it so completely. I surprised myself. But I guess I lose control sometimes. I go mad, smash things, break out the windows, and throw animal droppings at the Sunday crowds. Mad, that's what they think I am. But I don't care what they think except they're going to kill me. I care about that.

I care about them going to kill me. Wouldn't anyone? Ask anybody else in these cages and they'll all tell you the same thing. Nobody likes to get killed. Except the snakes. Sometimes I wonder if the snakes even know if they're alive or dead. Snakes are an indifferent lot.

Perhaps it's just as well that they kill me. And this time, I hope they do it right. I don't want to go through this again. I'm tired of lying here on this soiled straw matting, at the mercy of my keeper's indigestion. Regular feedings? I should say not. Brad-dock used to be my keeper, how the crowds loved me then. Fed like clockwork, I was, and sleek and well petted. The crowds went for me then. I was the fair-haired one then. Yes, sir, no question of it.

But now, since they found Braddock's body partly ingested, the stomach torn out like the sawdust stuffings of a wooden doll, us animals have to take what we can get, which isn't much. Our new keeper, he must be nearly demented, the way he drinks and all, and when his stomach is upset, does we get fed? Us does not.

Ever since I killed that man, I guess, things have been bad. I used to be in the same cage with Flippy and Jumbo but now they've got me penned by myself. Maybe I'm just too old. Getting too old, that's one of the things that is always happening to us. The muscles get stiff and we forget things. One week we can hear the oohs and aahs of the kids watching us and the next it seems like you can't remember any of the acrobatics and your hair is beginning to fall out. So it goes.

When I was young, I think I was loved. I don't remember my mother, they took her away and gave me this cloth thing with a clock inside. It wasn't the same thing as a mother, of course, but it served its purpose. It was better than no mother at all, was the way I looked at it. So soft the cloth was, almost like my mother's fur, and the clock ticking away in as regular a heartbeat as you could like. Of course, every hour the clock gained a minute, which may be the reason why I turned out so wrong. These things happen, you know.

There's still some blood on my straw matting and I really wish someone would come in and change it but I don't suppose anyone will. Since the murder no one will come near to me except to drop food through the slot in the bars. And not much of that either. How I miss Braddock. I wish they hadn't found him dead like that. He fed me and fed me well and I'll always remember that about him. He bled terribly when he died. I'll remember that too. There are so many things to remember.

I miss being petted. Nobody comes to brush me now. I look rather scruffy. Way I look, maybe getting put to death isn't such a bad idea. They don't love me anymore and I don't think they ever will again. Why go on then? What would be the point? I'm too old to do tricks anyway. And I'm so lonely.

I can still see out the high window. I can still climb a little, although what good it does, I don't know. I hear all the people out there, laughing and having fun. Living as if nothing had happened and for them, I guess, nothing has happened. Why did it have to change for me?

Is this what they call growing up? If it is, I don't feel so good and I wish it would go away. Nobody comes to see me. Nothing to look at and nothing to look forward to, one dreary meal a day and not nearly enough to keep me sleek and fit. If they kill me, at least I'll get out of this cage. They'll take me out to bury me. They always bury us in the ground when one of us dies. They have funny ways. I think it is a waste of meat when they bury one of us. Perhaps it does not occur to them that we are edible.

I do not know why they do not eat us when we die. I do not understand them at all. They do so many things that I do not understand. Once they put me in a cage with Nappi. Nappi

looked just like me except she seemed to have longer fur and brighter eyes. We used to sleep in the tree, wrapped in each other's arms. We were very happy. But one day they took Nappi to the big white building where they take all the animals that die.

When they brought her back that night, she had funny things made out of glass and metal buried in her head. They had pulled out her hair in two little patches on each side of her head and planted these things in there. I do not know if they thought they would grow there or not. I did not like them. Nappi did not like them either.

Nappi did not like me anymore after that either. She would not climb the tree with me, and when I tried to put my arm around her, she sank her sharp white teeth in my arm. I could not go near her without getting bitten. Later they took her away because she tried to bite Braddock when he brought food to us. It was not like Nappi to do that, sweet gentle Nappi, always crowding up to the bars to be first to get petted. She had been one of Braddock's favorites, I know. He always had a good word for her. But she wasn't the same Nappi.

She snarled and raged around the cage. She upset the visitors and so they came and took her one day and I never saw her again. I guess they destroyed her because the things in her head would not grow. I do not understand why they do these things. Nappi was very nice and gentle. She had had a real mother and she seemed so alive.

I sleep a lot because that helps pass the time. I'm really not hungry much anymore and my fur is falling out more and more. I eat when they bring me food but my heart is not in it. I call out to the other animals sometimes at night and they answer but it does not help very much. I cannot see them and the comfortable sounds they make only make it seem worse.

I did not mean to kill that man. I did not know who he was. He shouldn't have been here. Perhaps I did mean to kill him. He frightened me. Yes, he did, and I guess that is why I killed him. There was something not right that night when he came to my cage. All the other animals sensed it too. They were pacing restlessly in their cages, moaning and growling. Some of the big cats threw themselves against the bars, roaring.

The man smelled strange. He smelled like the animals that get sick and are taken away to the white building after they stop moving. Sometimes the animals would lay there all night sick like that and not moving before the attendants found them. The smell would get very strong then. That was the kind of smell the man had.

It was dark, I was awake in my tree, huddled against the trunk, missing the comforting warmth of Nappi, when he came over the wall. He fell to this side of the wall. He was very clumsy. It was frightening the way he fell. Like he did not have any bones. He just collapsed like jelly, rolled, and then slowly got to his feet. He frightened me.

I hid in the tree. I did not want him to see me. He walked very stiffly. Every step he took, it seemed like he was going to fall over. His eyes were closed, I could see that in the full light of the moon, and he reminded me of some of the animals who move their legs and make noises in their sleep.

I hid behind my tree trunk and I thought he would not find me. But I was wrong. He was coming for me. He came to the door of my cage and his hands brushed over the locks. The animals in the cages next to mine were in a rage. Their screams and catcalls filled the air. The man did not seem disturbed.

I was getting frightened. I get angry when I get frightened and I do things. I do not like to do things but when I am frightened I lose control. The man was tearing at the hinges of the door to my cage. I did not want him to come in. His smell frightened me.

He forced the door open. I bared my teeth and growled. I didn't want him in my cage. I don't like it when people come into my cage. His eyes opened, but his eyes were glassy. I do not think he could see me. I growled.

His mouth twitched and his lips moved. He reached up through the branches and his hand touched my leg. His hand was cold and damp and I couldn't stand the smell. I jumped down at him. I bit his face and tore at his eyes and jumped up and down on his chest when he fell over.

He fell over very easily and he did not make a sound or fight back. That made me even madder and I tore away at him with my sharp white teeth.

He came apart. The other animals in the cages next to mine were roaring and throwing themselves against the bars of their cages in frenzy. I went wild too. I was frightened and I lost control. I bit the bad-smelling thing's head off. I sank my teeth again and again into its soft white neck and it fell off and I worried the bloody thing across the floor. I clawed its foul-smelling clothes off, ripping it into shreds, and stamped furiously on the soft white body. I was frightened and angry.

Then I ran up the tree and hugged the branches until my arms hurt and then I rested and calmed down. I was tired and frightened and I wanted to go away from there and not see that man anymore. I looked down and the man had not gone away, so I stayed up there in the tree and hugged the branches.

All the man's arms and legs had come off and I had got blood on my straw and I did not like it. I don't like blood. It makes my head hurt and I get angry and frightened. I stayed up in the tree all night.

When the new keeper, the mean one who drank, came in the morning to change my straw he found the dead man. I thought he was going to hit me with a stick. But he didn't hit me. He ran away and they came with a net and dragged me out of the tree and wrapped me up in the net and no matter how much I screamed they wouldn't listen. I wanted to be free and they wouldn't listen.

That's why they put me in this cage in the big white building and why the men in the white coats are going to kill me. They keep telling me they are going to kill me but I don't care. My fur is falling out and they don't feed me enough and nobody pets me anymore. I don't care. I'll sleep a lot and that will help pass the time. They don't love me anymore. I don't care. I'll sleep a lot and have good dreams and I will be very angry when they wake me up because my dreams will be very pleasant and I will not want to leave them.

I will dream that I am dead.

I'M A SPY IN THE HOUSE OF LOVE

I left the gates of the city and the girl behind and I walked through the rain. I passed over the stone bridge and into the silent rows of buildings in the alien quarter. It was the middle of the night and the air was untouchable, a foggy cloth that separated as I passed through it. Night sounds were soft, muffled, driven like tunnel vision.

I had an open wound on my chest through which my eyes called her name. I found myself moving ghostlike into the alien quarter, drawn there as though a magnet had attached me to the path of its forces. How often I had returned to haunt these dreary ways in the dark hours. I have met the dangerous, mad creatures that dwell here and they have met me. And sometimes I wonder if I am not one of them. I have murdered telepathically, I have killed souls with my eyes. I, too, wear a face from the ancient gallery.

As my steps took me closer to the place where I had once found her and lost her, I heard the red sounds of animals tearing at each other. I turned my eyes toward the alley and I saw the thrashing bodies rolling in the dark and then, faintly, I heard a cry for help.

The cry came from one of my own kind I could but dimly see, engaged in mortal combat with two Riyalls. They had him down against the side of the building, their long teeth moving toward his face. I came up behind them and stuck a dagger through the arm of the one who had him by the throat. He shrieked and jumped away. The other Riyall spun away from the downed man's body. He faced my dagger far too calmly for my taste. I made a move as if to throw it and it was only then that he turned and fled.

The other Riyall edged back away from us until his outline dimmed in the night mist. He uttered a threat in his own language which I could not understand, then turned and fled, Ms one arm dangling uselessly at his side.

The man moaned weakly and rolled over. Something was wedged between him and the wall. The man's breathing was harsh, ragged. In the dim light of the alley, his wounds were hard to see but I knew he would die from them. His face was torn in at least three places and one of his eyes was gone. I could feel the life forces draining away. There appeared to be nothing further that I could do. I had come too late. As I turned to leave, I suddenly noticed the object between the wall and the dying man's body. It was a severed head.

Just then the man's soul rose unsteadily to its feet, glowing softly in the night mist. It reached out and touched my hand and that touch was eloquent. I found myself seized up in a great mystery. I found myself filled with the old hunger and, almost unbidden, the blind womb, the cave mind, the dark part of me opened in my mind and the telepathic gift that has been the curse and death sentence of my life began in me again. A wave of lightning passed through me, thoughts tumbling madly in a stream, a continuum of shadings and nuances springing from the minds of those around me. The dying man's soul hovered above the body, taking the last essence of his bodily life force as it made complete its exit. There was a shimmering quality to the thought tendrils that streamed toward me from the dead man's soul. As my mind opened, as the dead man's soul poured into my mind, I began ordering its perceptions, refitting its thoughts into a chronology, a matrix that would allow me to read it. Each man in the world, each creature has its own mental language, and I, and I alone of my kind, am doomed to know how to read them.

That is my curse. My curse. I am an unwilling spy in the house of love, in the carnival of life. I have longed for blindness. I long to be a blind cave fish who makes a career out of sleep. Gentle sleep. But not for me. I prowl the night when all are snug in their beds except the creatures, the mad ones who instinctively fear me. Night is a comforting time, for the great mass of them, the screamers, the bleeders, the howling, insane, frantic insect cycle of them, are asleep. I take comfort in their dreams, their nightmares, and in the day, I sleep, projecting my nightmares on them.

"I've put a bullet hole in the wind," said the dead man's spirit. "My name is Carpenter."

My reordering of his mind was far from complete. I found myself as yet unable to reply.

"Come with me and I'll tell you something," said the spirit. "Hold my essence together with your mind and I'll tell you something."

"Agreed." I could now manage as I fitted him better into my thought stream.

"It was a black night," said the soul of Carpenter, "and hot as the red suns of Ishi. I had a hot little woman from Kroalian with me and we'd had a row. A blind, smashing fight and she ran from me, the little bitch, she ran away and I'd paid my money."

"Please!" I managed. "You must be faster, and more to the point. There is a limit to the time I can hold your life force against dissipation."

"I ran blindly, drunk as a space-happy harpy, in the dark, up this street and down that one. I guess I must have passed out somewhere along the way. When one of my buddies found me, I was asleep in the street outside our fleabag hotel. In a leather pouch beside me was this head."

"Faster! Speed!" I cried as I felt the life forces beginning to leak, to diffuse within the circle I had made to bind it.

With a kind of panic, the dead voice of Carpenter continued. "I thought I would keep it as a souvenir. But I no sooner got back to town with it than a Riyall showed at my door and offered me a thousand credits for it. I refused and two nights later they murdered me for it."

As the diffusion of the soul became more pronounced, the distance into Carpenter's soul that I could reach began shrinking. At the moment when I would have reached into the secret of the significance of the head, Carpenter began fading, spreading into a color wheel of glowing light, thoughts scattered, cut off from their center. I released the essence of him and, unbound, the soul of Carpenter shot upward into the night sky to join the other loose molecules of the universe, the void.

I paused a moment to reorient myself, to clean the shield away that I had used to hold Carpenter's soul together. My eyes fell with curiosity upon the head. It was well preserved, showing no sign of decay. I took hold of it by the hair and tucked it under my arm. On my way home I met no one, and as I walked, the head beneath my arm stirred with a restless energy, an energy unlike any that I have ever explored.

I put the head in a glass bowl and placed it on the table in the center of my living room. I had detected a slight tremor in the eyelids, a flutter as if they were on the point of opening. I intended to examine it the next morning. For now I would sleep. And it was while I slept that the eyes opened and moved in their sockets, watching.

MENSTRUATION TABOOS: A WOMEN'S STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

(with Jim Morrison)

"Conception," said Peter Renoir, "like imagination, is automatic and runs in grooves. Creativity in sexual matters is confined at every moment to the idiom it is creating."

Semina finished a cigarette in a conventional manner and stubbed it out on the cover of a literary magazine.

"I question your wisdom. I would add that a lover is only faithful either by ignorance of all others or by his own love of self."

"Nudity," continued Peter Renoir, "is appropriate for Greek gods. But to us, it is repulsive. The influences of the harmony of impressions that nudity provides us rob us of the veil that conceals natural imperfections."

"Such as our next-door neighbor who spends a lot of time locked in his bathroom and is fond of . . ."

"No specifics," snapped Peter Renoir. "I don't care how well built he is. This fatalistic seeking in you for inordinate length is a piddling love of decoration."

"To love decoration is to enjoy synthesis," she said. "It is to have hungry senses and unused powers of attention."

Peter Renoir looked at her and imagined her as the ideal Gothic church, enriched by forbidden altars, stalls, chantries, and tombs—cunningly devised ornaments that were the reason for the whole edifice.

They were sitting in the back seat of a 1957 blue Chevy. It was the night of the senior prom. They were both naked. She was a cheerleader and he had read too much Victor Hugo.

"I am experiencing lust," said Semina, smoothing mustard on her hot dog with her finger. It was his first seduction. It was her third hot dog.

"We should try to restrain ourselves," said Peter Renoir. "Unless, of course, you think you can arouse me yet again and can justify it by animal sincerity."

"Acquaintance is a necessary association between passion and a second erection. By this I mean arouse yourself. I hardly know you. After all, this is only our first date."

Peter Renoir paled slightly under the stars. He had stained the back seat and he knew his father would kill him. This thought was an irrational fear that served as the springboard for the prevention of a second erection. Then too, it was her period and it made her particularly abusive and given to painful sermonizing. It was a case of arrested envelopment.

"Would you like a cigarette?" he asked, offering her several.

"I would," she said, "if I did not love you more."

"It's late and we really ought to be going."

"It's early and the picture hasn't even started yet," pointed out Semina, who had a flair for accuracy.

"Let's not argue," replied Peter Renoir. "It's fate. Kiss me. Arouse me."

"Don't get pushy," advised Semina. "We happen to breathe and on that account we are interested in breathing and that is that. But sex is intentional. Besides, reproduction, like nutrition, contains a prophecy of false triumph. Fat people give birth to thin children. What then of the lowly IUD?"

"IUD?"

"Rubber, then, or diaphragm," suggested Semina. "There must be something worth wondering about. Our devisings have become too intentional."

"We could wonder about our future."

"Wouldn't that be boring?"

"Perhaps," admitted Peter Renoir.

She smiled at him with all of her teeth. "There is so little of a percentage in it for us. The future, in any case, is prerational. It is vigorous. It is unconvincing because it intends to be sincere even if it winds up being second-rate. If we were wise, we should look at the future, and decide not to go," said Semina, spreading her legs.

"Let's screw," said Peter Renoir, trying to come up with a viable alternative.

LOVE AFFAIR

She looked like a dollar bill, wrinkled and stuffed in some forgotten pocket.

He looked like a hand that had never known work.

And they met somewhere in the dark of the night in one of those lonely little places with bad lighting and overpriced drinks.

And she said, as he approached her, "This seat is taken." When it wasn't.

And he smiled with very white teeth, apologizing. "Excuse me, sir, seeing as how you're invisible, perhaps you won't mind if I sit on your lap."

And he sat down in the seat beside her and they looked at each other.

After a little while, when neither of them had made a move to say a single cliched thing, she sighed.

He noticed the sigh but did not mention it.

"I guess I'm going to fall in love with you," she said.

"I know," he said.

"But you probably won't fall in love with me."

"Probably not," he admitted with rare candor.

"And you'll sleep with me and tell me that you won't leave me."

He nodded.

"And we'll sit in bars and darkened theaters and hold hands like we were thirteen-year-olds about to steal our first kiss. And we'll tell jokes in bed and eat crazy things like pizza with whipped cream at four in the morning, and when I look in the mirror I won't see someone who's thirty-eight years old with a body that's beginning to sag, I'll see a woman in love."

"All of those things," he promised.

"And the first time I touch you, the rough skin of your hand will make me jump with a secret thrill of, not pleasure, no, not that, of discovery, I think. That first sense that another human body is touching mine. And all the small moments we share will rise above us, somehow made monumental and larger than ourselves."

He bought her a drink. She bought all the rest of them. They drank quite a few.

"Maybe we'll go for long walks and the rain will catch us and we'll huddle together in some doorway out of the rain and we'll hold each other very tightly and the cold won't matter and the rain won't matter because the only thing that exists is that feeling, that rosy glow that I'll have inside when you put your arms around me."

"Don't forget the boat rides in the lake. And picnics on sunny afternoons," he said, never looking in the mirror hanging over the bar, never seeing his own face. He never had to look because he knew his face was perfectly posed.

He said, "And don't forget the nights beside the fireplace, our faces glowing with the wine and the cheery heat of the flames."

"Never forget those things," she agreed. "I'll not forget them."

She would pay for the taxi. He didn't even offer because he knew she would.

"I'm rich," she said.

"Good for you, lady," said the taxi driver, who did not exist as far as his two passengers were concerned.

"I knew," he said.

"I knew you knew," she said. "It's the money, isn't it? That's the only reason, isn't it?"

Without hesitation, he answered, "Shall I lie?"

"Yes," she said. "Please do. This new honesty. I'm not sure I totally approve of it. I think I'd much prefer the lies."

"As you please," he said, smiling. She was no different from the others, just a little more shopworn.

"I've never met anyone like you," he told her, one hand seeking hers.

"Dozens like me, but go on," she said, watching the meter.

"Until I met you tonight in the bar, I thought I'd seen all the beautiful women in the world. Now that I've seen you, I've one more to add to the score."

"Yes," she said, holding his hand.

"I've been lonely in a thousand places tonight and I would have been lonely in a thousand more if I had not met you. With you by my side I'll never be lonely again."

"Never be lonely again," she said, picking up the last of his words as she dug the fare out of her purse.

The taxi sped off down the street. She nodded curtly at the doorman who held the door open for them.

She pushed the button marked "Penthouse" and the elevator ascended.

"And you want me? You find me desirable?"

"Yes." Lips parted, he moved against her. Gracefully, with none of the hesitant clumsiness of the first shared intimacy.

She responded willingly.

The door opened at the top and they stepped out, faces hot with the first warm flush of promised intimacy.

The key fit the door and they went inside.

"Drinks," he said, making them each one.

"I suppose it's in the script," she said.

"Always," he said.

"Can I tell you something you won't understand before I excuse myself to go get into something more comfortable?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Well. It's just that if you don't get what you want, you better want what you get."

"You're right. I don't understand." He frowned.

"You weren't really supposed to." She kissed him on the cheek, a small promissory note, and went to change.

He smoked a cigarette out of boredom, wondering how much money he'd eventually get off her. He saw no pleasure in all this. Instead, he took a certain mechanical pride in his own precision.

"You look ravishing," he said, spinning her around, looking appreciatively at the expensive nightgown that did not flatter her.

"You're overdressed," she said, helping him off with his coat, loosening his tie for him.

Later, when they had undressed, he admitted, "What you said before. I still don't understand it."

"Let's make love," she said. "It's not important. Just love me."

"Of course," he said.

In the morning, they awoke with their backs to each other.

He rolled over, remembering where he was and why. Blinking in the light, he reached for her under the sheets, fingers touching the places that would get a response.

She pushed him away, almost violently.

He was surprised. Very surprised. And he was a man who seldom had to experience that.

"But, darling . . ." he began, but she put her hand against his lips, cutting him off.

"I've made you uneasy. There's no need to be. It's not that I don't like it or the way you do it," she said.

He frowned, expecting something unpleasant.

"You're very good," she assured him. "It's not what you think."

"What is it then?" The sheet covered very little of him.

"It's just that I have stomach cancer and I can't hold the pain off anymore. The drugs have worn off and I couldn't stand it if you tried to touch me again."

"But. . ." There was no compassion in his voice. No pity.

"I expect you're disappointed. Not shocked. Just disappointed," she said. "It's not quite the long love affair you counted on, is it? Short, not very sweet and not very profitable, is it?"

He was professional enough to know the right response.

"But, darling, surely with the right doctors?"

"I'd still be dead, right doctors or not. A few weeks from now, days, who knows."

She seemed rather calm about it.

He stirred in bed, restlessly, his shoulders rising.

"It won't be a total loss. I'll pay you well for tonight," she said.

"I'm not a prostitute," he said, not really offended.

"I never said you were," she said, and she reached for the drawer of the night table. Her hand came out of the drawer with a pearl-handled .32.

"What's that for?"

"It's for that thing you don't understand," she said.

"You're not really going to use that, are you?"

"Yes."

"On yourself or on me?" He smiled somewhat cynically, aware that the dialogue was clever.

"Yes," she said. "I'm going to use it. That's all you need to know."

"Why?"

"You think I'm ugly, don't you?"

"What does it matter? Please put the gun . . ."

"No. I'll ask questions and you answer them. You'll tell the truth. The exact truth because this gun is loaded."

He licked his lips nervously, now aware of the tension edging the lines of her face. He pulled the sheet up over him as if it were some kind of protection.

"You find me ugly, don't you?" she asked.

"Yes. You're ugly."

"I'm not the kind of woman who's likely to get involved in a love affair, am I?"

"No. Probably not. But look, you can't. . ."

"Don't ad-lib, darling. An actor is only as good as his script."

"So you're ugly and no one's liable to fall in love with you and I'm only after you for your money. So what? You knew it all along. I don't see what that has to do with shooting me. What have I . . . ?"

"It has everything and nothing to do with you. You're just not very lucky. You picked me and that was a mistake." He moved, straightening up in bed. "I'm going." She cocked the gun and aimed it very carefully at his head. "I'd really rather you didn't." "But. . ."

"Now tell me. Don't you find me beautiful?" The gun did not waver.

He understood. "Yes. Yes. Of course. You're beautiful!"

"Tell me how beautiful I am."

"I've never met anyone more lovely."

"And you love me?" Her finger lightly caressed the trigger.

"Yes. I love you. I've never met anyone I've loved as much as you!" He smiled insincerely, beginning to perspire.

"And how long will you stay with me?" She looked kindly, almost lovingly at him.

He noticed the tender look in her eyes and allowed himself to relax a little. So she was not serious about the gun.

Encouraged, he tried to sound as if he really meant it. "I want to stay with you always. I'll never leave you. I really do love you."

He was as tender and as loving as he had ever pretended to be.

She seemed to be melting under his soft looks and soft words.

Her finger lifted off the trigger. She looked like a woman who was very much in love.

Then her finger found the trigger again and jerked it back.

The bullet took him just above the bridge of the nose and exploded bone and gray matter out the back of his head. The body thumped back against the headboard, then slipped sideways, falling over on her side of the bed.

She held the raging inferno in her stomach and leaned lovingly over the gore-soaked body in the bed. There was a red stain on the wall above the headboard of the bed.

"Such a lovely man," she said, the gun dangling from her fingers. "And he said he loved me."

She picked up a hand rapidly going cold and held it against the side of her face.

"No man on his deathbed could tell lies," she said.

"I'm beautiful," she said, in a room without mirrors. "Beautiful!" And the mirror was inside herself and she saw the reflection clearly.

"I'm loved!" And she felt the warmth of his arms around her and the taste of lips that her beauty had bought.

"He'll be with me always. He told me that he loved me," she said, and her faith was as strong and as real and as lasting as the growth that burned inside her like a worm of death.

She put the gun barrel against the side of her head.

"I'm having a love affair," she said, "and unlike other love affairs, this one is going to end happily."

Love affairs being what they are, the next bullet undoubtedly proved her right.

LAST WISH FULFILLMENT AND TESTAMENT

As I, the undersigned, lay here, body burned beyond recognition, having committed myself to death at my own hands, I leave this final legacy. These words are mine and not mine and though I speak them after the fact, the fact itself renders unto me that which is mine.

To my mistress, for all the days of her life that she spent with me and I with her, I leave her all of that which had value to me. In particular, I leave her my collection of paintings of horses with erections and my collection of lampshades made out of human skin. Cherishing, as was her wont, material possessions above life itself, she is now welcome to whatever bones I had not yet picked in this life.

Although my mistress is dead, I do not expect to meet her again. Her mind never penetrated any world but that of mortal pleasures, so I am sure she ceased to be in all worlds the moment she put the gun to her head.

To my father and his father before him, my apologies for not fully appreciating in time the complete efficiency of poisoning you both at an early age. In the folly of my times, perhaps I was led astray by the conventions that so blinded me that I could not see the nobility of both your deaths. That I aspired to it at a time when natural death had already deprived me of the opportunity in both your cases, is a sin that shall be neither forgotten nor forgiven. Had I you to kill again, less of the world would have died.

To my mother, upon whose grave are the ruins of an ammo dump, the memory of huge ovens, and the smell of other, more energetic mass graves, I offer no apologies. In this life, nothing became you so well as your leaving it. Time has not dimmed your role in the history of this world. You had become then what you are now. An obstruction and a blight upon the land. In the realm of newfound senses, in the spheres of expediency, you had become an experienceable and, of course, objectionable bowel movement. As a child in your womb, I found that every kick I gave I also got in return. I felt your mangled, your suffocating spirit traveling down the umbilical cord into my helpless body like a cloud of fierce intent. With you long dead, and me dying, I suppose your womb has made some adjustment to the inequality of our lives. I, for one, never experienced a moment of remorse, then or now, over what we shared together. The criticism, the moral bleats of the common man, were never of any concern for me. Our intimacy then, as now, was always my moment of highest self-esteem, my one truly BIG LIE which I never tired of telling.

I have always felt that Oedipus Rex should have put his mother's eyes out and not his own. After all, she was the older of the two and probably had a venereal disease.

To those weak men who advised me, who led me down the path that led to my eventual downfall, I leave my teeth and the eventual dispute over my dental records.

To those who stood by me when traitors turned like worms thawing in the half-warm meat of my century, I leave an almost inexhaustible supply of wasted meat which can be found stacked neatly in rows and tucked for safekeeping in the ground. I have instructed that markers, monuments, plain white crosses, the memories of idiots, and other such items are to be left in the places where the meat is stacked to light the way for the coming meatless ages. I do this out of a feeling of benevolence for mankind, lest he ever forget.

To the psychiatrists, I leave a stringless guitar and a condom with a mental image of a hole in the tip of it. May these dual instrumentalities carry them through the coming ages as they ponder the kind of world I and my kind made and remade.

To myself, in the extra-normal situation, I leave a pocket, completely sewn shut, in which I would put all the benefits, all the medals, all the glories, and all the triumphs which were mine in this world.

I deem these things my legacy and call upon the Gods and Goddesses of Valhalla to attest to my final and lethal last act.

My own obedient servant,

ADOLF HITLER

INTO EVERY RAIN A LITTLE LIFE MUST FALL

I punch into the console web, link into the main computer. The control room is warm and comfortable but outside it's a miserable night. The street monitors sweep my sector and all of them shoot back the same story. No action.

I'd lucked out on assignment. Hit the graveyard shift, which is my favorite. Most of the action breaks at night. Not tonight, though.

It's cold and it's raining to beat hell and this is one of those kinds of nights that give me the womb cop blues.

The streets in my sector are deserted. Very depressing. I like action. I sit there behind my monitors, audio helmet jammed on my head, feel like a football player sitting out a game on the bench.

I dialed Central to report myself in. "WOMB COP 345-45, STEVENS, ROGER DAVIS. Reporting for duty, shift 2, punch in 0200, all systems functioning, nothing to report, no shift 1 carry-overs."

It was a slow night all over. I had only about half of my mobile street units out. Rain had the whole city locked in. It was coming down hard and cold and nobody in his right mind was out in it, or anyone in his wrong mind either.

My hands itched with inaction, toying with the trigger grips of my bank of pocket lasers.

The rain had cut down visibility and I had all dispatched scanners turned up to the highest wide-angle scoop. Even then, my visual range was pretty limited.

I don't feel useful on a night like this. I like the action, like the feel of being on top of a crime, hitting into it, punching it in, and shutting it down. Then if I'm lucky, burn-down. I wish there was some way of expressing the satisfaction I get when I burn down a criminal. I love my work.

Fifteen minutes plugged into the computer and not one peep.

Then action. "Position," said the computer. "Pickup 27, Monitor 7."

This is more like it! I punch in video and audio and man, I feel alive again!

Nothing on audio but the sound of rain coming down on the pavement so hard it's bouncing. I tap the toggle on my helmet. I'm turning up to high gain. Still nothing but the damn rain.

Visuals, the same story. A gray side street shrouded in rain. Can't pierce the rain more than ten feet at a time. I link into the mobile unit. Scanners on high scope, still can't see a damn thing.

"27-7, move toward subject!" The monitor begins moving down the street, rapidly.

The computer reads out: "Pedestrian, unidentified racial type, unidentified gender. Computing."

"Identify," I snarl. I can't even begin to guess what's coming down.

The computer hesitates and then again: "Pedestrian, unidentified racial type, unidentified gender. Computing."

"Move in close, damn it!"

"Acknowledged."

I tap the trigger grips impatiently. This seems like it's taking forever. I feel like I am playing pin the tail on an invisible donkey.

Finally, audio picks up the sound of footsteps, the sound of feet splashing through puddles. A fraction of a second later, video picks out a bedraggled figure moving slowly through the rain. Heat scanners must have sensed him a long way off.

"Identify." The scanners freeze-frame his face, code and transmit the image automatically to Central.

"Caucasian, male. No information. No identity card, no arrest record. It does not compute."

Has to be a computer foul-up. Maybe fifty years ago it might be possible for someone to exist without an identity card but not now. Somebody in programming deserved a long vacation

without pay.

"Pursue and monitor," I order, stalling until Central rings in with the correct information. That's the best I can do.

"It does not compute. Lack of data," clacks out Central.

"Telephoto zoom. Target, hands and fingers. Positive print I.D. check," I order the mobile unit, which immediately begins circling subject, clicking extreme close-up telephoto freeze frames. I punch in the information direct to Central.

"Information acknowledged," reads out Central. "No print record. Information does not compute."

What can I do? Damn programmers! I punch in: "Check programmer error!"

Central beat me to it. "Possibility programmer error eliminated. No identity card. No file tapes. Detain and identify. Violation of Identity Code, Section 348. Hold for questioning." One entire panel lights up on my console. My computer units all lock into Central. They're functioning full-gauge on this one. Damn!

I've been a womb cop for ten years, ten years and I've never run into anyone who didn't have an identity card, who didn't have an identity tape on file! It's not only illegal, it's damn impossible! This was something new we had on our hands.

Two more panels switch in. The computer is going crazy on this one. As far as it's concerned, the impossible has happened.

I've got my eyes riveted on my monitors and I'm really giving our boy a looking-over. He's no beauty.

"Detain," I punch in, and the mobile unit which has been keeping pace with this character moves in and cuffs him to the detention cable on the side of the unit. No resistance, no reaction at all. Subject seems unaware of the monitor circling around him.

It's an old man, video observation indicates. Frayed overcoat. About 5'4", pants too big and ragged. Looks like an alcohol addiction case, a wino, unshaven. Eyes, on full zoom, look bloodshot. He's unconcerned. Looks like he doesn't care one way or the other about being stopped. Alcohol probable cause of brain damage indicated by subject's lack of interest, negative display of emotional response.

"Who are you? Please identify yourself," my voice comes through the mobile unit speakers. Tapes being filed, a direct line to Central. All my panels are lighting up. My console looks like a computer light show. Central is really shooting sparks over this.

The old scarecrow looks directly into the monitor. Gaunt features, eyes sunk into his head. Deathly white face. I'd swear I was talking to a corpse. No expression on the face, just kind of cold and withdrawn. No answer.

"Repeat. This is womb cop Davis. You are in violation of the Identity Code, Section 348. Please identify yourself." Not a flicker of anything from the old man. Central punches in: "Section Commander Hartmann on the line. What the blue hell is going on down there?" I beep in acknowledgment of his call. "Checking, sir. We have a man with no identity records, sir." "That's impossible!" Hartmann sounds fit to be deprogrammed. "Please identify yourself," I try again. Jesus, this is really one for the tapes!

"Plug in your lie detector monitors!" snapped Hartmann, his voice booming through loud on the line.

"They're already plugged in, sir! I can't get a response from subject, sir." Damn, I feel like an idiot. He knows I haven't got a response, that order about the lie detector was just to prod me into getting one. This action is plugged into every section of Central. My console panels flash with a thousand simultaneous plug-ins. Everybody's interested in this one.

My eyes stayed on the monitor. The old man turned away from the monitor and looked back over his shoulder, as if looking for someone, as if someone were following him.

"It's raining," said the old man. He turned around and looked straight into the monitor again.

I went to split screen, turned the console camera on me, and put my picture in the bottom half

of his screen. Standard interrogation procedure.

"This is womb cop Davis. You are in violation of . . ." He nodded once, rain pouring from the battered brim of his hat. "I know who you are."

"Please identify yourself." He could see me in his monitor, could see my hands resting lightly on the trigger grips of my pocket lasers. That threat gives me a psychological edge when questioning suspects. Seeing the burn-down triggers makes the threat more real to them.

No fear reaction in close-up video scan of his face. But there was something so strange about this old man that I found my own face tightening a little. I found my hands sweating on the trigger grips.

"Have you seen a man on this street? Did a man pass through here tonight?" asked the old man.

Stunned, I automatically shook my head no.

"Was you here last night? Did you see a man come through here last night? Did you see a man here after curfew?"

"Hartmann here," audio cut in. "Play along with him. Keep him talking. We've punched in voice prints, visual factors. We're running everything through the mill again. We have to have a computer error somewhere, possibly a circuit breakdown."

"I was on duty last night. I saw several men but none after curfew. We had a woman after curfew but no men," I answered, beeping in an affirmative to Commander Hartmann's call.

The old man's eyes burned in my monitor. The old man may have looked like a corpse but there was something fierce and wild about his eyes. They seemed to look right through me.

"Who are you looking for? Perhaps I can check with Central and locate him for you?"

He shook his head.

"I could send out a mobile unit to locate him for you."

"I'll find him first. I don't need you to find him. I'll find him first and then . . ." He let the sentence trail off.

"Does this friend of yours have a name?" I asked, trying an indirect tack. If we could pin down an associate, maybe we could trace back to him.

"He's no friend of mine!" snarled the old man, an edge of violence in his voice. "I've got a *message* for him."

There was an unspoken threat in his manner, in the way he emphasized the word "message."

"Perhaps we could help you deliver the message," I volunteered.

"No! Not yet. The only message I got for him is under my coat."

He tapped one of the bulky pockets of his overcoat.

I punched into the mobile unit, X-rayed him, scanned him with a metal detector. The unmistakable outline of a knife came from the pocket he had tapped with his unmanacled hand.

I debated immediate confiscation but tabled it. As long as he was talking, and since he was manacled to the mobile unit and couldn't go anywhere, there was no sense in taking any overt action that might make him stop communicating. Nothing forced here, just playing along, hoping he would give out some useful information.

Central punched in again: "Hartmann here. There is no, repeat, NO record of this man anywhere!" There was a note of panic in his voice. I could tell he was shook up and I didn't blame him. A contradiction like this could disrupt our entire society.

I wiped my hands against the armrests of my womb couch. I was sweating like a bandit caught on a monitor! At least, this night wasn't boring anymore, I'll say that much. It was turning out to be one hell of a strange night.

The old man looked back over his shoulder again. He seemed to be waiting for someone.

I piped into Central with a query: "No possibility of programmer error?"

Hartmann punched right back: "None! We've checked and double-checked! We've got a file on every living human being! We've got everyone but him!" In the background of Hartmann's

signal, I heard the sound of voices in heated argument.

"Who are you? Please identify yourself," I asked again, at Hartmann's insistent urging.

To my surprise, he told me.

"My name's Farris. Jonathan Farris." Again the old man looked back the way he had come and shivered in the rain. He was cold and wet and miserable. If there hadn't been something so wrong with him, so evil, I guess is the word I'm looking for, maybe I would have felt a little bit of pity for the old man. But there was something very much wrong with this old man, something terrible and grim which stopped any pity I might have felt toward him. Besides, I'm a womb cop. I don't have much pity for anything or anybody.

"Shall I bring him in?" I queried Central.

Before I got an answer the old man spoke again.

"Bantam is his name. Michael Bantam is the one I'm looking for. He's behind me, I'm sure. I might have passed him in the rain but he'll be along."

"Checking on Bantam," clacked my computer linkup.

"I've got to meet him. You've got to let me go," said the old man, shaking his manacled hand.

"I'll be late and I mustn't be late." A shadow of worry moved across his haggard face.

"But..." I started to say through the mobile speakers.

"Release him immediately!" Hartmann's terse command snapped across the relays. "Have him followed! We want a record of everyone he meets, file tapes on everything he does or says!"

My hand jumped off the console board, curling into a fist with shock. I was stunned by the command, contrary to everything I had ever been taught. I've never let a violator go free! Not once in ten years! Not once!

"Damn it, Davis! That's a direct order! Snap to it!"

I shook myself into action, punched in the release command. I had a sick sensation in the pit of my stomach as my fingers tapped in the order. This was contrary to everything I stood for, everything I believed in.

The manacle automatically came unsnapped. The old man nodded his head and backed away from the mobile unit, massaging his free wrist.

"At least, let me confiscate the illegal concealed weapon?" I asked Central. "My God, I can't let. . ."

"Denied." Central's reply was immediate.

"You're free to go," I heard myself say. My hands shook on the console and I fought with myself to keep from automatically reaching for the laser triggers. My mind was crying for a burn-down. My trigger fingers twitched instinctively.

"I've got to get going. He'll be coming along and I've got to find him," said the old man, touching his overcoat pocket. "If you see him, you tell him that Jonathan Farris is going to get him. I'll see him killed for what he did to me."

"What does he look like? How will I know him when I see him?" I asked.

On a monitor beside my head, a series of telephoto stills of Michael Bantam appeared on the screen, piped in direct from Central. As the series of photographs flashed across the screen, biographical information automatically printed out across the bottom half of the screen. Central's computers were really on the ball.

"You'll know him when you see him," said the old man with a smile that had no smile to it.

"He's young, red hair cut short. There's a scar over his left eye and his face is pale like dirty newspaper. You'll know him when you see him. He'll be coming along grinning, he'll be laughing at me, but not for long." Again the old man let his hand rest meaningfully on his overcoat pocket.

"If I see him, I'll tell him you're looking for him," I assured him. I glanced at the monitors. A pretty accurate description the old man gave. At least there was a record of Michael Bantam.

Why the hell am I letting him go? What the hell is going down at Central? Have they gone soft in their computer programs? I slammed my fist down on the console, punching in angrily

to Central. I'm going to get some answers! I've had about all I can take. I don't know what the hell is going on. This man's a criminal whether he's on file or not, and I got every right to burn him down.

I start to speak but the old man cuts in and I listen and wait, choking on my own anger and frustration.

"He'll never get away with it! Nobody does that to me and gets away with it! I'll see him dead before the night is gone." The old man was livid with rage.

The circuit monitoring panels were all flashing emergency reds and I knew the computer system was pushing toward an overload.

I punched a sharp query at Central: "What the goddamn . . ."

"Why don't you follow me," said the old man, beckoning the mobile unit toward him. "Just down this street and left a little ways down the alley. Yes, why don't you follow me." He began walking.

I looked at my sector chart. The alley was the cutoff point at the end of my patrol sector. That was someone else's territory. I punched in this information. Awaited a go-ahead.

"Hartmann here. Ignore boundaries. Follow without restriction or limitation. Full monitoring, automatic filing, total surveillance."

I shrugged. It was a day for breaking the rules. I activated the mobile unit and it began tracking and pursuing the old man. Together, they moved down the street toward the alley.

I started to beep in an acknowledgment of the order.

Suddenly, everything went dead. Console, monitors, linkups, activation circuits. Everything. Nothing coming in, nothing going out. Computer overload. It had to be. The existence of the old man with no identity records, with no file tapes, was an insoluble problem. It wasn't supposed to be possible.

The womb couch cradled me like a hand, the release catches that would free me from its comfortable grip frozen into place by the power failure. I sat in the dark, felt like a helpless stuffed animal in the hands of a child.

I never felt so useless in my life. I struggled against the lock in the couch web, trying to force it manually, but it was impossible to shake loose. I was stuck there, helpless, like a butterfly stuck to a display board with a pin.

I shouted my frustrations at the darkened console in front of me. There was nothing I could do but wait. Nothing, not one damn thing!

It wasn't a minor overload. It must have been the granddaddy of granddaddies. My entire sector, from street unit to computer master terminal, had blanked. Whoever was responsible for programming a computer solution on this case ought to get burned down. It was an error on the scale of programming a computer to find the square root of zero! Somebody was going to be up the computer without a program!

There must have been one hell of a lot of damage to repair. My wrist chronometer wasn't working. Just guessing, I'd say I sat there maybe an hour or more. Probably closer to two.

The power came back on around 0418 hours. Maybe 0419.

Central was on the line while I was still blinking my eyes, trying to adjust to the console lights when they flashed back on.

Commander Hartmann's voice almost broke my eardrums. I winced under my audio helmet and turned down the audio pickup.

"What's happening down there?" he demanded.

I rubbed my eyes, waiting for them to adjust. The monitors were flashing back on, focusing and retuning for maximum image clarity.

"Locate Pickup 27, Monitor 7!" I shouted. The monitor for 7 had not focused properly yet. The blurred pattern on the monitor merged and then refocused. The mobile unit that had been as-

signed to the suspect had been stopped dead in its tracks just as it was turning into the alley.

When the power surged on, the unit completed the turn, its scanners probing the alley.

"Position," clacked the computer. "Pickup 27, Monitor 7."

Mobile unit moves forward into the alley. Scanners set. Audio punched in.

Tapes filing. Red flash on my console. Mobile unit activates an emergency panel. Other units from other sectors on standby with possible intercept patterns.

There's a body in the center of the alley. My mouth drops open in shock. The computer frantically begins absorbing data, counter-referencing, automatic alert all sectors.

That haggard face, the sunken eyes, the old coat. A knife sticking out of the old man's chest. Unmistakable.

I go to full zoom, extreme close-up, lateral pan. Very clearly marked. A color-coded homicide tag attached to the handle of the knife. I punch in for a close-up on the card. It tells me that the victim was murdered, unmonitored, discovered by first shift of sector 8, assignment G, shift 1 carry-over, that the body was overdue for pickup by sanitation. There was a blue sticker on the end of the tag that meant preserve body for evidence, autopsy mandatory.

Sweet Jesus!

The computer reads out: "DECEDENT . . . FARRIS, JONATHAN FRANKLIN. MALE. CAUCASIAN. AGE 57. BIRTH DATE 2053/03.09.

CAUSATION: Knife wound through right ventricle, ESTIMATED TIME EXPIRATION ... 3 hours, 27 minutes, 55 seconds when first discovered, UPDATE EST. T. EXP. this scan: 6 hours, 19 minutes, 31 seconds, DEATH . . . instantaneous, CONCLUSION . . . HOMICIDE, MOTIVES . . . UNKNOWN, SUSPECTS . . . UNKNOWN. Actual crime unmonitored. No more information available without request through proper channels to sector 8. Case jurisdiction . . . sector 8. System breakdown factor in loss of information. Suggest alternate . . ."

I cut the computer off and sat on the switch that hooked me into Central. Commander Hartmann appeared on a video monitor to my right. My console camera automatically plugged me into his office.

We just sat there and stared at each other, too shocked to even speak. I felt sick, physically sick.

"When a man dies, they take his identity file off record," said Commander Hartmann. His face was pale with shock. "The computer was able to correctly identify Farris . . ."

"But..." I started to say.

"From information already on file in the Death Register," he continued.

I got a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Are you trying to tell me the reason we couldn't get a make on him is because he was already dead? Are you saying he was dead when I picked him up in my sector? That we had no tape records of him because his files listed him as deceased?"

Commander Hartmann shuddered and stared down at the blank surface of his desk. "I don't have an explanation. I'm not sure I want one. Christ! Christ!" A nervous tic jerked one side of his face grotesquely. He was struggling to maintain his grip on reality.

Jesus! I turned away from Hartmann's monitor and stared at the corpse of Farris.

"He was dead three hours before I punched into my shift! But . . . but . . ." Words failed me. I couldn't move, couldn't think. I sat in my womb couch, paralyzed.

I'm just a womb cop, an extension of my computers, the driver of the car. My job's driving, punching in, and doing what I'm trained for, not explaining the engine. This was out of my league. I only know what the computers know. Then I act on it. That's my job. That's all I want to do.

Commander Hartmann was on the edge of hysteria.

"Command decision!" he ordered, his voice ragged. It was a direct order.

I was confused. Hell, I was scared. I was terrified. I knew the decision he expected me to make. I just sat there stunned. I wanted to pretend I couldn't hear him, to pretend that I didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

"I SAID COMMAND DECISION!" repeated Hartmann, shouting, his voice cracking with emotion.

I punched into Central, pressed the automatic filing code. I tried to stay calm but my hands shook as I dialed in.

It was the hardest thing I ever did, the most difficult command decision I ever made.

My voice sounded distant and cold, as if it belonged to some-

one else, as I punched in the only command decision I could possibly make, "ARREST MICHAEL BANTAM FOR THE MURDER OF JONATHAN FARRIS. CAPTURE AND EXECUTE ON SIGHT. VIOLATION OF CRIMINAL CODE, SECTION 81-4. THIS IS A PRIORITY COMMAND. IMPLEMENT IMMEDIATELY."

The report goes to Central. The first time, I hope the only time in my life, I've made a decision that isn't based on cold hard facts. You tell me what my decision was based on. An eyewitness account of a murder from the victim? I'm not sure I know.

I waited for a decision from Central. They have all the evidence I have. Trouble is, the information I acted on will never compute, and I know it. They could have my head for a thing like that. I'm a mass of jelly, a shock cube of raw nerves, waiting, just waiting.

The seconds crawl by slowly. I can feel the sweat pouring from me, seeping into the soft cushion of the womb couch at my back. An hour goes by like an eternity bathed in my own sweat.

Central links up. "SUBJECT: COMMAND DECISION OF WOMB COP 345-45, STEVENS, ROGER DAVIS, CASE NUMBER 87-41 1a (SECTOR 8, JURISDICTION SUPERSEDED, APPROVED TRANSFER COMMAND DECISION TO SECTOR 7), HOMICIDE, DECISION ON APPREHENSION AND EXECUTION OF MICHAEL BANTAM . . ."

There was a pause. Oh God no, I thought, here it comes . . .

Central continued "APPROVED, MICHAEL BANTAM APPREHENDED DISTRICT 9. EXECUTED FOR VIOLATION OF CRIMINAL CODE, SECTION 81-4. CONFIRMED. SPECIAL CITATION OF MERIT ISSUED THIS DATE, WOMB COP 345-45, STEVENS, ROGER DAVIS, FOR INDIVIDUAL EFFORT WITHOUT AID OF COMPUTER ASSISTANCE . . . CONGRATULATIONS."

What really happened that rainy night? I'm not sure I really want to know. As a very good computer friend of mine once said, it simply does not compute.

Down deep, I kind of hope it stays that way.

There are some things that computers are not meant to know.

GODS WHO COULD NOT STAY

Koda was a twin with a brother. Koda, the seeker of the first light, was good. But Moka, his many-eyed brother, had a bad face. Before they were born they asked the swimming birds how they might enter into the world of their mother.

The swimming birds could give them no answer, for Koda and Moka were sorcerers, sorcerers come in eggs of the sky with burning colors.

Koda, of the sky-color star egg, said, "I am born as others." And he came from the bottom of his mother, covered in shiny afterbirth. Born walking, he shed the shiny afterbirth like a snake its skin. And his face was a man face.

But Moka, the too proud, came through his mother's side and his afterbirth was dirt-colored and black. And it hung upon him and he walked and his face was hidden from man.

And Koda's egg healed its wound of birthing and became a circle again and its life continued in the great life of all. But Moka's egg had great fire cracks in its side and it caught fire and burned with strange colors. And the watchers knew that surely evil had lived through the life of Moka's egg and that it was accursed.

Moka destroyed his egg mother and thus it was thought that he would destroy the egg of his brother. But the sun spirit took Koda's egg in its hands and lifted it on a tree of burning back into the sky, where its light was continued in the light of the stars of all the nights of the world.

This is the tale of Koda and Moka, the strange gods who could not stay. I am Saksis, the teller of men's dreams. And this is Saksis' own dream, this tale of Koda and Moka. And as a story is passed from the mouth of one to another and then to another in wakefulness, this dream is passed in my sleep to another in his sleep and then to another until the day of its telling by one whose face is too far from my dreams for my seeing.

I am Saksis. For seven years I lived alone in the mountains. Making powerful medicine. For seven years I dwelt among the shadows, reading the signs, marking the path of the yellow snake. And then, on the morning of my dream's beginning, the ground beneath me whispered in its sleep. The sun shook the cold of morning out of the sky. The world came awake like it did on other mornings of this world.

I settled back into the dust as my father had taught me and became the earth and the grass and the insects. And I listened. I felt the hooves of the deer grazing upon my body. I felt the bird's flight in the breath I took. I heard the morning sound of the tree's roots and the crying of the grass and the smell of things came to me. And I saw through the burning eyes of the hawks, felt the fear in the muscles of the small eaters of grass. And I was the hunted and the hunter.

Then a strangeness flew into my head from far away. It pushed upon my face from inside and it got stronger and stronger.

Suddenly the star eggs fell upon our mountain and the pushing within me made me cry out in pain. I rolled in the dust like a dying animal. Then I slept in darkness.

When I awoke, there was a talking in my head. It was different from animal talk. I wondered who talked inside of my head. And I looked around me.

Then, through the eyes of a hawk, I saw the star egg break open, and the talker in my head was hatched from his egg mother.

"I am Koda! I am Koda!" There were the new birth words that flashed like lightning in my head. There were the walking-upon-first-legs words of Koda, born knowing his name. I began down the mountain.

Koda was full-grown at birth. He closed something in his face and the talking stopped.

He had red hair and black hair and his face was red and black. But the black on his face and the red in his hair were ornaments painted on.

Koda pointed the light of his world on me. The morning grew strangely bright around me and I was almost blinded by the glare of the sun in his hands. I flapped my wings and three times I

circled above his head. I, Saksis, the loon, the vision keeper, I circled above the new god. Koda opened up something in his face and the talking in my head started again. Koda asked me what I wanted. I said only to serve. Koda pulled me out of the sky with his hands and said, "Loon, I shall teach you a strange long call like the howl of the animals of my home. Because I am lonely and you shall be my messenger."
And thus it is that I give a strange cry in the lonely parts of this world. Calling out to the lonely god who could not stay.
I am Saksis, the loon.

CLOSELY WATCHED URINALS

Eye am found out. They saw me in the wisdom urinal. Eye was putting a pair of pants on. Yes, eye was embarrassed. Eye was mortified. Eye hope the people who read this will regard me in a kindly light. Eye hope they will forgive me. Eye did not always have atavistic desires. Eye once walked as nakedly as anyone. Yes, eye did.

If eye am let go this one time, eye promise eye will never wear clothes again. Eye am a victim of environment. Eye am a product of a happy home. Eye was once fixed in the lap of luxury. Yes, eye was fixed. U can check my records, eye complied, eye obeyed, eye am no lawbreaker. Eye am not habitual.

Eye was fixed just like the big old tomcat (he traveled the neighborhood extensively) we had around here once, eye forget if it had a name, but eye was fixed just like the tomcat was fixed. After it was fixed, the tomcat gave up traveling. It used to sit around in the bread box and just stare. Eventually, it died.

Eye know there is a lesson in that but it escapes me.

Eye guess U wonder, perhaps U muse, perhaps U speculate.

U look at me (the pants still draped obscenely around my ankles) and U are thinking eye am no good. U imagine me in various degenerate poses in the wisdom urinal (where the handwriting is on the wall). Perhaps U visualize me saluting a flag or brushing my teeth. U hypothesize the use of dental floss.

Eye, by my very nature (which is sadistic and vengeful), resist this wintertime of speculative despair. Eye am a human being. Eye am not a neutered tomcat, dressed in bread boxes, wallowing in existential despair. Eye have only slipped up this one time and eye do not appreciate the rude phantom of sure prediction eye see tumbling from U into the hurtling jet-night.

Eye admit my error quite freely (the fact that U have me on videotape has no influence on me). Eye, citizen 6749, sensitivity-trained, a fellow toiler in the nude therapy society, a committed group analyst and grope avoidance counselor and swell dancer, admit to U, in the face of a mere five billion viewers (and believe me, eye am grateful that eye am being tried in prime time), that eye have sinned.

As U have noted, the hidden cameras have revealed that eye have gone clothed in the outhouse of learning. Eye have camouflaged, momentarily, the live ammunition eye use in my art and in my sex life. Eye have committed a violent perversion of natural instruction. Eye have violated the basic tenets of cosmic potty training and eye know it full well. Eye am a lowly wisdom urinal sinner.

But (and this is where the mitigating circumstances come in) mitigating circumstances come into this case. For instance, eye believe eye can speak well of my otherwise sterling character. Eye believe eye can cite chapter and verse, so to speak, of a past life that is blameless. U doubt me? U ask for a for-instance?

Well, eye once saved the world from a plague of understanding that threads the world like a spinal tap of the backbone of our universe. (Eye apologize for this seeming poetry. The whole world is a savior. Who could ask for anything more?) Eye saved the world. Eye was a mere child at the time. Eye did not know the world needed saving. Eye showed initiative. Eye ran over a poet with my father's air car. Eye did it intentionally. Since this is strictly a fatal retelling of a fatal incident, surely this tantamount good deed will sway U to mercy. Surely, it will.

Eye cite this incident from my past to demonstrate to U that eye have my good side. Eye have not always lived my life like Ferris wheel shrieks, rusted shut. Oh no, eye have lived a really exemplary life until just lately.

Lately, eye have transgressed a little but surely eye *cannot* be held responsible for one fatal dip into the forbidden benediction of zippers and collar buttons. Look (eye shake the pants,

vile things that they are, a hideous primal reminder of an age when things touched each other abrasively, off my ankles and step free of them), see, eye am properly naked now.

See, see, see, look at the genitals, note the genitals. Those are my genitals. See how they dangle over the edge of the cold bench. Brrrrr! That is what eye might say if eye were my genitals.

Eye do have a nice growth of pubic hair. Thank U for mentioning it. Unlike some, eye have never shaved my pubic hair (not even at the height of the pubic hair shaving craze of 2127). U are seeing the actual pubic hair eye was endowed with. It is not a hairpiece, eye assure U. Eye braided it once in a wisdom urinal in a monorail station in Flatland but eye was only fooling around. Eye tell U, eye am proud to be naked, eye was only fooling around. This pants situation, eye don't know what came over me. Eye really deserve another chance.

See how my penis hangs apologetically over the center of my scrotum. See how sad and forlorn it is. Love me with your eyeball and touch me not. That is what eye would say if eye were my penis. Eye know it is as contrite as eye am.

U ask me where eye found the pants in the first place. U ask a very good question and U enunciate clearly. Actually, since U just can't find pants growing on trees these days (they've been illegal for a hundred years), eye am hard-pressed to come up with a satisfactory explanation of how these pants (lying innocently at my feet) came into my possession. Eye fear it is a long story.

U say U have plenty of time. Eye was afraid of that.

In that case, eye tell you, eye was hanging around. Eye was listening to a lecture in the Nudiversity. Eye was listening attentively to a speech about retina cunnilingus (eye have a degree in visual love, did eye mention that?). Eye was holding up my end of the speech.

Eye was listening, eye was at attention, eye was about to hit my peak when someone actually touched me obscenely from behind.

By obscenely, eye mean eye was touched criminally and licentiously from behind. Yes, U guessed it, eye was touched by a person's naked hand.

Eye was touched by a naked sexist hand! U say it is shocking. Well, U can imagine how eye felt! Eye was stunned! Eye missed my peak (my attention waned)! Eye almost fainted. Who wouldn't? U ask. Yes, U are right. What a trauma this atavistic crudity gave me! Why, the very academic sneak feel of wisdom escaped me!

Eye was unmanned! Eye was exploited! Eye missed my peak, and when you miss that, you have missed everything. In short, eye was grasped. Eye turned to look at my criminal assailant. Eye saw that it was, GASP, a member of the opposite sex! Eye was struck atonal!

Eye felt sullied, dirtied. Eye felt degraded. Eye felt like excrement. Mind U, eye am the type who has never even thought of physical abasement. Like eye have said before, eye am foolish in some respects but eye am no criminal. Eye have spent my whole chaste life visualizing. Optical sexuality, visual promiscuity, to these precepts eye have been eternally faithful. Eye have breathed the coiled filament of sex into my retinal stream, yes, and sent the hot patina of desire coursing along the synapses. Eye, visualizing sensuous heavens, had no trace elements of behavioral abnormality, no obscene physical range. Eye inverted my images, eye functioned chastely, eye sent the gray clouds of visual sex swirling up the gray-matter tubes. To dissipate with the dim, respectful hiss of modesty in the pleasure dome.

Eye am, eye have always been, virtuous. Eye, like my numerically annotated fellow citizens, have lived the visual LIFE BLAMELESS. Eye have followed the wisdom urinals. Eye have kept the writings and precepts, the teachings of the ancients, sacred. Eye have written in my diary the urinal wisdom. Eye have committed the proverbs of wisdom urinals to memory. SUE SUCKS . . . FLUSH TWICE, IT'S TWO MILES TO THE CAFETERIA . . . CALL 586-FOR A BLOW JOB ... RICHARD NIXON HAS OVERBITE . . .

Eye have made sacrifices. Eye have made the pilgrimage to the holiest of holies. Eye am one of the fortunate ones. Eye have visited the sacred memorial shrine of urinal aspirations. Eye

have seen the fabled URINAL of AMBITION. Eye refer to the wisdom urinal in Flatland which has the sacred inspirational message scrawled on the ceiling: IF U CAN PISS THIS HIGH, U OUGHTA BE A FIREMAN. Eye mention all this so U will understand that eye have had a good, water-closet, Christian upbringing. Eye am no pervert. Eye am merely an innocent dupe who in this situation of the pants (now in a heap at my feet) has simply been led astray.

Did eye seek out the physical excitement of wearing pants? Is this crime an act resulting from actions solely on my part? U ask. Let me make this clear to U. Eye have spent my whole life waiting, ding dong, for the mail-room slot of my visual abilities, the mailbox of my eyes, to bring me lewd letters written on optical tracks. Eye have been waiting all my life for pornographic dirty French postcards, vividly depicted, open beaver, non-rejection slips. Eye have been normal, normal, normal, normal. Eye cannot say it enough. Normal, normal, normal, normal.

Eye have never touched certain areas of other people's bodies. NEVER! What? Eye digress? Eye care not, my sterling luster of normalcy remains intact. Where did eye get the pants? U ask.

Eye was just getting to that. Frankly, eye was seduced by a hypnotic machine voice at the ARCADE. What? U do not believe me? Where did the voice come from? Eye was getting to that. U really should try to be more patient. U really should.

Eye was in the amusement arcade, eye went there to see the peep shows, to put aluminum nickels in the pincrotum machines. Eye am an arcade man. Eye go there every Saturday except when it rains. If it rains, eye go the day before. Eye like to play the submarine machine. Perhaps U are familiar with it. Huge gray metal battleships with hand-painted vaginas amidships float across a sea of oozy lubrication. In this game, eye am the submarine. Eye fire tiny magnetic phalluses out of my crimson torpedo tubes. Eye strike out at the vagina battleships. Eye get an orgasm for every direct hit eye make on one of the hand-painted vaginas. If eye miss the vagina target zone on the battleship but still hit the ship with my tool torpedo, eye am credited with a premature ejaculation, which counts for three points. If eye am credited with twenty points in any one game (a direct hit on a vagina counts five points), eye am awarded a second erection and a bonus game. Eye am a real submarine fanatic.

What about the pants? U ask. Eye am getting to that, eye really think you should let me tell it my own way. After all, eye am the one who faces a six-month work sentence as a towel attendant in an all-night Working Woman's Wisdom Urinal. After all, eye am the one who . . . ahem . . .

U are right. Eye certainly would not like my I-balls washed out with soap. Eye will tell you how it happened.

Eye was in the amusement arcade. It was Friday that eye was there, because it rained Saturday. Eye was playing the beaver rifle range game. It too is one of my favorites. In this game, one shoots bullet-shaped tongues at wide-open beavers moving in a circle around a small tower of pulsating clitorises. Two points for every clitoris your tongue bumps against and five points for every beaver your tongue penetrates. Eye had just scored a multiple-score bonus from a ricochet shot off the topmost clitoris (eight points total) and then down into one of the beavers. Eye was elated by my natural ability as a beaver shooter.

Suddenly, a machine voice came out of the machine. It was a compelling hypnotic kind of voice. It sounded suspiciously like a *woman's* machine voice. Eye felt my scrotum tighten with fear. It *was* the voice of an opposite-sexer and the voice said, and eye quote: IN MY YOUTH, I WORE GOLD SHOES, UNDERPANTIES OF SATIN, SILK AND LEATHER RIDING QUIRTS. I AM TWENTY-NINE YEARS OLD. I HAVE ONLY BEEN USED ONCE BY A SAILOR ON LEAVE. LOVE ME, LOVE MY URETHRA.

Eye was shocked! Eye was flattened like the taste of granola! Eye was repulsed! The voice

continued: i AM A SINCERE WOMAN, A PUSSYCAT,
FORMER STUDENT OF DR. DISCIPLINE, WHO INVITED LADIES TO SERVE AND
BE SERVED TO THE *SOUND OF MUSIC*, NOW AVAILABLE FOR UNLIMITED
HORIZONTAL BOOKINGS.

Eye was overwhelmed with the sheer, obscene crudity! When the voice said deposit fifty
aluminum sexies in the machine, surely U can understand, eye was in no shape, eye was
morally un-responsible. Eye was demented, eye was incapacitated by perversion.

Involuntarily, my hand strayed to my cheeks, where eye keep my supply of sexies. Eye
counted the nipple-shaped coins out in my hand, and like a mindless automaton, dropped
them into the coin slot.

There was an enormous crashing sound from within the machine. It sounded like a three-mile-
long platinum brassiere crumpling under its own weight. The front of the machine opened. An
opposite-sexer stepped out of the machine, CLOTHED IN A BIKINI!!! Eye nearly fainted
dead away! U ask me what happened next? Eye hardly remember, it was so obscene and it all
happened so fast.

The opposite-sexer approached me, and, GASP, she spoke directly to me, saying, and eye
quote: IN THIS AGE OF COMPUTERS

AND DEPERSONALIZED SERVICE, ONE OF THE NATION'S MOST RESPECTED
BOOK CLUBS OFFERS YOU A UNIQUE SELECTION OF OLD-AND-RARES. THE
BOOK CLUB PROVIDES ITS MEMBERS WITH DISTINCTIVE PIECES USUALLY
NOT FOUND IN OTHER BOOK CLUBS AND ENHANCES ITS OFFERINGS WITH
INDIVIDUAL AND HONEST SERVICE.

U ask how eye can remember it so exactly. Believe me, eye have her words burned indelibly
on my retina! What next? U are about to ask. Eye shudder even to relate it!

The opposite-sexer touched her bikini bottoms and said: ARE
YOU FOND OF THE SOUTH WIND?

What did eye do? Eye fainted dead away, of course. Why, there is no higher obscenity! The
mere thought that an opposite-sexer has sexual feelings about a person of my sex (ridiculous)
and eye am ready to throw up! Wouldn't anybody? U ask. Yes, U are right, of course. A
perverse concept, a perverse concept! (Eye have always despised all those opposite-sexers and
all of their beastly functions.) Somebody should put those opposite-sexers in their place.

What about the pants? U ask. Eye was getting to that. Eye cannot be rushed, eye have
suffered, eye have been abused, eye have been rolled up emotionally and bounced like a
rubber ball. Eye am hardly in possession of my critical faculties, surely U can be a little
patient.

Well, eye was walking through the park where the artificial trees were already in bloom. The
first artificial robins of spring were pecking the Astroturf for artificial worms. Eye was
walking along, minding my own business, as twilight approached, and then arrived. Eye was
bothering no one. The chill night air made my exposed genitals shrink up like fatty hamburger
in a hot frying pan.

Eye paused in front of a porno-holographic billboard. Perhaps

U have seen the billboard to which eye now refer. Eye refer to the porno-holographic
billboard of the Playboy Bunny impaled on a long-necked bottle of Chianti. Imported Chianti.
Eye was staring at the billboard, eye was getting an I-full. Eye was soaking up this church-
sponsored visual treat when something about the porno-holographic billboard disturbed me.
Call it premonition, call it intuitive testicles, call it what U like, eye sensed something amiss.
Eye peered even more closely at the porno-hologram. Eye moved to one side to get another
angle on this three-dimensional objection d'art.

Immediately, eye knew what was wrong. It was not a three-dimensional porno-holographic
billboard of a Playboy Bunny and a long-necked bottle of Chianti (imported) at all! It was a
real Playboy Bunny impaling herself with abandon on a Chianti bottle. Imported.

Eye was outraged. Eye was shocked. She saw me. Eye witnessed some perverse change in her facial expression as she removed the bottle and tossed it away. She advanced toward me. (Eye sensed that some illness possessed her.) Eye began backing away, terror stopping the blood in my veins. She lunged at me, eye blush thinking of it, since she lunged directly at my exposed lap of luxury.

Fortunately, eye dodge good and she missed, allowing me to back away even farther. As eye left her, she said, and eye quote:

I AM A FORMER PLAYBOY BUNNY AND I AM TIRED OF INDISCRIMINATE PINCHING. I'M LOOKING FOR A MORE PERSONAL TOUCH. IF YOU RESPOND, I WILL GIVE YOU A PIECE OF MY TAIL.

Eye turned and ran. Eye was lucky to escape with my . . . U ask me about the pants? Can U prattle of nothing but pants? Eye am fed up with this endless round of interrogations. Eye am but an innocent dupe, a tool in the hands of ... Perhaps eye have chosen an unfortunate way of phrasing it, let us just say eye have been manipulated.

O.K., eye'U tell U about the pants, eye was just getting to that part anyway. Eye was in a rowboat. Eye was floating through the TUNNEL OF LOVE, which is an underground peep show in New Jersey that takes U through Mother Earth's vagina and out her anus. Perhaps U are familiar with it. It is very cleverly done, built on a former strip-mine location, with a small stand of evergreen trees representing the pubic hair. As U flow into the vagina, on a wave of natural gas, there is a continuous light show on all sides. The waves of natural gas are turbulent, which gives U a constant in/out sensation. The walls are lined with stalactite phalluses that drip limestone sperm.

Eye had reached the halfway mark between Mother Earth's vagina and her anus when suddenly a boat, coming up the umbilical tube, crashed into the side of my boat. The jolt almost upended my craft. Eye was outraged! This other boat had no business mucking around in the umbilical cord like that. Maturity keeps one out of the umbilical cord and in the mainstream.

Well, eye stood up in my boat and eye guess eye told the other man what eye thought of him. As his type so often does, he ignored me. He was listening attentively to himself, preparatory to leading his own wave of applause, He said, and eye quote: I AM

ARTHUR O. RAMA. I AM A PRACTICING EGOTIST. THERE IS NO LIGHT IN MY WINDOW UNLESS IT IS ME. I AM A BORED (and here eye pause because eye admit to some confusion, perhaps he said: I AM BORING. Yes, eye think he did say that, now that eye think of it) SCIENTIST FROM THE MYSTIC YEAST. I SEEK A BRIGHT FEMALE COMPANION TO (and here he made an obscure gesture with an antiquated set of genital instrumentation, which reflected the unknowable knowledge of the inside of a vacuum cleaner) HELP

SCRAPE OFF THE ACADEMIC MOLD.

Eye was shocked, but by this time, and sensing a certain chauvinistic familiarity about this fossil, eye was not in the least surprised.

What about the pants? U ask. Eye am outraged about the way U continually harp about this theme! Eye was just about to tell U about the pants when U so crudely interrupted! Eye was just about to tell all and U butted in! Eye have no patience with people who have no patience.

U see, eye was at the mortuary of the future. An attendant was lecturing on corpus delicious. Suddenly one of the corpses, a lonely thirty-four-year-old woman from Philadelphia, sat up on her slab and said, and eye quote: I AM ALERT AND VIBRANT, I AM

EXPERIENCED. I'VE SLEPT WITH POLICEMEN. I'VE MADE TV COMMERCIALS. MY GREATEST DESIRE IS TO MEET A WELL-HUNG MAN WHO WANTS A DEEP, PENETRATING ENCOUNTER WITH A REAL WOMAN.

U say this is getting me nowhere? Perhaps U are right. Eye stole the pants off a dead nigger. Am eye joking? Certainly not.

The dead nigger was stuffed and mounted in an exhibit at the Smithsonian. It was the section of the building that dealt with obsolescence and ideas whose time had come and gone. Eye stole the pants off this dead nigger and eye took them to the wisdom urinal and eye put them on. WHY? WHY? WHY? Uask. It seemed like the thing to do.

A WOUNDED KNEE FAIRY TALE

He was hustle-looking, hustle-hungry. Sitting there in the doorway of the cut-rate record shop, watching the Sunday afternoon in New York scene. Eyes scanning the freaks and the lunch-hour ladies, the alarm-clock, time-card-punching cowboys. Sunday afternoon and Johnny on the record store steps looking for a new boy. He could always tell the new ones, almost smell them. He just sat there, looking for a home in every face.

This boy coming down the street. Some kind of Indian costume. God! Authentic-looking, maybe even real deerskin and wood-and-bone chokers, the whole trip. In New York City, and looking out of place in this authentic suit right down to the moccasins. That whole thing there, he added that up. It had a smell to it of money. Those kinds of costumes are strictly heavy paper over the counter. This boy coming down the street.

Johnny looked at the boy's face and knew he had a mark. A freak, a face-painted freak on Sunday afternoon in New York. The boy was out-of-town action, hick-town, he looked out of place. Strictly a stranger, lost, bewildered, looking like he just got off the boat and everything is new to him.

When that boy went by, Johnny moved out behind him, stalking him like a cat. He kept close, planning, figuring angles, figuring how to take him before the other hustlers moved in. When the boy stopped to look at his reflection in a store window, Johnny moved up and touched him on the shoulder, touched him softly, caressingly.

"You're going to need a guide. Someone to show you the city. Show you the sights. Huh, boy? You're new, boy, you're new here and you need someone to take care of you." Johnny grinned, mixing threat and invitation in his voice. The marks liked Johnny. He had full, soft lips, he talked his hustles nice. He wore old clothes but they were always clean and he had that little-boy look. The little-boy look, the curly hair, the clean, hairless face, the soft neuter movements that made the marks go for him.

"I show you real nice. You're going to like how I show you." Johnny said it right, said it dirty. But that face-painted freak, that costumed crazy, he was like a million miles away. He just stared at his reflection in the window. Then he spoke, a language of lilting polysyllables, strange inflections. He seemed to speak as much to himself, as much to his reflection, as to the hustler.

"Hell!" muttered Johnny. "I shoulda known you'd be a damn foreigner." The hustler smiled again and gave it another try. "*Habla espanol?*"

Behind the boy, Valdez was coming along, coming up behind the boy. Valdez with that empty walk when he's empty, hungry for himself, hungry for that next best mark. Johnny saw him coming, saw that high-pressure hype with the big chest and overmus-cled arms, and his face went black with rage. Valdez came up quick, nose out like a fish nibbling bait.

Johnny grabbed the boy, spun him around, tried to pull him away. There was a hiss like animal fat burning in a cook fire and the space where Johnny stood was empty. There was a stench, an odor of scorched hair. Valdez had frozen in place, one arm extended, reaching for Johnny's new boy.

The strange boy turned and looked at Valdez, turned and looked. Valdez was paralyzed. The strange boy's face was changing color, going from brown to blood red, and then he was gone. So gone. It was a goddamn trip. He was there and then nothing. It was like a light bulb going out. Sunday afternoon in New York and there was this freak in this damn Indian costume, and two hustlers had tried to take him and one had disappeared like out of some goddamn fairy tale and the other hustler had watched them both disappear. Man, it could only happen in New York City on a Sunday afternoon.

It wasn't a question of security. It didn't matter if you cut your teeth on the hammer and sickle or on the stars and stripes. It was a gathering of frightened children, a hodgepodge of military

and government personnel. There was a full crew of university eggheads, linguists, chiropodists, Russian spies, anyone who might know something, anyone willing to go. Quacks, religious fanatics, candy-ass liberals going to cheer, librarians, intelligence agents from everywhere, militiamen, army men, sailors in white suits, marines shaved bald like smart monkeys, Indian experts with long knives and CARE packages from the state liquor stores, Indian experts with degrees in Pawnee sex practices, phony Indians with hairy knuckles and raised eyebrow ridges, mouth breathers. Ambassadors and diplomats, senators and state governors, painted ladies and the criminally insane, an indistinct group, an inseparable aggregation, all moving together, all running like thunder-frightened cattle.

It began when someone reported that all the tribes were gathering, some FBI informer in a position to know, a reformed Indian with his pants down, waiting for government aid. Some sort of big powwow. Not unusual, not unheard of. That's what the informer said, several tribes had gathered together before, had had their little powwows. But this was different. Before the information could get out on the difference, the reformed Indian fell asleep with a knife in his back.

It *was* different. Suddenly, with no reason given, leaving possessions and homes abandoned, all the tribes began marching toward Wounded Knee. Cars, boats, airplanes, every imaginable type of vehicle was full of Indians moving toward Wounded Knee. A ceremony at the place where the hoop of the nations was broken. A civil disorder. Like Kent State, like Vietnam, like Korea, one civil disorder pretty much like any other. They could handle it. They told everyone they could handle it.

But on the morning of the day the tribes began moving, at 10:45 Eastern Standard time, the lights went out in New York, the dynamos at Niagara froze solid. At Oak Ridge, the powerful atomic reactors fell silent. In Russia, the great bear in night was plunged into a deeper night and confusion. The clocks of the world stopped at 10:45. All over the world, there was the non-sound of things stopping, of machines falling silent.

At 11:30 Eastern Standard time, the only movement, the only sounds made by machines were made by vehicles moving toward Wounded Knee. Cars full of Indians speeding down the highways long after they had run out of gas. A twin-engine plane with two Mohawk families, gliding silently westward over Chicago, both engines feathered, pulled at a speed that strained the wings, pulled forward with both engines silenced while the pilot shouted into a dead headset.

It was a selective madness. Nothing worked that had moving metal parts. Guns, cars, bicycles, garbage disposals, electric garage door openers, all the metal parts frozen solid, fused together, worthless. Only Indians moved freely, their cars worked, their planes, everything they touched, worked. Only Indians had guns that worked. It was stranger than New York City on a Sunday afternoon. Only Indians had guns that worked. And they moved toward Wounded Knee over the bodies of the obstacle course between them and Wounded Knee.

Ten days it took them to gather, ten days for the South American peoples to float up the rivers, to come out of the jungles and hidden places where white men had never been. Ten days to reach the ports and catch the airplanes and boats that waited for them there. Waited there to take them to Wounded Knee.

And the other people of the world, they went crazy. Aliens? An invasion from another planet? A warning from God?

The grasshopper people, government people, military replicas of people, they all danced to the same questions. They came running, crawling on knees suspiciously like helpless fists. Moving like old age toward Wounded Knee. They walked and rode horses. The more important of them rode in hastily built wooden carriages that broke down frequently. In growing numbers, they marched, moved, and crawled. In their path they found only emptiness and stillness, as if a storm had passed leaving the air cleaned and purified. Like hungry junkies with needle intensity, with one goal, one vein, they too moved on Wounded Knee.

The group mind, the briefcase mentality, the committee of single-minded purpose found him. They found him dancing with the Rosebud Sioux. They found him dancing with the Ojibway, the Cherokees, the Seminoles, the Kiowas, all the tribes of creation spread out over the land like the buffalo. Marching and dancing, moving in the wind like the leaves of corn, moving in one vast hoop that stretched across the flat land like one all-encircling snake. They found him dancing with the bird people, dancing with the animal people. They found him dancing with the fox people, the bear people, the wind river people. All around like soft blankets, the spirits of the dead circled the dancers, circled above, moving through the scattered bodies of their children, moving in the shadow and light.

They saw him and he was unlike any man that had ever walked their earth. His face was fire, his shoulders were feathered with black eagle wings, and when he laughed it was thunder and when he smiled it was lightning.

One of the generals, too long accustomed to a desk, too long gone from the world of men, moved forward among the watchers, pushed his way through the rapidly forming committees and study groups. He elbowed his way past the religious bleat, the organic cheering section, he broke through and marched forcefully toward the dancers.

As he moved toward the path of the great circle, the dancers began falling silently to the ground. The women, the children, the old ones, the fierce young men, the proud young women, they all fell back to rest. To rest.

They rested, surrounded by whites held at bay by guns that worked, guarded by tall warriors at the edge of the hoop, fierce-eyed men with rifles. The bodies of those who had come too close kept the others away. Every so often, a liberal believing all men were brothers would add his body to the piles of the dead.

The general was undeterred. The old general walked past the guard who kept the gun pointed at his chest. For some reason, no one made a move to shoot him. The old general walked up to one of the old men.

"How!" the general said, and he put his hand up, open-palmed, like a demented John Wayne. "On behalf of your President, I—"

There was a hiss like animal fat burning in the cook fire and the general and the rest of his sentence were gone.

And the white people moved back as if a spring had snapped within them. And they fled in one flowing wave. The one who fell from the sun stood at the top of the great Hoop of the Nations, and as one they rose up, all the peoples of the creation, they rose up. They danced, the old and the young and the sick and the lame, all whole now, all one.

And they danced in clouds of ghosts, whirling around and around, and as they passed beneath the winged man, there was the sound of a thousand things moving in darkness and light, shaking, a thousand things moving and breaking in the time of the going away. And gently, like the stroke of soft-feathered birds, the eyes of the man of thunder and lightning fell upon the people, his eyes touched them and they moved quietly like dying angels, floating like memories to the sun.

Faster and faster, the drums, the drums that went faster and faded and faster and faded and then stopped, each note like a monument, each note rising into the air like a flight of birds. And then they were gone. Gone. The Hoop, the spirits of the dead, the dancers, the drums of the people, all fallen into the sun.

And the being who fell from the sun stood alone. Alone. He spread his wings and let the sun spin above him. And the spin of the sun rilled his wings and he left the earth. He left the earth. Behind him on the plain, in the silence, in the dust, a general and a New York City hustler materialized, embraced in each other's arms. Embraced in each other's arms on sterile ground in a world that would never grow up.

Sterile children in a world that would never grow up.

WE ARE THE PEOPLE OUR PARENTS WARNED US ABOUT

"Environment," said the tour guide, and he unwrapped a sandwich.

"Active Process," dutifully replied the student Koapa.

"What kind of active? What kind of process?" prompted the tour guide.

"Invisible," suggested the student Koapa, and he made himself invisible in demonstration of his theory.

"Mind you keep to the shadows," said the tour guide. "Invisibility is an anti-environment. If the Earth Persons saw your shadow but not you making it, you might give the Earthlings trauma."

"Are they really scientists?" said the Koapa, reappearing under the enormous tower of the 200-inch telescope.

"Positive," said the tour guide. "Just look in the handbook under the section heading 'Astronomy.' This type of building is called an Observatory and that man in the white coat is looking through the giant telescope because he is what Earthlings call an Astronomer."

"Is he honored among his own kind, favored above all others?" asked the Koapa, carving himself into an oak-leaf cluster and a bowling tournament trophy.

The tour guide bit into his sandwich with cynical amity. "Those of his race have no reason to be grateful to those who juggle with the thresholds of sensory experience in the name of haphazard innovation."

"I fail to understand how these creatures perceive anything," said the Koapa, changing into a late weather bulletin.

"But that's just it," explained the tour guide. "They don't really understand anything. They perceive nothing, but instead, they gain perspectives. They regard all phenomena from a fixed point of view."

A man in a white coat came through a doorway and approached the astronomer who was looking studiously through the telescope. He tapped the astronomer on the shoulder and said, "What do you see?"

The astronomer looked away from the eyepiece and said, "It's going to rain."

The other man seemed astonished. "How can you tell?" he cried.

"My corns hurt," said the astronomer.

The student Koapa frowned. "I don't understand. I don't understand any of it. We came all this way. All this way only to find that long-distance is *better* than being there," complained the Koapa, turning into a busy signal.

"Don't let it get you down," said the tour guide. "You must learn to be tolerant of Earth customs. Down here, it isn't logical, it isn't reasonable, it isn't necessary, it's Earthish. That explains nothing and excuses everything."

"But I clearly specified what I wanted," said the Koapa as he brushed a ticker tape parade off his tongue. "Take me to your leader, I said. How could they not understand me?"

"Perhaps we expect too much of them. We expect them to understand us when we ourselves are not even sure they understand each other," suggested the tour guide, nibbling thoughtfully on his tentacle. "You must remember that any system of enough complexity embodies a quality that we call mentality or mind. While this is fairly standard throughout the galaxy, here on Earth there is insufficient evidence to prove it exists here."

"What about organized religions? Surely there are intelligence patterns that. . ." began the Koapa, turning into a Bingo board.

"We are talking about an organized intelligence," interrupted the tour guide somewhat testily, "and that kind of science fiction has nothing to do with it."

"But surely they have reached the age of technology, and it is therefore logical to assume that they must have some really complex cybernetic structures, is that not so?" asked the student Koapa, becoming an automatic toilet bowl disinfectant dispenser.

"The telephone is the most complex system yet devised by man and as such it is representative of the highest machine intelligence on the planet."

"That is all very interesting," said the Koapa, foaming over the side of the toilet bowl. "But how does it relate back to my failure to communicate with the leadership of Earth intelligence, with the head of whatever religion rules this planet?"

"The system is complex without comprehension. It is so complex it is obtuse. It has lost its head and built many in its place," replied the tour guide.

"But doesn't someone know how to make the contact?" asked the Koapa, ionizing into a supermarket grand opening.

The tour guide sighed. "Who knows. None of the handbooks cover this subject. Perhaps there is a telephone lineman in Dayton, Ohio, who knows how to talk to God."

"And if there isn't?"

"I'm sure the reverse is true," said the tour guide "In either case, there is no possibility of our establishing communication. The closest we have come is a recording. A recording and three hundred fifty-seven wrong numbers."

"Not to mention three obscene phone calls and the aluminum siding we bought," added the Koapa, handspringing into a dial tone. "All in all, not a very encouraging situation."

"Then we must try to establish the system that is next to the telephone in complexity and seek an immediate contact with it."

"Which system would that be?" asked the Koapa, putting himself on hold.

"Plumbing."

"Plumbing?" said the Koapa, so shocked he hung up on himself.

"Certainly," said the tour guide, smiling out of the four sides of his mouth. "Haven't you heard? This entire civilization has gone down the drain."

"Must there be a moral in everything I see?" complained the Koapa, forming itself into an advertising council.

"Please!" said the tour guide, becoming offended. "Are we savages? In this not-experienced, timeless reality we can afford everything but the luxury of asking ignorant questions."

"And how, may I ask," asked the Koapa, speaking as the chairman of the ad council, "is my question ignorant? Are you telling me not to be ignorant? If so, how am I expected to learn anything at all? Without the confusion of ignorance, how would I have the courage to face the world? Where would I get my enthusiasm?"

"We may be on Earth," said the tour guide, "but now is not the time to go completely native. When I give a negative command like 'Don't be ignorant,' I don't say 'Don't be ignorant' but rather 'May you remain unactualized-ignorant'"

"Then it's all right if I'm ignorant if taken at face value?" asked the Koapa, becoming legal tender.

"On Earth, it's the standard disguise," said the tour guide. "What would you like to see next?"

"Nothing whatsoever," said the Koapa, firmly making a lemonade stand. "At the moment, I am only interested in finding out why my question was ignorant."

"Because you are mistaking cause and effect. It is not a question of seeing a moral in everything. It is simply that on Earth there is no reason why you should see a moral in *anything*, if you really must know," snapped the tour guide.

"No morals!" said the Koapa, squeezing his lemons in surprise. "I find that hard to believe. Somehow I have a different idea of how Earth is."

"Have you been sneaking out and mingling on your own?" The tour guide was angry. "Where do you get these crazy ideas?"

The Koapa turned into a sheep and looked sheepish. "Well, I did go out for an hour last night but I was very careful."

"You idiot!" screamed the tour guide, waving a tentacle in a crazy arc over his head. "I could

lose my license!"

"But I was careful!" protested the Koapa. "I didn't vote in any local elections and I didn't try to buy whiskey on Sunday! What could possibly go wrong after that?"

"I told you to stay in the hotel room and watch television!" said the tour guide, wringing his tentacles nervously. "Why couldn't you stay in like the rest of my charges?"

"Television," sneered the Koapa, "is chewing gum for the eyes. I wanted to see some real action!"

"I'm almost afraid to ask where you went," said the tour guide, wiping a pint of sweat off his third forehead.

"I went to a strip joint. Where else would I see a moral in everything? It was a topless and bottomless place," said the Koapa, becoming a top that was less.

"What a ghastly thing to do! You are a barbarian at heart!" cried the tour guide. "And what, if anything, did you learn from it?"

"Mostly religious stuff," said the Koapa, becoming a statistical drop in sex crimes. "A bald-headed man with a briefcase in his lap told me that God made sex for a joke but people took it seriously and made it a sin."

"And you saw a moral in that?" asked the tour guide.

"Yes," said the Koapa. "I saw a moral in the absence of morals."

"I hope you had the good sense not to point out that state of affairs to anybody. It wouldn't do to try to teach them morals or the value of acquiring them."

"Oh, I tried," said the Koapa, turning into a garbage truck with disgust. "I made a concentrated effort to convert the bald-headed man to morality but it was impossible. He kept talking about things that had nothing to do with morality."

"Politics?" asked the tour guide.

"No," said the Koapa. "He thought I was talking about sex."

Above the Koapa's head the poets in the balcony jeered drunken encouragement from the wine and the heat and other things too. They embarrassed the Koapa, those motorcycle gang poets, using their boots as tripods, mad and crazy they were, spitting angry poems over the railing, down among the people, as if fired from slingshots. Clammy poems, beer can poems, wet poems, dank and musty menstrual poems. All over the balcony.

The Koapa really didn't mind. The used-condom poems fell in his hair and fell into his buttered popcorn but he really didn't mind. He couldn't really eat the popcorn anyway and the hair, that awful stuff, it was just glued on anyway.

The Koapa is an alien. He's not real, so why should he care if a motorcycle gang poem falls on him? It is all a part of the particular cultural experience. Personally, he wouldn't miss it for the world. It's so quaint.

The Koapa is an alien. Don't be shocked. It is only by admitting it can his unique value be expressed. He is from another time zone, for one thing. But I want you to know it is a time zone that communicates importance instead of time, just as the gold of a painted halo is not really a color. He is sitting in the audience tonight, quietly, circumspectly. Any minute the strippers are going to come out replete with seed intuitions for all of humanity.

Strippers, a term to be preferred over exotic dancers, create values in their actions. Values so unique that to praise them is impossible. A striptease as a narrative, as a mosaic of human experience, has its parts arranged in terms of value estimations (as in medieval tapestries where the most important saint is the biggest one) and not in terms of consequence.

The Koapa is sitting there quietly. The stage is lit, he is lit. His knees spark little heel marks against the back of the bald-headed man in the seat in front of him. The bald-headed man's head wets with anticipatory perspiration, as if a poem were on the verge of falling out of his lap. The bald-headed man leans forward and makes a series of jerking motions. It is then that

the Koapa realizes that this man, this fellow traveler, is confronting himself with a rejection of the historical present. But then, the rooms of Earth are always so cold. What surprised grammarian would ever admit that there is any acceptable substitute for a hand warmer in the dark?

The alien, comfortably entrenched in an anticipatory present, is sitting there quietly. He is disturbing no one in the hope that someone, preferably from the theater stage, will soon disturb him.

There is an indifferent roll of the drums and the stage curtain parts. Out walks Earth's last hope, Lou Effie Vavoom, sticker bumper and organ grinder. On Tuesdays, she went bottomless. With her chest, who noticed?

The Koapa wiped the sweat off his bald anus, now shining dimly in the soft theater lights because his wig has fallen off into the next row behind him. The Koapa's dark glasses look like the black back doors of two hearses connected by a frame.

Lou Effie Vavoom prances to center stage. She does something to her top and it springs forward, seemingly out of control. She does something to the left that throws something like we should hope to tell you you wouldn't think anything could be thrown to the right. Fascinated, obsessed, the alien's four eyes rivet on the movement. His head follows the incredible arc, his body tilts, wavers. He's lost control, tries to check his swing, overcorrects, and falls sideways between the theater seats.

The Koapa is stuck, trapped between the seats, struggling like a pinned butterfly, a fat, disguised, helpless butterfly with sunglasses and a business suit. When he fell between the seats he made a dull thud.

What is the significance of this? So long as the space between the two rows of theater seats remains a space with a certain volume, quietly reflecting the things around it, there is no life to it. To assert itself as reality, a sound must come from it. The space then proves to be dynamic, to be full of vitality, to be of significance to sentient beings.

When the fat Koapa in the business suit falls into the space with a dull thud, the space becomes an object of interest, of value.

It's the thud of life that makes it worthwhile. In fact, it was this accident that made the entire experience real to the Koapa. The stripper had ceased to exist even though, as promised in the advertisements, a man, certainly not beautiful, but positively nude, had caught her on the bump of her bump and grind and had impaled her in three-part harmony center stage. It was copulation in the first degree. It was something like a finale.

Nobody in the theater noticed, however. Their eyes were on the alien. The act of sexual intercourse on the stage lacked the novelty of an accident.

When the Koapa returned to his mentor, he was confused. On a world so obviously obsessed with sex, the inhabitants seemed extremely easy to distract.

"Why did they look at me and not at that which they all seem to seek?" asked the Koapa, becoming the staple in a *Playboy* foldout.

The tour guide shrugged his antennae expressively. "On Earth, there are two things. One is prayer, the other is sex. Both are popular, both have the same motivations. And both are good anywhere except on a stage."

"And why is that?" asked the Koapa, putting himself in a collection plate.

The tour guide seemed reluctant to discuss it further.

"If we are going to discuss indistinguishables like sex and religion," said the tour guide, "I would like to explain to you that I am no longer the person to whom you are speaking."

"Can't you give me a hint? Just a tiny inkling why copulation and prayer aren't good on stage?" persisted the Koapa, crossing his own palms with silver.

"They both require a resurrection of the flesh," said the tour guide with a sigh, having grown weary of the antics of the Earthlings. "And what audience is going to believe it two times a night and once for the matinee?"

THREE DREAM WOMAN

(with Michael Bishop)

"Well, what do you want?" Jarmster asked Melyna. "An abo? A Norseman? A Cossack?"

"If I knew, I'd say," the girl said. "You know I don't care much for the things anyway." Sometimes she had trouble just caring for the other two members of her triad.

"You haven't asked me," Zared, the third member of their six-month-old three-group, said from the circular ulterior balcony.

Jarmster and Melyna looked up. They were standing on a floor of Make-Me-Opaque Ambersea, at transparency stage 4. Zared, looking down, could see the tenants in the bowlcove under theirs, all rippled and foggy, making erotic motions with a new Zulu Androlacrum. That, of course, was what had probably started the argument.

"All right, then," Jarmster said, peeling off the Roman nose he'd worn all morning and substituting his own pugnacious pug one. "What do *you* want, Zared?"

"Something indigenous," Zared said.

Melyna made the Make-Me-Opaque floor opaque, smiled at Zared, and saw the Oriental woman upstairs leering at her through the Ambersea floor above the interior balcony. Because the old woman couldn't abide darkness, nine lamps shone down into their living area behind Rose Mashita's head. Outside, it was always dark. Fifty or so years ago the authorities, for everyone's comfort, had polarized the sky. Sometimes, Melyna thought, it was too bad you couldn't opaque the ceiling, but that was all part of living in a bowlcove: only if you were a minnow in the bottommost bowl could you ink out the fibrafoam above, as compensation for having no one below to leer at.

The Villa, Bowlcove 9 (only one from the top), on the Kansas-Oklahoma perimeter of Wichitopolis, Zared, Jarmster, and Melyna's home.

Jarmster, puzzled, said, "What?"

"Indigenous," Zared responded.

"Again, please."

"He means 'native,'" Melyna said, tweaking Jarmster's nose. Jarmster had to move it over a smidgen, to get it right again.

"Zared's been *reading* again," Jarmster said, oozing distaste.

From the balcony: "Hypnoscanning, is all."

"Well, what sort of ... native ... do you want?" Melyna asked, cupping her heartside breast for the benefit of Rose Mashita hi Bowlcove 10. "A Mandan, an Arikara, a Meshi'ka, an Inca, a Yuchi, a Yamaha . . . ?" Melyna began laughing. The woman upstairs had confused her, no doubt.

Zared, playing buccaneer, leaped from the balcony. The fibrafoam enfolded him—then pushed back out, nudging him upward to his feet as if he were a mushroom poking through peat moss. (They'd all seen mushrooms at the Wichitopolis Green Quarter: obscene little beasts. Jarmster had asked if they were mammals. "Of course not," Zared had said contemptuously, "they don't have fur.")

Now Zared was saying, "You're making a joke of this, Melyna. When I say we should put in a native, I mean a *native*. Why, this area—according to the twelfth retaping of the *Encyklohomika*, you know—was once a veritable Amerindic zoo!" Excited, he was bouncing a bit on the Ambersea. "It ought to be easy for the HeDonStitute to take our specifications, feed them to the Andro-lacrumizer, and deliver unto us a warrior. I want feathers, you see. I want feathers, and parfleches, and flesh as sinewy as pem-mican. . ."

"Mmmmmm," said Jarmster, caught up.

"All right," Melyna said. "In May we had my Esquimau mama, for whatever she was worth. It *is* Zared's turn."

But Melyna sometimes wondered why they just didn't go upstairs to old Rose Mashita, who was dwelling alone, and give themselves to *her*. As repugnant as that thought was . . . Jarmster and Zared, after all, ran through WageAid units like slotballers, and in ten more years, at this rate, they'd be out every life-unit allotted them and have to go waste-walking with the scurves of Wichitopolis just to keep their bones together. "But tomorrow," Jarmster always said, incorrigible, "our bowl may break and we wee little fishes die." He'd got that from a gum-machine guru-oracle in the lobby of the Wichitopolis gypsum baths, and how he delighted in ratcheting it out whenever he needed a justification for spreeing away their WageAids.

"Good," Zared said, pulling a vineline out of the Blucite wall. "Let's call in our specs." He tapped the fonehead into action on the base of the miniature Praxiteles (Aphrodite) in the middle of the room and passed it over to Jarmster.

They called in their specs.

A *native*, they specified.

Jarmster reeled off the abstracts, insisting on (1) "intensity," (2) "mystery," and (3) "romantic melancholy."

Melyna was given the task of defining psycho-physico parameters and so requested (1) "youth," (2) "beauty," and (3) "feral intelligence."

And Zared supplied the flavoring, the sensory correlatives of the qualities foregoing. (1) "Feathers," he said. (2) "Parfleches," he said. And (3) "flesh," he said, "as sinewy as pemmican."

They'd had two already, this triad. But the novelty had worn off, and they'd traded away their Androlacra (a rascal Basque, an Esquimau mama) for four silent Barrymore films, a wardrobe of BodiSheeths, a nucleoscape, and a seasonal supply of Virilitol, the Gentle Aphrodisiac.

But now they had foned in their specs . . .

. . . And so the HeDonStitute's ministers sent their computer aloft, and had it circle the plain underlying the city, and asked it to conceive from auras and thermospoors and historiographic data . . . an Amerind. "And once you've conceived," they told the Androlacrumizer, "gestate us a gestalt as gravid with authenticity as ever you may."

And the computer, being a computer, did.

The triad went to the HeDonStitute in their nucleoscaphe. They settled into the facility through the vehicle port. In the circular Hall of Androlacra they found the Don of Affairs.

"Where is it?" Jarmster asked, rubbing the bridge of his Barrymore put-on nose.

The Don's name was Ridpath, and he led them over the Maplelux parquetry to the Blue Sky Room. Their feet went from the waxy Reelwood to the nappy indigo of InsuSod, and the mustachioed Ridpath told them to sit in hammock nets, to await what their WageAid units had bought.

Through a curtain of blue Make-Me-Opaque polymer it came in to them, and Ridpath took its hand for the introductions.

Zared was up on his feet. "It's a woman!" he said.

The Don of Affairs said, "You didn't specify sex."

"We had a woman last time," Zared protested. "I wanted, you know, a . . . warrior. Feathers. Parfleches. Flesh as . . ."

The Androlacrum *was* a woman. She wore a heavy flowered dress made of trader cloth, and an ugly dun blanket. Her hair was parted in the middle and pulled back behind her ears. In her hands, a leather parfleche tooled with a design of interlocking snakes.

"Hello," Melyna said, nodding politely.

"Mmmmm," Jarmster said, crossing his legs.

"Beauty," Zared said. "Melyna said beauty. Is this beauty? I ask you. We *specified* beauty."

The Androlacrum didn't flinch.

The Don of Affairs said, "Whose standards would you impose? Yours, sir, or the milieu's from which we've distilled her?"

"But she resembles the Esquimau mama!"

"Who was beautiful," said Jarmster. Then he said, "Well, Don Ridpath, what bunch is she of?"

"Tribe," Ridpath corrected. Then he avowed, "A composite of the plains, good people. Kiowa, Comanche, Oglala Sioux, Osage, Arapaho. A bit of them all."

"She . . . *smells!*" said Zared, circling her. The face of the Androlacrum was devoid of apology. "She smells like . . . like Flav-O-Smoak, Bar-B-Q Piquant. And / don't like the Piquant."

"To some extent," Ridpath said, ignoring Zared, "a composite Amerind is a composite human being, so many such people were hereabouts . . . once. This woman, in fact, is what one would have if he made a tree from all trees, a flower from all flowers."

Experimenting with the sound, Jarmster said, "*A tree from all trees . . .*" He liked the feel of it, Melyna could tell.

Zared said, "I didn't want a tree. I didn't want a flower. I wanted a warrior!"

"I'm sorry," the Don of Affairs said. "Your Androlacrum, taking into account every one of your specs, is a quintessential Amerind, programmed with the lore of the land we've conjured her from. And our contract, I hasten to add, is vocoded, Zared."

"Don't worry, Don Ridpath," Melyna said. "We *do* want her, you know. But could you tell us her name?"

"Certainly," said Ridpath. "A sort of a story. Once 'born,' she asked how she got here . . ."

"She does talk, then?" asked Zared, staring at the silent figure.

"Yes. Given a little time. Anyhow, she asked how she got here. We told her. She understood. And that's how she decided upon a name, you see. Because three of you collaborated in imagining her, she told us, her name would have to be Three Dream Woman."

"Oh, that's lovely," Melyna said. "Three Dream Woman."

And the Androlacrum, once programmed, three times dreamed. A helix of artificial wishes, aroused by dead dreams, moves her on a mechanical journey to the end of the night. Awake in the body, whispering in the blood, bloodstream surging. I will plant you in the earth of my body.

In the body, restless undercurrents, and the shore rising to cut an underocean of sleep. The artificial wishes, the helix of specifications, beckoning. The empty fist of the triad arranges the fences across the no-man's-land of their minds. Her eyes move with life. The blood, rising, dreams through her skin. What did she dream?

A child with a kickball, Moksiis they call you, little potbelly. Keep the ball of antelope hair up in the air. A cause for laughter if it touches the earth. Touch the earth with your sisters, little Moksiis; dream in your play, slowing from games into a cotton-wood womanhood, supple and stern, your potbelly flattening into flanks not for touching. You're a girl with a kickball, a child in the spring of her running.

The second dream is the cottonwood womanhood of the embryo dreamer. A hide flesher you hold, also a digging stick. The quick and the dead. Early sunups. The buffalo flow in your dreams. Red Leaf has died, those returning will tell you, and on the last day of summer your tree has fallen.

The last dream is of power, all praise to the crone you've slyly become. Sixty-five winters, grudgingly borne. Dying's the final birth. . . .

Though only two days old, Three Dream Woman, the Androlacrum, had thus dreamed her whole life. That was the way the HeDonStitute did things, for the sake of reality, because even a spurious life can comfort.

For the first time in a month, Rose Mashita had put their Am-bersea ceiling on a thoroughly opaque setting. As a result, their bowlcove was dark when they entered, and cool, and empty. It was the middle of August. And Three Dream Woman had a blanket about her, a heavy Navaho weave.

Jarmster said, "Let me take your blanket."

Three Dream Woman pulled it to her throat, and gazed about the bowlcove with contempt. "The world is dying," she said. The first words she'd spoken since their departure from the HeDonStitute.

How old is she? Melyna wondered. I specified youth and she looks no more than twenty—but her eyes are ageless. Sixty-five years of false experience in the body of a woman-child.

Zared said, "Maybe our 3-D lady would like the cool turned down."

Jarmster nodded and turned the cool down. August seeped in like a gas. Beads of sweat appeared on Three Dream Woman's brow. They would have to give her a BodiSheeth, Melyna thought, to spare her the discomforts of meteorological annoyances, inside and out.

"Aren't we blessed," said Jarmster, gesturing upward, "that Horror Show Mashita isn't ringside for the unveiling?" He reached for Three Dream Woman's blanket.

"The world is dying," Three Dream Woman said. "And I am not yours."

As he had done in the Blue Sky Room, Zared circled the Androlacrum. "We *bought* you, 3-D lady. You're ours because we bought you."

"It may be that you have bought me, but I am not owned."

The triad was stymied. Intensity they had in Three Dream Woman, and mystery, and intelligence, and all the sensory correlatives Zared had asked for. What had gone wrong? "I know what it is," Zared said. "It's the romantic melancholy Jarmster specified. Her melancholy isn't romantic at all: it's fatalistic and classical, you see, and not even a bit self-pitying. Oriental, you could call it. In any case, our contract is breached."

"No, Zared," Melyna said. "Minimum grounds for annulment are seven out of nine specs. Eight and a half? Never."

"You were the one," Jarmster told Zared, "who wanted something indigenous, don't you remember? Melyna and I, we like her fine."

"Ipso facto," Zared said heatedly, glaring at them all. "I disrobe her."

He pulled Three Dream Woman's blanket away from her shoulders, tossed it over Aphrodite in the middle of the bowlcove. He tore her dress of trader cloth, yanked it free, flung it aside. Three Dream Woman did not move. In moccasins and calfhide breechpiece she stared at the flurried Zared. Melyna wanted to put an arm around her naked shoulders and tell her not to stare so dauntingly. Zared was a spoiled little boy. Jarmster smirked.

"Because I was born only two days past," Three Dream Woman said, "I am a virgin. But in spite of this, I have memories of lying with Red Leaf, my husband, and bearing him two sons and a daughter. My first when I was sixteen snows old, the other in the years that followed. I am Virgin and Mother, a woman of my people. How do you dare to touch me, when this is so?"

Stymied.

The triad averted their eyes, and rubbed their hands together, seeking a solution. Only Melyna could smile, her eyes amused at their predicament.

"This is Ridpath's fault," Zared said. "For giving us a ... a 'composite.' It's Ridpath who's to blame."

They looked again at their Androlacrum. Three Dream Woman was now sitting fully clothed at the base of the Praxiteles, her legs to one side. The statue above her, Melyna thought, might

have been a cottonwood, the Ambersea beneath her a swatch of hard prairie.

"I'm hungry," Melyna said. And she sat down beside the Androlacrum and pulsebeeped their bowlcove's contingency cart out of the kitchen.

"You are hungry because the world is dying," said Three Dream Woman, "and no once dances the sun to life."

"Phaugh," said Zared, disgusted.

He and Jarmster stood with their arms folded, like spectators at an accident, wishing not to get involved. They moved away from the Androlacrum and set the Make-Me-Opaque floor at transparency stage 2. For the next two hours they played at voyeur. In that brief time a good deal of the world died.

The Androlacrum placed a cutting of her hair in the arms of Aphrodite. "My hair stands for the sagebrush," she told them. Then, facing the statue, Three Dream Woman began her dance. The sun, she had told them, was nowhere to be seen in this place Wichtopolis, and so she danced for the sun.

Zared and Jarmster forsook this ceremony for the gypsum baths, where they gladly immersed themselves in the mechanical sensualizers.

Melyna, fearfully rapt, was unable to leave. She made herself a pallet on the interior balcony and now and again called down to Three Dream Woman to stop for a time. "You must eat," she pleaded. "Androlacrum or no, you mustn't let yourself starve." Did she really care? Melyna wondered. Or did she simply wish the insane dance to end?

But Three Dream Woman thrived on her dancing.

On the fifth hour of the Sun Dance, Rose Mashita reappeared in the bowlcove above. She stared down in lewd fascination. Framing her face, a battery of PlayaSol lamps burned through their Ambersea ceiling like nine gong-sized eyes. Three Dream Woman seemed unaware of these eyes. Even if the sun had come back in them, she could not halt to acknowledge it. The world must be wound back up, the decline of its energies stayed. These people had forgotten how to do that. They had let things go. Even their BodiSheeths couldn't disguise the slackness spiraling through them: it seeped into the world like diluted glue, loosening the seams of creation.

Childhood. Womanhood. Sly senility.

Three Dream Woman united all in her dance; in one heaving of a Sun Dance she lived a lifetime. The soles of her feet fed power into the earth, nine coves up though they were. Three dreams, united, became something magically other. A world that had forgotten magic had no defense against it.

The dance rose up, many-eyed, saw the triad's dream skull city before it, saw the relationship of Jarmster, Zared, and Melyna embodied in a skull city that was empty of humanity but for a tiny piece of brain. There was only a little bit of brain left but the dance couldn't get at it. The dance became an ant in order to get into the skull city and get enough to eat.

The ant entered the skull city. When the dance had picked it clean, the ant turned back into Three Dream Woman, but Three Dream Woman had her head inside the skull city. Inside the skull.

Above, Rose Mashita gasped as she saw the Androlacrum's head covered by a skull.

And now, as their Androlacrum danced, Melyna felt the whole of the Villa shudder with the passion of Three Dream Woman's dance. The gleaming white skull began to grow with each step of the dance. Lizards danced in the cranial cracks. The great empty sockets filled with the wind of the burial pit. The spirit canoes moved across the vanished ocean of the dead tongue, awash with the spit taste of death. And the skull grew. The dance, drumming; the skull, growing. The angry dead teeth, biting out a handhold of dust. The top of the skull was already brushing the upper-balcony floor; the weight of the dead white thing was sending dead roots crashing downward.

"STOP!" Melyna cried, her voice lost in the other's deep chanting. "Three Dream Woman, please! Please, you must stop!" This was Ridpath's fault, it occurred to her. Who could she turn to for help?

Upstairs, Rose Mashita now wore an expression ecstatically serene. Her hands pressed together. The gong lamps around her sounded out glory. She was a Shinto, Melyna recalled. For her, poor wretch, miracles were everywhere. The triad had often seen her at her bowlcove shrine, worshipping the *kami*. How she must be enjoying this, Melyna thought, terrified, as the skull grew and grew.

Zared and Jarmster burst into the cove. They were only half as tall as the skull, and its shadow seemed to obliterate them. They beheld Three Dream Woman singing beneath the weight of the skull and the dance, and like Melyna, were terrified.

"Melyna," Zared shouted, "are you all right?" It almost made her cry, his uncharacteristic concern, brought on by terror. She couldn't speak.

"Melyna!" Jarmster called out, circling the wall opposite the still-growing skull. "The eight bowlcoves beneath ours have been crushed into the earth! The whole Villa has gone down like a Blucite plunger! We're on street level now, Melyna, and we've got to get out!"

The skull on Three Dream Woman's head, as large now as a water tank, was only an inch under the Ambersea ceiling, the cranial ridges straining against the weakening ceiling. On the other side of the transparent membrane Rose Mashita was on her knees, the gong lamps around her popping out one by one as if from an electrical overload. Surely, Melyna thought, surely the world is dying. Only wall glow remained in the two final coves aboveground, and everything trembled.

"The other minnows just made it, Melyna!" Jarmster called. "Come down from there and go with us!"

But she couldn't move. Although she was frightened, fear did not immobilize her. What held her in place, a slender woman gripping the balcony rail, was awe at what Three Dream Woman was showing her. She *had* to watch the ceremony; it was ordained that she see this.

"Melyna!" Zared shouted, terror in his voice.

Their Ambersea ceiling, at transparency stage 2, buckled as the skull grew through it. Aphrodite fell from her pedestal and shattered.

The fibrafoam ceiling collapsed and toppled into their bowl-cove a roomful of inflatable furniture, nine dead sun lamps, and the woman, Rose Mashita herself, in a slash-pattern kimono. Jarmster and Zared jumped back against the wall to avoid being struck, and Melyna flattened herself against the balcony wall. The fibrafoam, yielding, would have prevented injury to Rose Mashita had she fallen so as not to snap her neck. As it was, she was the first bit of rubble to stop bouncing. She lay broken, lifeless.

Zared, who had never liked the woman, shouted at their Androlacrum, "You've gone too far now! Much too far!"

"And we're going to stop you!" cried Jarmster.

The two men found a bowl of polystyrene apples on the contingency cart near the cove's kitchen bubble and began flinging them feebly at Three Dream Woman. They bounced off the skull . . . like polystyrene apples.

The skull, whether by accident or design, as if wounded, cracked open like a fire-shattered rock. Melyna crouched away from Three Dream Woman on the balcony floor and watched transfixed as the woman cracked open as the skull had done. The Androlacrum's body shattered beneath the cracking skull, decayed and withered like overripe fruit. The hair withered gray, as if it were poisoned grass; bones pushed through the sagging folds of the Androlacrum's skin.

Jarmster and Zared had exhausted themselves flinging apples against the skull. Now it gleamed whitely, like some obscene vase shattered by the hand of a god. The Androlacrum body was fragmented, collapsed among the bone ruins. Melyna rose, sobbing.

Three Dream Woman's soul streamed through the dead husk's skin, a bright pool of light rising, taking an eloquent human form. The soul, hovering over the myth of the body, spread upward, moving to the place where the sky lives.

Jarmster and Zared, blinded by the glow, fell back into themselves, screaming. They tumbled among the fragments of the skull, mere shells.

"The shadows, their shadows disappear into night. The sun cannot reach them," whispered Three Dream Woman, her words alive in the air.

"But as a stone is a star in the heaven," she said then, "all that is of the heart is touched by all else. Come with me, Melyna, memory of a daughter, live again in me. Come."

"No," cried Melyna, shaking her head in despair as she huddled in the ruin of the triad's life. The break was too final, too different, too alive.

"Come live among the living. Give up what is dying." Gentle, the wind of Three Dream Woman's words.

But Melyna didn't wish to die in order to give up what was dying. Her body shriveled, tightening around her like wet rope. Her body said: I am afraid of living, never having tried. She could only shake her head, and lower her eyes.

The bowlcove cracked and collapsed, plunging down into ruin. Jarmster and Zared, screaming, joined Rose Mashita.

Three Dream Woman's soul united with the placenta of her dreaming and rose toward the sun of life, fusing to form a dimension, a world, come alive with power.

"I would have planted you in the earth of my body," whispered the soul of Three Dream Woman upon the wind. And then gone. Back among the living. The might of her translation set every star and the horns of the moon trembling in the seamless fabric of the dark.

Melyna, among the dead. Melyna, afraid to live, was taken to emergency facilities erected by crane on the Boeing tarmac. Among the victims of the seismic disturbances that had engulfed the bowlcove villas on the city's perimeter. Among the dead. She was given a cot. She was given a blanket. She was bathed, tranquilized, and psychiatrically shriven. "Feel no guilt," the mecho-analyst told her; "it's not your fault, Melyna, that you're still alive."

Afterward, envying the dead, she was able to sleep.

She had three dreams that night, childhood, womanhood, and her own slow senility, one inside the other, like Chinese boxes. She saw her whole life telescoping to ruin. It was emptiness, all of it, and when Melyna, among the dead, cried out in her sleep, not one of the earthquake victims moved to comfort her.

A SUNDAY VISIT WITH GREAT-GRANDFATHER

Great-grandfather stared at his gift with a sharply critical eye. Great-grandmother gnashed her teeth like she always did when Great-grandfather was about to make a social error.

"This tobacco stinks!" said Great-grandfather. He held the pouch away from his nose. "As usual, my cheap great-grandson has shown his respect by bringing me cheap tobacco."

Great-grandmother kicked Great-grandfather in the shin, as she had been doing in such instances as long as she could remember. Not that it did any good. Great-grandfather had grown old and independent and it took something of the magnitude of an earthquake to change his ways.

Great-grandson sighed. He knew that no matter what kind of tobacco he brought or how much it cost, Great-grandfather would always say it was cheap.

"You are looking well, Great-grandfather," he said.

"A fat lot you know!" said Great-grandfather irritably.

"It's the vapors. It gets him in the back," said Great-grandmother. "And he hasn't got enough sense to come in when the cold clouds are out. Not him. He stands out in bad vapors and rain looking for a demigod or trying to remember where he's supposed to be, as if one rock didn't look like another, as if one burial rack didn't. . ."

"Someday your tongue will go crazy and beat you to death!" roared Great-grandfather.

"Great-grandmother gave her great-grandson a sympathetic look and shrugged.

"How are the white people treating you in away school?" asked Great-grandfather. He shifted his position upon the hard rock so that the sun did not shine directly into his weak, old eyes.

"As badly as usual, revered one. Those white people are crazy."

"And what kind of things are they learning you? Healing arts? Better ways of hunting? Surely these white men are teaching you many things?" said Great-grandfather.

"No, Great-grandfather," answered Great-grandson. "They are not teaching me any of those things. I am learning science. I am learning how lightning is made and what rocks are made of and what stars are and how fast light travels."

"Spells! Most excellent! These white people are smarter than I thought. But what was that you said about light traveling? I have never heard of such a thing! Of what use is it?" Great-grandfather asked.

"They are not spells," explained Great-grandson patiently. "And the traveling of light is mathematics."

Great-grandfather nodded his head wisely. "Ah yes! Mathematics." A shadow darkened his face and he scowled. "What the hell is mathematics?" growled Great-grandfather.

"Counting and measuring. Adding and subtracting the number of things one has," said Great-grandson.

"Sending you to away school has turned you into a wise nose! Why didn't you say that the first time! Mathematics! Any fool knows how to count on his fingers! You went to away school to learn a four-dollar word for counting on your fingers? This is the kind of a thing you are learning?"

"You don't understand. We learn more than just how to count on our fingers. We've learned how to measure great distances. For instance, I know how far away the stars are."

Great-grandfather shook his head. He looked at his wife. They both shrugged. "That is very interesting," said Great-grandfather. "And what is that used for?"

"I don't know," admitted Great-grandson. "They only told me how far away it is."

"What other kinds of things have they told you?" asked Great-grandmother. "These things sound as crazy as eating rocks."

"Well, I have learned that man was once an ape, that the earth flies in the air around the sun, and that when people die their bodies rot and their souls go to heaven. Also I learned that. . ."

Great-grandfather jumped off the rock. "What? What?" he shouted. "What is this craziness!"

Has my great-grandson fallen upon his head too many times!"

Great-grandmother tried to quiet Great-grandfather down but he jumped around like a frightened horse. He paced back and forth, cursing loudly.

"They also told me the Great Spirit is superstition," said Great-grandson.

"What is this superstition?" roared Great-grandfather. "Is that another of those city funnies you picked up at away school? If I wasn't so old I'd flatten you with a rock! I never heard such foolishness!"

"But, Great-grandfather," protested Great-grandson, "I am only telling you what they are teaching me at away school. It isn't my fault that the white people are all crazy. They even told me that it was impossible to talk with people after they are dead."

"They have gone too far!" shrieked Great-grandfather. "They have gone too far! There will be no more away school!"

Great-grandfather beat his scrawny chest with his fists in a defiant gesture which sent him into a fit of coughing.

Great-grandmother patted him on the back as his face swelled up and turned red.

She looked disgusted. "You shouldn't have told him all those terrible things," she said, pounding Great-grandfather's back vigorously. "You know this happens every time he gets upset."

Great-grandson looked properly apologetic and helped Great-grandmother sit him back on his favorite sitting rock. The coughing fit passed, leaving Great-grandfather weak and gasping for breath.

"It's the vapors," said Great-grandmother. "If he had enough sense to come in out of the . . ."

Great-grandfather scowled so ferociously that she stopped speaking. She knew when she was well off.

"No more!" shouted Great-grandfather between gasps. "No more away school!"

"But, Great-grandfather," the boy protested. "I will be arrested and thrown into the white man's jail if I do not go to away school."

The old man folded his arms across his chest. He raised his head, tilting it at a defiant angle. He sucked his scrawny stomach in and pushed his thin chest out. It was his warrior's stance, which had once put fear into the hearts of many a comely woman. When Great-grandfather did this, it meant that his mind was made up. It meant that there would be no further discussion. It meant that there would be no more away school. It also meant another coughing spell for Great-grandfather, who was always forgetting his condition.

Great-grandmother began whacking him on the back again with the practiced ease of one who has done it many hundreds of times. She sighed. "He never learns."

"Or else he never remembers," suggested Great-grandson.

Great-grandmother shook her head wearily. "I think it is a little of both," she said.

The letter from away school came three weeks later. The boy carried the letter to his great-grandparents. "I told you they were going to throw me into the slammer if I didn't go to away school," he said after reading them the letter. The letter said they were going to throw him into the slammer.

Great-grandfather started to go into his warrior's stance, but the old woman had anticipated that very thing and she whacked him in the back before he could get a decent start at it. He was taken completely by surprise and fell forward off his favorite sitting rock. This saved him from another coughing spell.

"What happens is that they are going to come and get me and throw me in the slammer," said Great-grandson, looking unhappy about the whole thing.

"Something will have to be done about this thing," said the old man solemnly from his seat upon the ground. "I will not take this thing lying down." He got up as if he meant it literally and started to sit back down on his favorite sitting rock. His dim eyes betrayed him and he

almost sat down on Great-grandmother.

"The rock is two feet to your left," said Great-grandmother.

"I knew that all along," said Great-grandfather indignantly. "I was only trying to get you to guess my weight."

He moved over to the rock, stared at it carefully, judging its exact location, and sat down. He missed the rock by three inches.

"It is good to sit upon the ground once in a while," reflected the old man as he rubbed his hip.

"It gives a man a whole new perspective on things."

Great-grandmother snickered to herself. In an aside to the boy, she said, "Boy! He's in lousy shape, ain't he?"

It was but one day later that Great-grandson rushed up to his great-grandparents. "They've come," he cried, gazing over his shoulder fearfully. There was a loud whining noise from the direction from which he had just come. Great-grandfather was asleep in the sun with his mouth open. He jumped awake, thinking he had been shot. He felt all over his chest, not that it would have made any difference in his condition.

"Who? What?" he said.

"The white men have come to throw your one and only great-grandson into the slammer!" shouted Great-grandson.

Great-grandfather yawned and closed his eyes again. "That's nice," he said. "I always liked buffalo sou . . ." He was asleep again.

"Wake up Great-grandfather!" shouted Great-grandson.

"Boy, he really is in lousy shape, ain't he?" said Great-grandmother.

"Who? What?" said Great-grandfather.

"We already covered that already!" groaned Great-grandson.

Grudgingly, Great-grandfather awoke. He rubbed his eyes. From a distance, there was a strange whooshing noise.

"Who's that whooshing around my place of business!" roared the old man.

"It's the white men come to throw me in the slammer!" yelled Great-grandson for the third or fourth time.

"No kidding," said Great-grandfather. He didn't seem particularly concerned. "By the way," asked the old man, "what the hell is a slammer?"

"That's a white man's jail," replied the boy.

"Well! Why the hell didn't you say so in the first place! You idiot! I thought a slammer was a ..."

Great-grandson was never to know what the old man thought a slammer was because the white men arrived in a strange vehicle without wheels.

"It's the white men come to throw our one and only great-grandson into the slammer," said Great-grandmother. But as she said it she had doubts. For one thing, they had tentacles and were blue. She'd seen some ugly white people in her day but none quite as ugly as the two specimens who had just come into view.

Great-grandson threw his hands up in the air, screamed at least once, and ran like hell. He disappeared behind an outcropping of rock.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Great-grandfather. "Did he sit on a cold worm? Where's he going?"

"It's the white men come to throw our one and only great-grandson into the slammer," repeated Great-grandmother, and she motioned at the aliens embarking from the vehicle. He followed her arm with his weak eyes and saw them vaguely.

Great-grandfather snorted. "You think I don't know what they are? I got eyes, you know." He blinked his eyes uncertainly. For some reason, the blurry forms in front of him seemed suspiciously blue. He attributed this to indigestion.

The aliens advanced on the seated couple. The aliens were six feet tall, covered with blue scaly armor. They had eye bulbs on each side of their faces, thin slit mouths, red eye membranes across red-pupiled eyes. They were clothed in a superior smirk.

"So you think you're going to throw my one and only great-grandson into the slammer, do you?" roared Great-grandfather.

He immediately went into a coughing fit. Great-grandmother began pumping his back in the usual fashion.

"What's a slammer?" said the first alien. He eyed the old man, who was bent over double, gasping and coughing with his tongue hanging out.

"Boy, he's really in lousy shape, ain't he?" commented the first alien.

"Yeah," said the second alien. "This is going to be easier than making candy out of babies."

The first alien took a hand weapon out of a pouch strapped below his chin. He set the gauge on stun. "This is going to be the easiest one yet. No technology worth shaking a quantum at. No force fields, no personal power packs, no weapons. Clothes made out of animal skins. Primitive." He aimed the weapon at Great-grandfather and shot him in the head, laughing to himself all the while.

It had absolutely no effect on the old man. He just kept coughing. The first alien turned and stared at the second alien. "Wow!" he said.

"Yeah," agreed the second alien. A good stun shot was strong enough to cripple a five-ton herbil.

Great-grandfather coughed, Great-grandmother pounded his back, and Great-grandson hid in the rocks viewing the whole proceedings with alarm.

"My stunner must be out of whack. Lemme use yours," grunted the first alien.

The second alien handed it over to him. The first alien set it on stun and shot the old man again. Nothing happened. The old man didn't even blink an eye. He was too busy trying to get his breath back.

"Hey!" said the first alien, whipping his tentacles in a confused circle around his shoulders. "Hey!"

The second alien nodded his head. "Yeah."

"Am I gonna get him now!" threatened the first alien, setting his tentacles determinedly around the hand weapon. He set the stunner on full charge, moved the power setting to overload, and blasted away at the old man again. The only thing that happened was that the weapon overheated and melted into a shapeless hunk of hot metal. It burned the alien's tentacle. He yelped and threw the useless weapon away. He waved his stinging tentacle in the air. He looked madder than hell. He looked at the second alien, who looked right back at him.

"We didn't get the wrong planet, did we? I mean, I've seen technology and I've seen technology, but this is beyond me. How come he ain't dead, is what I want to know."

"I can't understand it either," said the second alien. "We flew over the missile base. They had atomic weapons. Real kid stuff. No force fields, no anti-matter weapons. Prepubescent technology. So how come this one is so hard to kill?"

"I'll nail him with my molecular disruption gun," said the first alien as he took a small metal tube out of his neck pouch. "He won't know what hit him." He smirked, but his smirk lacked conviction.

Great-grandfather sat weakly on his favorite sitting rock. He'd got his breath back finally. Great-grandmother had her eyes on the ugly white men. She couldn't understand anything they were saying. None of it made any sense. This helped convince her that they were indeed white people.

"Stop burping me!" growled Great-grandfather. She stopped whacking his back.

The gun in the alien's tentacle erupted in a silvery-red flash and a brilliant beam of energy passed through Great-grandfather and completely destroyed his favorite sitting rock. It disappeared in a shimmering cloud of vaporized molecules. Great-grandfather fell flat on his

back. He was so shocked he almost went into another coughing fit.

"Hey!" shouted the first alien, whipping tentacles in all directions, entangling two of them in his confusion. "Hey!"

The second alien was too shocked to even say yeah.

"That does it!" shouted Great-grandfather, struggling to get off the ground. "I'm going to teach you crazy white people to mess with me! Throw my one and only great-grandson into the slammer, will you?"

"What's a slammer?" said the first alien. "Are we talking the right language or what?"

"I'm going to hit you with the dreaded curse of Cheroboa! I'll knock your rooty-tooty eyes out!" exclaimed Great-grandfather, dangerously close to another coughing fit.

Great-grandmother covered her eyes. "Oh no! Not that old song and dance again!"

"Maybe they put up that missile base to fool us," suggested the second alien. "Maybe those radio broadcasts we picked up twenty years ago are true? Maybe this guy is Superman?"

"Hoogma nuba toot!" roared Great-grandfather, and he made a mystic pass through the air with his hands. He looked around expectantly. Nothing happened.

"Nuts!" he said. "I was sure I had it right."

"Who is kidding who?" asked the first alien. He eyed the old man critically, studying him first with one eye bulb and then the other.

"Where's his cape? Superman got to have a cape," said the first alien. "How we gonna find out if he's Superman?"

"Hoogma toot nuba." It began raining in downtown Los Angeles. "Ah, come on now!" complained Great-grandfather. "I know I had it right that time!" He stared at the sky expectantly.

The second alien pulled a handful of weapons out of his pouch, rummaging frantically for something at the bottom of the pouch. He pulled out a hunk of kryptonite and threw it at the old man. They had prepared for everything, even Superman. It passed right through him and fell to the ground.

"He must be the Green Hornet!" said the first alien, all his tentacles agog at the prospect. "Or Captain Marvel! Or all of them!"

"Well, toot hoogma nuba!" roared Great-grandfather without much conviction. Suddenly the sky opened up and it began raining frogs.

"Nuts!" said Great-grandfather, thoroughly disgusted with the whole business. Frogs pelted off the heads of the aliens. They were too stunned by this sudden turn of events to even duck.

"I give it one more try," said Great-grandfather. Great-grandmother, who had been crouching behind her sitting rock, poked her head up from behind the rock and looked rather dubiously at the sky. "He never learns and he never remembers either," she muttered under her breath.

A frog bounced off Great-grandfather's head, almost knocking him to the ground.

"And, boy, is he in lousy shape," she added.

"I heard that," roared Great-grandfather, and he went into a violent coughing fit.

The second alien began packing up his weapons meekly. "I think we just better go home and forget about the whole invasion. I think we better leave before he notices we're here and does something to us we'll regret. Did we ever get the wrong planet!"

The first alien was staring at a frog resting on his shoulder. He was scared to death to touch it. He'd heard about warts. The frog returned his stare and then hopped off his shoulder. The alien almost collapsed with relief.

The sky stopped dropping frogs.

"This ain't no technology to be fooling with! Let's get the hell out of here! Man! Am I glad we decided to hit the sticks first!"

"I can't understand it. It should have worked. I can't figure out what went wrong. That curse always worked on chickens," said Great-grandfather.

"It could have been worse," said the first alien. "We could have landed in Cleveland."

"Or met the Lone Ranger," added the other alien, a look of pure horror on his face. The aliens turned in full flight and ran to their vehicle. They jumped in, dropping weapons carelessly in their haste to get away.

"Take a good look," said the first alien as he slammed the power bar into gear. "Sure doesn't look like a super-technology, does it? I'd swear there wasn't a weapon or self-defense mechanism on any of them. They'll never believe it back home." He stared at Great-grandfather with absolute terror. Great-grandfather was looking up into the sky, still expecting the curse of Cheroboa to materialize. "You wouldn't think . . ." said the first alien, thinking about the energy beams passing through the old man without hurting him at all, thinking about the frogs. "No. No. You wouldn't think . . ." He paused. "He sure . . ."

"Is in lousy shape, ain't he?" finished the second alien.

"Yeah," said the first alien. "I should be in such lousy shape!"

They returned to their spaceship and left Earth as fast as they could travel. They never came back.

"You can come out now!" yelled Great-grandmother to Great-grandson. "The crazy white men are gone."

"They are?" asked Great-grandfather, looking disappointed. "Nuts! Just when I had the curse down pat, too."

Great-grandmother rolled her eyes.

Great-grandson came out from behind a rock. Great-grandfather stared at the rock. "He's putting on weight, ain't he? White man's school has made him fat and weak."

Great-grandmother sighed. It had been a long day. Every day was a long day that was spent with a rascal like Great-grandfather.

"It's time we got some sleep," said Great-grandmother.

Great-grandfather yawned.

Great-grandson came up to them and looped an arm in theirs. Lifting them gently to their feet, he walked them across the sacred ground to the burial rack. Tenderly, he helped them climb back onto the burial rack.

"You're a good great-grandson," said Great-grandmother. "Will we see you next Sunday?"

"Same time as always," said Great-grandson.

"He's such a good great-grandson," said Great-grandmother.

"He brings me cheap tobacco," muttered Great-grandfather.

Great-grandmother would have kicked him but he was already snoring.

SLEEP IS THE ONLY FREEDOM

Nothing is forever. All things turn into what they pretend to be if they pretend hard enough. I am the lonely molecule. Do not touch me. Speak softly, lest you wake me. Sleep is the only freedom I know. Do not touch me.

I am the lonely molecule. I am the pebble too large for the sand of the beach. I tumble endlessly. The sky weeps compassionately on me. I, the pebble, I bring you new songs that appear changeless and eternal. I am erosion. I am rivers wearing down mountains.

I came to hear you speak, a two-legged state of being, mouthing inanities that you think will live beyond you. A female impersonator doing nightclub impressions of Abraham Lincoln. Oh, I know you think it is lasting wisdom. Yes, I know what you think. You think anything that makes money knows what it is doing. And you are right.

But I, the pebble, a child of nature, would caution you that being right (and I speak from experience) once does not mean you are right forever. When you find out what I found out (nothing is forever) you will cry, yes, cry, and when the sky weeps with you, it will not go well for you. You are not a pebble. You are builders of mountains.

And the rain of life does not like mountains.

I, the pebble, used to live where it was flat. Everywhere you looked, it was flat. Trees were flat. They were so flat we called them roots. Air was flat. Foreheads were flat. Chests too. If you were flat, you had it made. You fit in, you belonged. If you were thick, you had to watch out. You had to always be on guard because you never knew when someone would want to come along and flatten you.

I was flat myself. Flat, but I practiced it in moderation. I had my highs and lows just like anybody else, but I always aimed for the middle and happy flatness. If only I had dared to be different. If only I had dared, things would be different.

In those days, I never saw anything that hadn't been flat or was flat or wasn't about to be flat, whether it wanted to be or not. You were either flat or you weren't at all. That's the way it was in the old days. You had to pay attention, you had to mind your manners or someone would come along and flatten you flatter than was fashionable.

It was possible to be too flat. Oh yes, it really was. I had an aunt who slept in a hammock and liked poetry. What's worse, she would even admit to it if you asked her about it. That kind of behavior did not, of course, go unnoticed. One day she was and the next day she wasn't. They leveled her so flat you couldn't tell where the ground began and she left off. That's the way it was in the old days. You couldn't fool around like people do now.

Today you can say, "Well, roll me up and bounce me like a rubber ball," and get away with it. Today you can say, "Help me unzip and I'll triangulate your proposition." Today you can say, "The angle of my dangle would make it exciting if we tangled." My, how complicated life is today.

In the old days, all you could see were the edges of other people. There were no knobs to play with, no distracting projections to trip over. Now the collision of shapes on the fruited plain of human anatomy is truly frightening. Not like it was. We could bump up against anybody just about anywhere in the good old days.

Now you have to be careful. Now you have to plan it out exactly. If you don't stop somewhere along the way and get a map of the terrain, you're liable to give someone vision impairment. Or ruin their sense of smell. So many holes these days and all those things to fill them with! It's too much for little old me, uneducated pebble that I am.

I tell you, this business of mountains and valleys, this sea and landmass conflict, common sense would tell anyone that in the old days people were a lot closer together. Flat people fit together better. Would that we had been daring enough to stay that way.

I know I complain a little too much of things that might have been, but really, the things we go through in the name of progress! You take the time when I saw my first mountain. It was a

traumatic experience. It was nerve-racking. I spent a week afterward running back and forth to the bathroom.

It was Tuesday. It was the third or fourth Tuesday since the creation of the universe. I really should try to remember exactly which Tuesday it was, but ice ages go by and you tend to forget things. The earth was spinning, spinning. It spun and it spun and there wasn't a pebble among us who didn't get sick from it. (This was before we had a clear idea about gravity. We had the notion for it, mind you, just not the temperament or the patience to apply it.) You had to hold on for dear life and try not to lose your breakfast at the same time. It was a terrible time, on that one point we were all agreed.

Spin and spin and spin. Lucky was the pebble who had not eaten a big breakfast. Just when we got adjusted to the spinning, the earth began getting hotter than the very devil. You talk about hot! My little mica particles were swelling fit to bust my shoes! It was, and this is the truth, anything but a fun time for us. Everything began melting and changing igneous hats.

We pebbles were burned up, we were melted, we ran all over the place with the smoke flying from the soles of our igneous shoes. It was a time that would tolerate no weaklings. It soon separated the granite from the granofels. We rushed here and crystallized over there. We solidified here and extruded there. We upthrust here and did so many things all at once that my poor pebble head can't keep it all straight.

Of course, we didn't have the slightest idea what was going on. Some of us thought that the world was coming to an end. Others insisted it was only signaling to pass and had plenty of road ahead before the end. I even heard some speculation from some usually conservative and quite close-mouthed members of the quartz family to the effect that the world was not ending but simply turning over in its sleep. Whatever it was, the old earth was shooting up mountains left and right and scaring the bejesus and limestone out of us. It was keeping us hopping.

You really had to be on your toes if you wanted to stay a pebble for very long. It was all you could do to keep from becoming a mineral formation, not to mention how incredibly hard it was to keep yourself in clean shirts. The very air was full of muck.

Volcanoes and steam and cinders and ash and little pieces of rock we used to know socially. Why, the very air was full of it! And the gas, let me tell you, if I had had some way to hold my nose, I would have. The air was filling up with atmosphere at an alarming rate. Oxygen and nitrogen and carbon dioxide and so many other gases it isn't even worth mentioning them. You couldn't even turn around without getting gassed with something or other.

And you talk about heartburn! I knew a mineral formation that had it so bad it broke out in geodes! It was no picnic, let me tell you. The earth was rezoning. Just when you got used to seeing it look one way, the crust would begin forming under you and you had to run like the very devil to keep from becoming a part of it. I was out of breath the whole time. Nothing but run, run, run.

It was the Precambrian age and everything was up for grabs. A pebble had to peddle his own papers. He had to carry his own weight. He had to roll with the tide or get sedimented where he stood. It was not an easy life by any means.

I had a friend, rather an unpretentious sort, really the very best type of fellow under ordinary circumstances, but a little slow. Nice but slow. He just didn't move fast enough. One minute he was flowing over the ground in as pretty a lava flow as you please and the next minute he's the middle section of a basalt column. Solidified. Just like that.

Stuck up there like that, he grew finely grained in texture and lived a quiet and unassuming life for the rest of his days. He had become dark and heavy and the lava had filled his pockets full of augite and plagioclase rock and his shirt was shot through with gas-bubble holes. He never got out much after that. He just sat around home and refused to socialize. He became very set in his ways.

Some of my other friends had it rough too, but none had it quite so rough as an aggregate of glass grains I first met at the Creation of the Universe Faculty Tea. They were nice chaps, as

glass grains go, a little too clannish, as most of the sand crowd always are, but down deep quite decent folks when you got to know them. They had a particularly horrifying experience. I shouldn't think I would have survived it were it me it happened to instead of them.

They were lazing about in the sun, pretending to be a beach before we ever got around to inventing the ocean, when suddenly they found themselves plunged headlong into one of the very hottest of the volcanoes current at the time. It was an up-and-coming volcano and there was nothing timid about it. It meant business.

The poor felsitic grains of sand, they didn't have a chance. The lava was so highly charged with gas that it erupted into the air, tossing the sand grain family out of the crater in the unfit-for-polite-society form of effervescent foam. It blew them right out of the vent. A shocking thing that, as I'm sure you will agree.

Well, what could you expect. They all got sick, of course. They were down with the trots for a month, not to mention a long-lasting case of sniffles. They had gotten chilled up there in the air and they had crashed to the earth as pumice. They said they felt like they were shot full of holes. It wasn't until later when things had settled down a little that we discovered that they *were* shot full of holes.

In March, you could hear the wind whistling through them. It made them madder than hell but there wasn't anything to be done about it. In those days, you had to play it where it lay. And everybody was getting laid, one way or another.

Sometimes the more risqué of us would go in for a little bit of foliation or a slight nip of striation, but the sensible ones of us tried to be as inconspicuously molten as possible. We didn't go out of our way to acquire gaudy amounts of minerals. We tried to be as flat and individualistic as possible. We tried to seek our own level and not to complain when we were forced to move into a neighborhood with lower-class minerals. We tried to make the best of what was basically a bad situation.

We had our regional maturities and our intervals of aggregation. It was the worst of times, but had we known the future, we would have thought it, by comparison, the best of times. From one day to the next we hardly knew where we stood or what we were. One day we might be wearing plagioclase sweat suits and the next basalt bathrobes with feldspar lapels. Where we once extruded, we felt smaller intrusive masses pushing up our pant legs. Nothing was fixed. Nothing was secure. Today you were and tomorrow you might be eroded.

Kingdoms of minerals rose and fell in the baked zones, oozed and slithered in the bleached zones. There were batholiths on every block and no waiting. Volcanoes bleated honestly from every corner and geysers goosed passersby with unrestrained glee and scalding water.

And the new things that kept popping up. No way to count them, oh no, they just piled up. A jumble, chaos. The world was practicing rhythmic birth control and it couldn't keep a beat. You name it (we tried to name it but we quickly ran out of fingers) and whatever it was, we were getting densely populated with it. One day it was the Precambrian and the quiet of unnamed species and the next day it was no longer Pre-. It was the Cambrian and we had our little felsitic fists full. We were swamped. We were bogged. We were washed with organic trivia. The sea, formed more or less on a hunch, once sedate and respected by all, the sea turned silly and vain and creature-filled. It became uppity. It began to have airs.

The warm shallow seas repeatedly invaded the continents. Countless incidents of backyard barbecues ruined by seasonal sea escapades became the order of the day. We were horrified. Righteously appalled. We were alternately wet and dry and mad as hell. Rain was fine—if it had to be, it had to be—but sea water, we instinctively felt, should learn to keep its place. We were jealous, I guess. We had worked so hard to be a continent. Pushing up here, extruding here, uplifting there, trying vainly to associate with the best minerals, trying to look as presentable as possible. And then, just when we had a particularly winsome striation down pat, the sea would rise up and put us under water.

How often I remember the trips to the seashore. I and the other pebbles would spit furiously

into the ocean. We would thumb our noses at the rude sea. The sea, heedless, even in those days, was just learning to wave. It crashed on the shore, impudently. Some of us, leaning a little too close, were splashed from head to foot, from hornblende to feldspar. It made us smooth and angry.

It was hard to get sentimental about the unromantic sea. For one thing, the sea was in its slime in those days. It was full of unpleasantness and involuntary creatures. It was murky with things. Had we known then what we know now, perhaps in anger we would have attempted something quite violent against the sea. I can't speak for my fellow feldspars, but I do know that I, for one, would have been right out there urinating into the sea if I had known what lurked beneath its insolent surface.

We pebbles had put up with a lot in 170 million years. We had had it rough, we thought. If only we had known how well off we were! The worst was yet to come. The sea was spawning. It was obscene and unusual. It was demented. The sea was paranoid and it was out to get us. The poor, shivering, wet thing, oozing down below with its oozes, perhaps unloved and certainly untutored. Surely, the sea was not perceptive enough to realize the extent of its villainy. Perhaps it thought it was only about to create a good topic for conversation. Perhaps there was no malice in its coral-encrusted heart. No matter, the damage was done.

The sea broke out in a rash of organisms and we, watching helplessly from the shore, knew the game was up. We were about to experience the Ordovician of Despair, the Silurian of Despond. We poor pebbles tossed and turned uncomfortably on our continental shelves. Our early paleozoic nightmares swarmed with sponges, trilobites, brachiopods, corals, nautiloid cephalopods, and so many other forms of lesser monetary worth that we arose in volcanic protest marches, heaved and foamed violently, but all to no avail.

Troubled sleep and endless woe were upon us. We sent the more sentimental of us down deep to get a closer look. Make records, we said, we'll want to know just what it is they're doing down there. They limped back to dry land, turned hard and impressed unduly with the perfidious presence of the sea creatures. There was no unsolidified doubt in our minds. The sea had pulled out all stops. Today jawless fishes, tomorrow the world!

We held prayer meetings. We formed study groups, steering committees. We attended masses in the milestone caverns. Speakers raged from stalactite pulpits against the ostracoderms. "If these jawless fishes flourish," warned the speakers, "before you know it, they'll want jaws and then there will be no stopping them!" We were in a panic.

We held extrusive marches. Sit-ins, be-ins, sediment-ins, all to no avail. Some of the cooler heads tried to calm us down. Oh, they tried. A cool, smooth-talking glacier pebble raised a question or two.

"It's no big deal!" he cried. "Let the ostracoderms get jaws, see if I care! If they get teeth and headlights, who cares? Why bother with jaws if there's nothing to bite?" While the crowd was shouting him down, behind our very backs and in some cases under our very noses, the placoderms were trying out their new jaws on each other and preparing the guest bedrooms for the Age of Fishes. It was the Devonian before we knew it. Before you could say "fossil cockroaches," the fish and invertebrates foul were upon us. We felt them staring balefully at us as we laughed and played upon our continents.

Although it was our season in the sun, from the hidden depths of their watery homes, a sensation of restlessness came to us. They had their eyes on land; of that there was no doubt. Countless numbers of times, we slapped their little tetrapod claws with rockslides as they tried to scale our thighs and clasp our rocky bosoms. They might pretend to be outwardly peaceful, but we were not fooled. We knew they were down there, growing feet. They were up to no good, that was clear, and we would be damned if we were going to give them the satisfaction of an easy journey.

"There goes the neighborhood!" we cried, when we felt the first amphi of the amphibian. "Goodbye, clean living; hello, organic fertilizer!" we cried, when we felt the first rep of the

reptile. We had no time to sort out the anatomical particulars. While we, in a panic, cast our fearful eyes transfixed upon the swarming sea, behind our backs the plants were festering on our tough hides like blisters and tearing the very subsoil out of us. We were caught between the rock and the hard place, as the saying goes.

Plants tearing out big hunks of our flesh on one side and tet-rapods mewling and whining all over our dancing shoes on the other. We were trapped and we knew it.

We hid our heads in the sand; we stood mute and silent, stunned by tragedy. We still had a trick or two left. We shifted a continent or two, just to keep our hand in, but the fun had gone out of life. What next? we cried. We wept, we made tearful stalactites out of ourselves. The worst has happened, we thought. Oh, how little we knew!

What was that enormous bleat? That thunderous, tunderous bump and grind? It was the Mesozoic 1920 with Stegosauruses who could be another Al Capone (except they lacked his compassion). The lights went up on the saurian burlesque show. The dinosaur duckbill hit vaudeville. A baggy-pants dinosaur was top banana. The straight man was a Tyrannosaurus rex, a Lizzie Borden with teeth trouble.

The clip joints all had teeth and big feet. Herbivore armor too tight? Need a shave? Step into the meat eater's cave! Take a little off the top, shorten the tail. There wasn't a rock formation that didn't groan under their tawdry weight, that didn't blush at the striptease of carnivore meeting herbivore. It was bleat and eat and excrete and we were swimming in it. We were appalled. We were up to our necks in it.

The shame! The degradation! Trampled eternally by the dinosaur-footed speakeasy and carried by a big kick. We hid our blushing crystals in shame. We melted our embarrassed gold in vein. Surely, nothing could be worse.

But lo and behold, it seemed like only a matter of minutes before the mammals made their singing debut, hard upon the heels of a ponderous inherit-the-earth act. The vaudeville cacophony of leather-winged bird calls, dinosaur egg-juggling stunts, and saurian can-can dancers had hardly finished their Permian encore when the mammals waltzed in and took our breaths away.

We were stunned, we were knocked flat on our crop rotations.

We were pruned and cultivated. Mammals! Marsupial monsoons!

Placental apartment buildings! Archaic tidal womb, from cradle to tomb, all those beastly functions!

All the pebbles, fously spattered with the soft-boiled egg, the creeping embryo, wondered whence and whither and, gritting our felsitic teeth, tried not to let it show. The egg exchanged for embryo, civilization and live birth and open sewers couldn't be far behind. We searched our brains, probed our granite matter, racked our minds. We were lost, busted, disgusted, and put away wet.

Clawed toes made holes in our hides, hooves (of all things) hit sparks off our flat cheeks. And there was no peace. There were no love affairs of chemicals, no sexual mineralogical grace, no crystal tryst to perpetuate the race. We were finished, permanently glued in mineralogical displays.

Our porous cavities filled with tears. The pebbles, once closely tied to their family formations, moved away, weathering, never to be seen again. We pebbles began endlessly tumbling, homeless, erosive, wearing away at the mountains, the sterile mountains that had betrayed us.

Had we known what we know now, perhaps the world would have been different. Perhaps I, the lonely molecule, the pebble too large for the sand of the beach, would tell a different tale. Perhaps I would be skating across the silent sea on ferromag-nesian hooves. Perhaps I would draw the clean geothermal steam into my silicone lungs and mate with a cute, passionate little red hematite from the formation just next door. Perhaps, but now I live in the river unloved, resorting to bitter abrasion and hydraulic action.

Perhaps it would have been different. Perhaps, in another life, I would have taken a wife and

raised little garnets of my own. Why, I remember a cute little hornblende formation with the sharpest double-chain tetrahedra! Ah, but where is she now? Asleep in the concrete bottom of a swimming pool! Ah, life! It is as if we never had been.

I, the pebble, I tumble endlessly, silent, unproductive. Be careful, lest you wake me. Treat me kindly. Don't skip me over the surface of the water. I am sleeping quietly with folded crystals. Like those fossils, those records of time past we made, we sleep, never having understood what love was for, uselessly we sleep, tumbled endlessly on this shore. Sleep. The only freedom we know.

REPORT ON THE RECENT OUTBREAK OF ENTERTAINMENT FROM EARTH

We had to admit to it finally, the planet needed entertainment. We had gotten quite a bit of amusement out of a rabid dog, but it had been years since he passed through.

We still talked of it, though. The dog had belonged to the Most High Poobob. It was an unremarkable dog, living underfoot for years and years in a quiet, gentlemanlike way, winning the regard of all who knew him. It was a genuine surprise to us when he began to hydrophobe in a most violent way.

We all thought he was devilishly clever. It was so unexpected of him.

The Most High Poobob spent a week in a tree over the incident. To his credit, he was able to maintain a lively sense of humor throughout this period.

If I can recall it, he said, "It is a remarkable thing. One may grow attached to a dog but never, never consider that that same dog may become attached to us."

This observation was made at the time the Most High Poobob was privileged to witness one of our former leading citizens drawing the rather reluctant mad dog down the street by the seat of his pants.

I have always felt the Most High Poobob showed markedly good sense in not mingling with the mad dog and filling his system full of dog virus. Some who experimented with it are, sadly enough, no longer with us. We have, however, preserved some of their teeth marks in the furniture of this district. It is on view five days a week in the museum.

Of course, it was an Earth man who finally provided us with enough excitement to pull us out of our planetary slump. (The astronomers claimed our depression had put a dip in our orbit. Not a very deep dip, mind you, but if you weren't watching the road, you could get quite a jolt out of it.) We never did figure how he got here, not that we minded much one way or the other. It was enough that he was here. Some people even went so far as to say that it was too much.

He kept claiming he was an astronaut, but we weren't fooled in the least. For one thing, he had a funny white coverall suit on, so unlike the space suits on television. He was awfully clumsy too, continually tripping over things, really making a monkey out of himself. We finally had to take that ridiculous suit away from him. He kept wading through the tomato plants and killing the vines with his heavy metal boots.

The Most High Poobob suggested that the Earth man had escaped during the night from some sort of institution, pointing out, in support of his theory, the clumsy suit the Earth man wore. They did look very like pajamas, I will grant you, but few of us could reconcile ourselves to this. Had the Earth man carried a teddy bear, though, I believe we would have been convinced.

I must admit that no one on the planet really expected we would get so much entertainment out of him. He talked a great deal, of course, and that was mildly entertaining. But only for ten minutes or so. After that, it became evident that he could go at it all night if given the chance. It soon became inflationary, as he began saying more words to say less.

He was forever after us to help him radio Earth to get help. We offered him the help of our best doctors, but I believe he must have had some phobia about hammers. He would never let one of our medical people get close enough to administer an anesthetic.

It seems he wanted us to help him put up some sort of radio tower which would then enable him to reach Earth. We could never see any advantage in it, but finally the Most High Poobob agreed to it on the condition that we be allowed to use the radio tower as a trellis for grapes.

The Earth man always had a poor head for agriculture, which is why, I suppose, he only agreed to our request with some reluctance. We helped him build the tower to his

specifications. It was an expensive project. Metal is very dear to us here, since most of it comes by mail from Sears, Roebuck.

At least twice a week, the Most High Poobob pointed out the economic advantages of building the radio tower out of wood, but the Earth man would have nothing to do with it. We are a mild sort of people, so we let him have his way.

But even mild people can be pushed past their limits. We had completed work on the radio tower. I believe it was on a Tuesday. We were wondering when we could set it up and some of us were more than a little bit proud of our efforts. To our knowledge, our planet has never known such a huge grape trellis in all of its history. Oh, we used to let grapes grow on old dinosaurs who had given up on life, but we could hardly claim to have built the dinosaurs. Besides, they were so unreliable. Often, a whole year's grape harvest would go crashing off into the jungle as it became obvious that the dinosaur we had picked had only been playing dead. The dinosaurs were always terrible practical jokers, never able to take even their own deaths seriously. The Most High Poobob had always maintained that that is the very reason they are now extinct. Others say it was transportation that killed them. What did you think?

At any rate, we had finished the radio tower and the Earth man made us load it up and carry it to the opera house. We rigged up a block and tackle and the Earth man attached it to the top of the opera house. Even then, we were unaware of what he intended to do with the tower.

Throughout this stage of the matter, I feel we were slightly naive. It was only when we had hoisted the radio tower to the roof that it became obvious to us that the Earth man intended to place the radio tower on top of the roof! What an unspeakably unagricultural thing to do! A roof is no place to grow grapes. Any fool knows that, even the Most High Poobob!

I think we pretty clearly stated our disapproval of the whole project. To a man, we deserted the company of the Earth man, leaving him to figure out a way to erect the radio tower on his own, since it was obvious to us now that he had no interest in agriculture, in fact was quite hopelessly retarded on the subject.

He stayed up there on the opera house roof, banging around with hammers and swearing a great deal. This was mildly amusing at first but soon palled. In the general course of things, I guess we forgot all about him.

I had tickets to the opera. The opera is a popular sport here. We only have one opera, so we only try to run it twice a week so as not to taint it by familiarity. I guess we could have had other operas, but we only had one man who wrote opera. At the time he had written our opera, which was called *The Smut Is in the Corn and the Blight Is Looking Very Seriously at the Tomatoes*, there was very little demand for opera. We were still experiencing dinosaurs and had little time for high culture.

Now, however, the dinosaurs having left the fold, we are hungry for operatic divertissement. The house was packed since one of our finest opera stars had announced she would sing that very night. We only had two opera stars, so it wasn't much of an announcement, but she was the only opera star we had with big bazooms, so I guess that counted for something.

The Earth man was up on the roof, of course, still fiddling with his radio tower but, thankfully, doing it quietly. Of course, opera is frightfully boring and only passes as the lowest form of entertainment. The only real excitement in opera for us was juggling for seats in the balcony so that the lucky seat holder might get a good view down at the top of our greatest opera singer's dress. She really did have the most incredible pair of bazooms we had ever seen. She was often the center of much agricultural speculation in this regard.

It just so happened that the weather bureau had forecast, for the very same night of the opera, a great deal of weather. In fact, they forecast more weather than we have had in recent months. It has always been exciting for me to hear weather forecast. It's such a disappointment when we have a month with no weather.

Well, the place was packed, I assure you. Those bazooms of hers had preceded her.

The show had hardly commenced when we heard the good, honest bleat of a lightning bolt.

The lightning struck the Earth man's radio tower, ran down his leg, took a drag on his cigarette, turned his boots wrong side out, convinced him to change socks, toyed with the hair on his arms, and took a loose tooth out and put it in his ear. All of this was done very briefly. The thing was plainly visible to us because the lightning, with some foresight and a flair for the dramatic, broke the glass in the skylight and deposited the skylight and the Earth man in a section of the house that happened to be empty because the ticket scalpers couldn't get more than \$150 apiece for the seats.

The Earth man's appearance in this manner was truly electrifying. A bolt of the yellow glow shot off one of his arms and out of the window, where it hit a light pole fifty feet high and carved it into double-pointed toothpicks.

Another bolt of the electric fluid danced around his feet and seared the carpet quite a bit. It was quite an entertaining display and I doubt if any who experienced it will forget it soon. It was such an explosive sort of thing to do, we never knew where he would hit next.

He made the rabid dog seem like an idle amusement, a child's toy by comparison. Of course, we could see it was an effort on his part, and in his face, I believe, we could see the strain of maintaining that extreme state of high conductivity.

He thrashed about a great deal, touching one of our ushers briefly. Sad to say, this contact was fatal for the usher. Our favorite opera singer felt decidedly upstaged at this point and, I suppose, got careless. She got a high note out backward and had to be rushed to a hospital for an immediate chest X ray. The newspapers later reported that twelve teams of doctors had examined her chest and that all of them had found it.

The Earth man had certainly had his moment. I am sure the moment of his appearance made two thousand men think of their wasted lives, and two thousand women feel for their back hair to see if it was still there. It was quite successful and caused no end of discussion in the balcony where he had fallen.

Eventually the electricity departed him and he tumbled somewhat wearily over the balcony in a rather unnecessary manner and plunged into the orchestra. It seemed somewhat anticlimactic. Some people simply do not know when to call it quits.

Ah, thinking back on it now, I do not think I shall ever forget how proud and buoyant he looked as he sailed in with that lightning bolt at his back, fireballs resting lightly in his hair, and how grieved and hurt he seemed when we later took him up in a body and gave him a swinging arc that carried him well over the street as we showed him the way out.

And that, when one reflects on it, was the entertainment from Earth we enjoyed the most.

RED BEAUTY

"Blood is man's most alarming treasure," said Dr. Vada.

The corpse did not reply.

The white-coated medical students stirred restlessly in their seats. A green-faced freshman in the second row was already having difficulty and Dr. Vada had just barely begun.

Dr. Vada took a scalpel from a tray at his side. He turned and watched the faces of the students in the auditorium. Good. All eyes were on him. He placed the sharpened point on the chest of the corpse.

"What is the only thriving wildlife as yet relatively untouched by man?" he asked.

It was not meant to be answered. He meant to supply the answer himself.

Bellamy, in the first row, could not resist.

"The Dean's wife, Dr. Vada. I don't know about her thriving, but they say she's wild all right!"

There was a roar of laughter from the students at his back. Bellamy turned and faced his audience, bowing slightly. He was enormously pleased with himself.

Dr. Vada's face burned with fury. "That is the last time I will have my class interrupted by . . . by a . . ."

Bellamy spread his hands. "My most humble apologies." He laughed. "Don't forget who I am, Dr. Vada. My father is president of the university and . . ."

"And his son is a fool. Sit down, Bellamy." Dr. Vada's hands trembled and the scalpel bit into the flesh of the corpse. His eyes burned with rage. The hostility between himself and young Bellamy was bitter and of long standing.

"As I was saying," he continued, "the wildlife I referred to that has barely been touched by man is the hot, poorly lit world within himself. We have never learned to admire the absolute beauty of the blood."

Dr. Vada licked his lips. His eyes flashed with excitement. "Blood is misunderstood. We hate the pain that always appears with it and that pain has taught us to hate it, to hate the sight of blood."

Dr. Vada stared at his students. "And thereby, man blinds himself to one of the most beautiful things in creation. Our own rich, red, human blood."

"Taking hematology from a lunatic!" muttered Bellamy to the girl in the seat next to him. Dr. Vada heard him, as he was meant to. Except for a certain tightening of the muscles in his face, he chose to ignore it.

The scalpel was again pressed to the chest of the corpse.

"I'm a nature lover but the only scenery I prefer is inside the body." The doctor's arm flexed. The knife bit into cold flesh, slashing a deep cavity across the cadaver's chest. Sightless eyes stared blankly up at the smile of pleasure that spread across Dr. Vada's face.

"How can one not admire the wondrous shape of the glands, the fragile transparent lungs, the world within worlds of the infinitely complex brain cell mass. And through it all and always, streams the blood."

Dr. Vada made rapid lateral incisions. Dropping the scalpel on the tray, he grabbed the edges of the incision with both hands and laid back the skin with one quick tearing motion, exposing the entire chest cavity of the corpse.

The green-faced freshman in the second row doubled over in his seat. Dr. Vada glared at him. The freshman tried to lift his head, to pretend that nothing was wrong, but it was too much for him. He fainted.

Someone at the back of the room rose to his feet, dropping his books with a crash. He exited at great speed with one hand clamped over his mouth. The sound of someone vomiting in the hall outside came back clearly.

Dr. Vada scowled. "Why must I be plagued with constant interruptions?"

Several students moved to help the one who had fainted.

"Leave him alone!" snapped Dr. Vada, hands still holding the split halves of the chest. "The fool isn't hurt and we've no time to waste on his kind." The students returned to their seats.

"Ah, the blood," said Dr. Vada, almost worshipfully. "And this, the poor, flawed repository in which it streams." He moved so they could get a better view.

Bellamy muttered something else to the girl in the seat beside him. Dr. Vada caught some of it, a fragment of a particularly dirty joke. The girl blushed but did not seem overly offended.

This Dr. Vada could not ignore. It almost amounted to sacrilege.

"Bellamy." Dr. Vada's voice crashed through the hall. "Come here, Bellamy."

Reluctantly, Bellamy rose to his feet.

Dr. Vada kicked a chair in the first row, turning it so it faced the students in the auditorium.

Vada motioned at the chair. "Sit."

"But, Dr. Vada, I was only . . ." began Bellamy with a smirk.

"Sit down and shut up." Bellamy did both.

Dr. Vada nodded to his class, almost apologetically. "Young Bellamy here is in his usual form today. And because he is"—Dr. Vada's hands clamped on Bellamy's neck, pushing him against the back of the chair—"our Mr. Bellamy is going to provide us with a special treat."

Bellamy winced. The old doctor's hands were surprisingly strong.

"I don't want. . ."

"Silence."

Dr. Vada took his hands away and moved to the trays beside the dissection table. He returned with a large syringe and a length of thin rubber tubing.

"Thank you for volunteering to give a blood sample." Dr. Vada's smile could have dispensed ice.

"I'm not volunteering for . . ."

A hand on his shoulder cut him off. Bellamy shuddered. The strength in the old man's hands was really quite incredible. The look in the old man's eyes was something else again. He resisted the impulse to stand up, to take a swing at Vada. How can you hit an old man?

"Roll up your sleeve." Dr. Vada hovered over him, as if daring Bellamy to defy him. I'll get you later, you bastard, thought Bellamy as he rolled his sleeve up past the elbow. You're going to regret you ever laid a hand on me.

"Pay careful attention, class," said Dr. Vada, resuming the role of professor. "Observe as I tie this length of rubber tubing around his upper arm." He did so.

Dr. Vada unwrapped a sterile glass syringe, sunk its plunger into its barrel, placed a sterile needle on the end, and turned to face Bellamy with it.

"Make a fist."

Bellamy did.

The needle got closer. "Aren't you supposed to swab it with alcohol first?" asked Bellamy.

"Only if one wants to lessen the pain," said Dr. Vada, jabbing the needle into Bellamy's outstretched arm. "Notice how smoothly I inserted the needle," he said, once again speaking to his class. "Many of you will find this part difficult. Sticking a needle into someone's skin, like dying, must be done quickly or it becomes a rather messy experience."

When the syringe was full, Dr. Vada pulled it free of Bellamy's arm with a jerk. Bellamy cried out in pain.

Dr. Vada turned to his class with a smile. He held up the syringe for all to see.

"And now we have it. One of the unsung beauties of man. Blood."

Dr. Vada had a look of rapturous contentment on his face. "But does this fragile beauty last?"

Dr. Vada held up a small glass beaker. He emptied the syringe into it, holding it carefully in front of him so that all might see what he had trapped there.

"No. It does not last. Within five minutes, surely no longer than ten, this beautiful ruby-red liquid will change into a solid brown mass. If I were a fool"—he glanced significantly at Bellamy, who was rubbing a sore arm—"and not a scientist, perhaps I might think that this

wonderful bit of living matter I have removed from a human body could now blindly live on as if it had never left its home. If I were a fool."

Dr. Vada's face became melancholy. "If only there was a way to keep it as you see it now, in its pure uncoagulated state."

Dr. Vada stared off into space as if he had forgotten where he was and to whom he spoke. "For thirty-five years I have sought the answer to this mystery. I have spent my life trying to stay this coarsening, this destroyer of natural beauty ... for it was my dream . . . my dream always . . . that my own blood should flow eternally . . . that even at my death the red liquid would . . ." Dr. Vada jumped. He looked around him uncertainly. The puzzled, almost frightened rows of faces stared back at him. At his back, Bellamy silently mouthed the word "lunatic."

Dr. Vada turned pale, licking his lips nervously. He passed his hand across his face, as if wiping it clean of expression.

"Class dismissed," said Dr. Vada. Students sat and stared at each other. Class dismissed an hour early? The doctor set the glass beaker down on his desk and stalked out of the room. At the bottom of the container lay a thick brown mass of coagulated blood.

Bellamy rose with a look of pure malice on his face and followed Dr. Vada. He caught up to him as Dr. Vada prepared to enter his office in the basement of Steiner Hall.

"Yes? What is it?" snapped Dr. Vada. "I want to be alone." The old man opened his door and tried to enter, but Bellamy blocked him.

"I wanna talk to you," said Bellamy. "Now!"

"Another day! I must be alone with my . . ."

Bellamy pushed Dr. Vada through the door and stepped inside behind him. Dr. Vada staggered, recovered his balance, and turned and stared coldly at the angry young man in front of him. The old man seemed neither surprised nor particularly upset.

"Do you intend to beat me?" asked Dr. Vada. "If that is your intention, I cannot defend myself. I have a weak heart."

"You're not going to get off that easily, you old bastard. What's the idea of using me for a guinea pig anyway!" Bellamy rubbed the spot on Ms arm where the needle had gone in. "You think you can get away with that kind of crap around me? You're going to be sorry you ever . . ."

"And what do you intend to do about it?"

"I mean to see you fired. Not only that, I intend to see to it that you never get a university position anywhere else either."

"Your father is not that powerful, I think," said Dr. Vada calmly. "Besides, how do I know he would do anything to me anyway? Surely your word cannot be all that honorable even in your father's eyes."

"Gloat, you miserable bastard," said Bellamy. "Do you remember Dr. Saygers?"

The old man nodded. "A pity. A very old and dear colleague of mine. His suicide was a very great shock to me."

"He did it because I got him canned," said Bellamy with a note of triumph in his voice. "I shagged him. Just like I'm going to shag you."

Dr. Vada went to his desk and sat down. "You sit here and brag that you are responsible for the death of Dr. Saygers?"

Bellamy laughed.

Dr. Vada stared at the top of his desk. There was no expression on his face. He simply looked tired.

Bellamy leaned on the edge of his desk. "What's the matter, pops, all your stuffing leak out?"

Dr. Vada opened a cigar box on his desk. His hand was hidden by the box lid. "Does the perfect anticoagulant interest you, Mr. Bellamy?"

"Only your disappearance from the university interests me," said Bellamy. "You're senile and

should have been put out to pasture a long time ago."

"A pity," said Dr. Vada. "Quite a fascinating subject. After blood leaves the body, prothrombin becomes converted to thrombin. When enough thrombin has formed, it converts fibrinogen to fibrin. I've tested hundreds of serums, perhaps thousands. I've never discovered anything that could reverse or totally inhibit that process." Dr. Vada sighed. He seemed abstracted, almost dreamy.

"You're mad, you know that? Still rattling on about your failures." Bellamy smiled. "Hasn't it sunk into that decrepit brain of yours that you're finished here?"

"Of course it has," said Dr. Vada. "Did you think I did not take you seriously? I assure you I do."

Bellamy stood up. "You'd better. Maybe you should resign. It'll look better than being booted out."

Dr. Vada just smiled. "Resign? I have no intention of resigning. I still have a new serum to try. Not much hope of success, I'm afraid. The proteins involved are impure. Always my greatest problem."

Angrily Bellamy leaned over the desk, opened his mouth to speak.

Dr. Vada struck. His hand came up from the inside of the cigar box. The hypodermic stabbed into the young man's chest.

Bellamy staggered back, eyes wide open with horror. He stumbled on a fold in the carpet and fell. The hypo was jolted free by the impact of the fall and landed in his lap.

"Help!" screamed Bellamy. "Help!"

Dr. Vada consulted the battered timepiece in his vest pocket. "Well, I underestimated the dose. Bit cramped and awkward doing it one-handed. I had hoped you wouldn't be able to scream."

Bellamy tried to rise. His arms and legs stiffened, refusing to obey. He was numb from the neck down. Paralysis was slowly creeping upward. Already his jaws and face felt heavy. His eyes rolled in terror, veins in his neck bulging horribly as he tried to move himself.

"Eleven seconds," said Dr. Vada. "Not a poison, Mr. Bellamy, so you needn't look so horrified. I wouldn't poison anyone. That would be inhuman."

"What are . . . you . . . doing to me?" The words came thickly from Bellamy's throat.

"You are in your usual form today, Mr. Bellamy," said Dr. Vada. He held a scalpel in one hand. "And because you are"—he moved to Bellamy's side—"you are going to provide me with a special treat."

"No! No!" whispered Bellamy.

"Our Mr. Bellamy has volunteered to participate in an anticoagulant test." Methodically, the old man began slicing through the shirt and pants, cutting away the clothes. He removed socks and shoes, undergarments. With a quick flip of the scalpel he snapped a gold chain that had encircled the young man's neck.

"You . . . can't. . . doesn't work . . . you know it won't work . . ." Bellamy was almost inaudible.

"Relax, Mr. Bellamy." Dr. Vada lightly scratched the carotid artery with the sharp point of the scalpel. His hand was sure. "Trust me. I know my serum probably won't work, but don't let it concern you. I won't let it discourage me. Like all scientists, I'll just keep trying."

"You . . . please . . . I won't . . . pleeeeeeeasssee." Bellamy could no longer control his vocal cords.

"A very effective drug, is it not, young Mr. Bellamy? Are you comfortable?" Dr. Vada smiled solicitously. "I know you are paralyzed. But you can still hear, still see, Mr. Bellamy. You'll be aware at all times. I find that a rather nice touch."

Bellamy neither moved nor spoke. A tear trickled down one cheek.

Producing another hypo, the old man injected 20 cc's of anticoagulant.

"Keep your fingers crossed," said Dr. Vada with a laugh. "Can't cross them? Pity." He took

the scalpel, held it gently to Bellamy's neck. With a firm, decisive stroke, he severed the carotid artery.

A bright arterial flow of blood gushed forth to pool on the floor at Dr. Vada's feet.

"Beautiful! Absolutely beautiful! Oh, beautiful, alarming treasure!" There was a look of pure delight on Dr. Vada's face.

"Do you hear it, my boy? Can you see the great rushing red glory of it?" Dr. Vada sighed.

"But of course you can. At least for a little while."

There was silence in the room. Bellamy on the floor in a bright red pool of blood. Dr. Vada back at his desk, dreamily eyeing the red area. If only the beauty could last.

Ten minutes crept by. Bellamy had passed hearing and seeing. Forever.

"Alas," said Dr. Vada.

The beautiful red pool had thickened and turned brown.

Dr. Vada sighed, filled with a great sorrow. Something beautiful had passed out of his life.

ON THE WAY HOME

That Army place on your head where your hair used to be, that's the first thing that gets out the bus door, bent over, down the steps and out. Long since got used to the absence of braids. Watching the bus boil away in the dust, wondering how long it going to be before you learn to walk like you ain't got a board rammed up your back. Damn Army.

Leonard Wolfe and Dave, his brother, are sitting in front of the gas station, eating crackers and drinking wine. Some damn tourist taking pictures of them, just asking to get his jaw rewired.

"Damn," says Leonard, taking the bottle away from his lips. "It's Yellow Dog." He waves him over with his sweaty hat.

Yellow Dog grins crooked, his jaw still sore from that big black sergeant's fist, and walks over to them. "Who's that there?" he asks, pointing at the tourist.

They all look up at the tourist and the idiot turns several shades of red and tries to hide behind his camera.

"You want something to drink?" Leonard hands the big old wine bottle up at the white man. The white man shakes his head, scared at the way they're looking at him.

"They'll be offended if you don't drink with them," says Yellow Dog, dropping his Army duffel bag on the ground beside his friends. "They might get mad at you. They might think you're saying you're too good to drink with them."

Yellow Dog is looking serious but, down deep, laughing it up.

The tourist gulps like he swallowed a wristwatch and reaches and takes the wine bottle. He starts to wipe the rim of the bottle on his sleeve but Yellow Dog shakes his head no and the tourist swallows another watch and shakes a little. He tilts the bottle up and swallows down a big gulp of warm wine, lips wrinkled up.

He pulls the bottle down and his eyes are bulging a little and he chokes and Yellow Dog is about ready to fall over a laugh and bust himself open, belly first. It is that much funny. Dumb damn white tourist and his frigging snap snap camera!

"Thanks a lot," says the tourist, spitting out his words. "I gotta gobyethanks for the drink." And 'fore you can spit he's halfway gone and still going away, camera bouncing off his side like a rug beater as he runs.

"Look at that rascal go! Don't he make a coyote look stiff?" says Leonard Wolfe. "Hey, Yellow Dog, you damn well home for good now?"

"Yeah, I guess," says Yellow Dog. "I guess this is home and I guess I'm here to stay."

"Sit yourself down and drink with us then, brother," says Leonard, and he hands the bottle over to him. So he sat down with them and drank and told lies about all them women he'd run and ate the late-afternoon dust and fought mosquitoes until dark gave them mosquitoes too much advantage. They run out of wine too.

By then, the headache was moving from that wine, yes, moving in him, spreading down through the arms and legs and moving down into his back. Yellow Dog just getting loaded and fitting in and it's dark, the dance starts up there 'cross the ways in Will Holds Horse's trading store. Hot damn.

Yellow Dog and Leonard Wolfe and his brother, they crawl down that way to see what's giving.

Country music blaring and a fight off in one corner and man it's just like always. They stagger in just as Gladys Best Heart comes out all bloodied up, drunk and spitting out her two front teeth. That damn Charlie Best Heart, he takes his drinking hard.

Loud voices and this woman dancing in one corner when she don't want to and some fight gets started and that's like how it almost got started big but Leonard Wolfe go up and hit Hungry Thomas over the head with a six-pack of beer and that end that.

Yellow Dog leaning against the wall there, just watching and drinking and listening that

music whanging away.

Someone, maybe that Tolbert woman from over across the road, try to get him to dance but he can't hardly stand up no more so he let it pass.

Yellow Dog sipping some beer that Leonard hand him, goddamn head begin to pound, feel like stuffed with pine needles.

God, is he getting sick? It might pass, woozy and shaking and legs sure feeling weak on him.

Leonard goes out, and his brother follows, probably some kind of fight, and Yellow Dog hugging the wall, can't walk to even get outside where the air is.

Damn inside air, smoke and sweat and no windows in there, going to knock him right out.

Oh damn, here it comes, sliding down the wall. Someone next to him, puking all over the floor. Got to get outside. Now.

Yellow Dog stagger away, bump into people, get pushed away, not too gentle, probably would have got mouth busted good but he so wasted they let him slip by.

Staggering toward the door. Hardly move, blur and dizzy. Head exploding.

Get out into the air, stagger off to one side, grab hold the flagpole, damn creosote agency flagpole, and that's it. Damn guts let go and hug that pole and try to do it gentle, try to get rid of it smooth and not tear up insides.

Heaving and heaving, and sick inside and when you got to quit or die it seems, then damn it lets loose of you, and slide back down, fall to the ground in your vomit and fall over on your back.

Damn, damn, curse Yellow Dog, lying there on his back, staring up at nothing. Damn, saying Yellow Dog, and crying a kind of empty in him, he look up through the liquor sickness at the moon and cry, "Oh damn," and tears in his eyes. "I'm home," he says.

WHITE BROTHERS FROM THE PLACE WHERE NO MAN WALKS

One evening Old Coat sat down in the fire. He did not wince or move his face. After a while the fire burned low. No one spoke.

Old Coat's daughter sat in the cornfield. Within her belly her sorrowing boy-child knew it would be born dead.

Uzmea the conjuror came in the night. Uzmea, the throat spreader, killed her and put her head in a red clay pot. Now the story begins.

Uzmea the taker of sacrifices lived in a cave of no color. No warrior went seeking Uzmea. He lived in the mountains among the strange gods and devices of his race.

One day of blackness and ground clouds, Uzmea came into Chota and stood silently by the village house. Warriors, women, and small ones gathered around him. No one dared move too close, for it was rumored that arms would drop from hands that touched Uzmea.

Uzmea had lived in the place of no color longer than the memory of the pretty women. He had been with our people from back into the time of the big cold land. He was not of our way. He wore strange plates of yellow metal around his chest. Upon his head was a strange metal shield with a tall bird plume. Around his neck was a string of glass stones that were red and blue and glitter. He worshipped strange gods. Gods of the sky and another more powerful, a snake god with feathers.

Twice had Uzmea come into Chota. Twice had the ground shaken the roots of houses and trees down. Twice water in the river had risen and fallen like the tide of the big water, the bottoms of lakes became hills, the earth cracked with the great wounds, and the hot foul breath of demons went into the air.

And each time Uzmea had spoken in a strange tongue to the sun. And then to us he spoke of this world-shake. It was a warning that the land would have new masters, Uzmea said.

Now Uzmea stood in the village again. Many hearts were tight with fear. Uzmea spoke to the sun in his strange tongue. Then he turned to the real people and said in our tongue:

"Listen and I shall tell you of a time long ago. I am the not-alive and the not-dead. I came to this place many animal ages ago. I made prophecy that the great white brothers would come. For the Delawares were upon you and your fires had sunk low. I told your oldest fathers of this place and of the coming of the white brothers who would keep your fires high. And I took blood that my prophecy would grow.

"It was many lifetimes before the whites came. They were not the white brothers I had prophesied. These white men came in ships across the big water. Uzmea sat in his cave dreaming and waiting. The real people had forgotten him except in fire talk but Uzmea did not forget.

"These white men became your brothers but they were not the white brothers of the time of need. Once again I spoke to the oldest of your fathers. I said: The white man will take your land. He will point you to the West, but there is no home for you there. He will make you become like him. He will say your way is no good. He will make roads across your heart so that he may come and look at you. He will teach you his tongue and the strange markings that are his you will learn. He will teach your people to spin and weave clothes that cover what you are not. He will teach you not to hunt and not to fight but to take food out of the ground. By these means he will destroy. He will marry your women and the children will be born boneless and bloodless.

"Some believed Uzmea and some did not. Hide, my children. Go to sleep, I said. Those who believed Uzmea hid in the caves and the high places. They stayed pure. Today I have come to

this gathering place for the last time.

"In the eyes of the whites, you are outlaws, the ones who did not move West. Your bones are strong and your blood sings. I have seen the clearness, the vision. I shall speak this once and go to the cave of my race for all time. I have seen the white brother who is yet to come. Perhaps they will come quickly or not in your breathing time. Time has no feeling to them. Years are days to these white brothers. But come now or for your children, they will know your need. He will look upon your bodies that are thin with hair. He will look at the blood of your children and it shall be his blood.

"Their ways are strange but that which was taken from you the white brother will give back. They are mighty. They come across the place where no man walks. Give them the strange things of the ground so that your brothers may live and breed in his home far from this place. This is my prophecy."

Then Uzmea beckoned with his hand to Old Coat.

Old Coat did not show fear as he walked toward Uzmea. He was walking to his death, he knew.

Uzmea stared at Old Coat with ugly prophecy eyes and raised his hands in front of his unsleeping eyes. Old Coat stood before Uzmea. He looked straight into Uzmea's eyes, his back straight. Uzmea's hands fell upon Old Coat's face and Old Coat became as one dead. His eyes were dead fish-eyes in his head.

"Do you see?" asked Uzmea.

Old Coat's voice came from the faraway of the grave. "I see."

Uzmea drew his robe about him. "Three deaths will feed this dream. Three blood lives will grow my prophecy."

As swift as hawk shadow, Uzmea went away from them and disappeared into the hill trees.

Old Coat stood on his dead legs. He began walking with stiffness and the real people parted and let him pass. He went to his house and called his daughter's name. She lay within, heavy with child. She came out and many were the people who gave moan. For she was dead too.

Old Coat and his dead daughter stood in front of the council fire. Old Coat lifted his arms and pointed at the lights in the sky. "They are there," his voice said. "The home of the white brothers is in the sky. The stars are their home. They shall come in round pots through the place where no man walks. They shall give the false white brother the sickness and he will wither as in winter. We will live as we did before. The prophecy is spoken. We must fall asleep and wait and watch the sky."

That night Old Coat sat down in the fire. He did not wince or move his face. After a while the fire burned out. No one spoke.

Old Coat's daughter sat in the cornfield. Within her belly her sorrowing boy-child knew it would be born dead.

Uzmea the conjuror came in the night and killed her and put her head in a red clay pot. He set the pot high in the mountains. Her eyes were pointed to the stars to guide the white brothers through the place where no man walks. No one speaks of this. They are all asleep. Uzmea alone is awake. Uzmea waits and watches beneath the stars.

The story has begun.

WE ALL LIVED IN THE WARM AQUARIUM

I guess it is the comets that I remember with the most joy. In the good old days a comet was a joke on the things that later got labeled in the popular press as planets. Ah, those comets! Comets looked a great deal like planets but they were thinner, more athletically inclined, and did not hurt so hard when they hit anybody as a planet invariably does. We called it a comet on account of its hair but later we found that the bald comets gave just as much satisfaction as the younger, more handsome kind.

I remember it all quite clearly, that first comet summer, my craving for something different here in the universe. There seemed to be nothing but duty, create, create, create. Always at the mercy of an act of creation. The creator of the universe isn't a job for dreamers. It requires precision, it requires eternal patience and a high school diploma. I remember finally remarking to my former wife, on that very day of the first comet, how much of a relief it was to find something straying into my universe. It was the first comet, that gladsome sight that strolled across my new-made sky, so totally unasked, that prompted me and my wife to an eventual parting of the ways. My wife, of course, thought very little of the whole thing.

"Don't you ever weary of green obedience?" I asked, rolling my tongue across the soft hills of the prairie. She turned her trees and looked at me incredulously.

"You must be eroding," she said, shaking her branches like an ornamental fan. "This comet business is highly irregular and certainly not something to be admired. In fact, I find it a decidedly vulgar development."

"We need contact with a reality not our own," I insisted, eyeing a ravine with some concern. Had it been there 20,000 years ago or was my face simply showing my age? Perhaps I was aging, after all. Was the grass on my face getting sparse? An unpleasant thought.

"You need a good shot of sap to bring you to your senses," she snarled as the woodpeckers began hammering at her insect load.

"One man's sap is another man's poison," I cautiously reasoned. "Besides, I've really grown a little weary of this entire sky-swallowing act. You just can't expect a man to create, create, create day after day, year after year, century after century. A man needs a little unproductivity now and then."

"So end as a fleshy tattoo if that is what you want!" she said, properly hurt and surly. "But don't come swarming back to me with the taste of stale people on your breath."

"So be it," I said. "I have wearied of this country life. I need unrefreshing air. I need unhealthy living. I need overcrowded restroom facilities. All the things deprived me by being a product of a happy home."

"The prognosis for misery is one hundred percent," she said as a parting shot.

I turned my mountain on her and, metamorphosing quietly into a molehill, left her to boil in her own ocean. There is no restless sea that is not intentional. I began moving toward that reality beside the hand-painted gate. The place where they have the warm aquarium. How I long for my place in the warm aquarium!

I will pass as one of them, I'm sure. It's a matter of shrinking into all diseases and learning to walk on bended knees. It's a simple act of a lack of faith. I could have been contented where I was. But no, the theory of birth is simply put as a child's desire to jump out of the womb and do a polka. Yes, I believe that is my destiny. My name is Fallen Angel.

It used to be Geronimo. My name used to be quite a lot of things but I was never serious about it. A man who isn't really a man anymore and who is privileged to swallow the sky at his discretion, as I am sure you will agree, isn't obligated to be serious.

I am changing quite rapidly, from skin to acetone, from braids to respectable beanie. I'm sure I'll pass the most rigid inspection. I'm sure my place in the warm aquarium is sealed over, sanitized for my protection, waiting, yes, waiting for me in the shower tool afterglow. How I ache to feel my first social revision!

I have my hand out by the road, my pointed thumb saying, "Here I am, the transformation divine."

Is that God driving by in an aluminum car? I'll run to the stopped car and see if I can buy passage to the dawn of dreams. I'll see if this man can convert me. I yearn for it tragically. Perhaps he will be a homosexual with capped teeth. Or perhaps a naked man under his clothes. The possibilities are endless.

I open the door slowly like a present you don't deserve but can't resist. There was no one in the car and I said, "Hello. How far are you going?"

He smiled unhappily. "Only as far as the next mortuary, I'm afraid. I'm making a delivery."

I climbed inside the metal vehicle and settled back against the seat with alacrity. "Do the dead deliver themselves?" I asked. "It sounds very efficient."

"Yes," admitted the man as he put the car in gear and eased out onto the highway again.

"We've improved a lot in the last years. You'd be surprised, I think, to find that in some parts of the world, they still don't make deliveries. Some people always drag their feet."

I couldn't help but notice the streams of cars, the great onrush of traffic. "Are all these cars making deliveries too?" I asked, displaying my innocence.

"I mind my own business. I look neither to the left nor right. That's how I got here in the first place," replied the man. "If all people would do the same we wouldn't need steering wheels on cars."

"That would be very economical," I said.

"You just know it!" he said, banging his fist on the dashboard clock. "Why, we could speed up deliveries at an alarming rate!"

We continued our journey in lively silence for the rest of the trip. He stopped twice to watch a butterfly smash into the windshield of the car.

"It's better to watch it in slow motion," he finally explained, breaking our convivial silence.

"You see, the world wasn't always like this. I think originally it was fatter."

"I'm sure you are right," I agreed, "or at least believe yourself to be right, which is, of course, the same thing."

"You don't need to get so pragmatic about it," he sniffed. "I am fairly liberal. I pick up hitchhikers. Respect my commitment here or hold your tongue."

"But I don't even know what you are talking about," I said. "I'm afraid I've lost myself at the point at which the world was fatter."

"Well then, why bring it up?" said the man at the wheel. "Incidentally, where are you going to?"

"I'm not going to," I replied. "I'm coming from. I was formally engaged as a sky swallower. I have since rescinded the task."

A large piece of sky fell and crashed into the hood of the car, smashing it flatter than a circus strong man's paper drinking straw.

"Jesus," said the man, a look of fear of falling on his face. "The sky is falling!"

"You are wrong," I gently chided as I began opening the door to the already slowing car. "The world is simply throwing itself up."

Venus patted Earth on the back tenderly, "There, there. Take two asteroids and go to bed. Now that you got all that nasty stuff out of your system, you'll be able to sleep at night."

Jupiter pulled the covers of space across the Earth's green seas.

"I fwowed up," said Earth, hugging its polar tightly in its arms.

"That's O.K., son. We all do sooner or later," said Saturn.

Doesn't everybody?

NOCKA-NOCKA AND THE DIRTY OLD MAN

When they finally got the old man to eat, he ate with his fingers. Bullock, the linguist, looked disgusted.

"Some holy man he makes! I'll bet the old goat hasn't taken a bath in twenty years!"

Miss Tarantella, the group anthropologist, looked dangerously close to wretching. "How can he stand to eat like that? He's absolutely filthy!" She wrinkled her pinched nose with disgust and her thick glasses slipped down and fell into her lap. She jerked reflex-ively, her lap sensitive to the touch as so many things are that are untouched.

The old man wiped his fingers on his chest and grinned at them with as many teeth as he had. Two, to be exact.

"Good! More eat! More dirty eat!" he said, gesturing with his hands at the near empty pot.

Miss Tarantella put her glasses back on her nose and peered over the top of them at the old man. "No more eat! Talk! You talk first and then you eat!"

"Me no want eat! You eat! You dirty you not eat! You clean eat!" said the old man with a two-toothed smile.

Bullock looked down at his knuckles. He sure could pick them, couldn't he? First Tarantella, that dried-out old prune of a woman. Now this dirty old lunatic Indian the woman had engaged as a guide.

"What talk? White fools up the flukey wheel! Go down the belly! Chomp! Chomp! Not safe! Not safe!" said the old man.

"It's hopeless," said Bullock. "He's as unreliable as a weather report. All of his gears are loose."

"I'm not leaving this mountain until I get what I came for!" announced Miss Tarantella stoutly. "I am not accustomed to failure! If I came here to track down the legendary cave of the Nocka-Nocka, then you can bet your camp stool that I intend to do just that! The word 'quit' is not in my vocabulary."

Miss Tarantella was a positive, overweight woman with no sense of humor. Bullock's conception of her lay somewhere between a German military band whose oompah-oompahs had gone awry and a self-taught virgin who played at human by ear and was tone-deaf.

"Nocka-Nocka! Chomp!" said the old man, and he pointed a greasy finger at Miss Tarantella.

"Ho the hot one! Big chomp!"

He clamped his fingers together and made chewing motions with his hands.

"The hell with your disgusting eating habits, you filthy old beast! What about Nocka-Nocka's cave? Where is it?" clamored Miss Tarantella, whose patience was legendary for its absence.

The old man just scratched Ms chest through a hole in his tattered shirt and giggled.

"Maybe he doesn't really know anything about Nocka-Nocka," suggested Bullock timidly.

"Maybe there is no such thing as a . . ."

"Are you suggesting that I am *wrong* in my research? Is that what you're suggesting?" said Miss Tarantella, her icy tone reminding Bullock of a wild weekend on a polar ice cap.

Bullock shivered involuntarily and quickly retracted his suggestion. Bullock was fed up with the whole thing. If they never found anything it would be fine with him. He didn't care one way or the other.

Two anything but fun-filled days following an insane old Indian up a steep mountain on a wild-goose chase was no picnic. Putting up with Miss Tarantella was something else again. Often in the last two days, Bullock had prayed that an avalanche would start and carry those two off the mountain. Only idiots and Indians climbed mountains anyway, as far as Bullock was concerned.

"Nocka-Nocka," nodded the old man. He pointed back over his shoulder toward the top of the mountain.

The old man scooped up a handful of dirt with bis fingers, dumped it in with what was left of

the beef stew, and began stirring it around with his fingers.

"Christ!" said Bullock, who was only a linguist and didn't really give a damn. "Is that some kind of custom?"

"I think he's just being nasty," snarled Miss Tarantella. "These filthy old Indians are always trying to be purposely disgusting. I guess they think it's funny. He'll probably expose himself next!"

Bullock just shrugged. He sort of admired the way the old boy got under Miss Tarantella's skin. Personally, he found the old man kind of charming, in a smelly sort of way.

The old man rattled off a long curious speech in a Calusa dialect that Bullock found hard to follow.

"What'd he say? What'd he say?" demanded Miss Tarantella.

"I'm not sure I got it all," Bullock said. He tried a few phrases on the old man, trying to get him to repeat the message. The greasy old man just sat there cross-legged, inscrutable as a rock. He refused to say anything else.

"Well?" inquired Miss Tarantella.

"Well, I didn't get it all," admitted Bullock, trying to sort it out in his head. "And I'm sure I'm getting some of it wrong, especially the part where I think he said 'Buy War Bonds.'"

"Never mind what you didn't get, you incompetent idiot! What did he say about Nocka-Nocka?" snapped Miss Tarantella.

Bullock bristled at the words "incompetent" and "idiot" but let it pass. "Well, I think he said Nocka-Nocka's cave is only a little bit farther up the mountain."

"Is that it? The old ass has been saying that for the last two days! Didn't he say anything else?"

"Sure. I think he asked for something dirty to eat or at any rate he said something about something dirty to eat."

"You're one hell of a linguist!" she said.

Bullock shrugged. Calusa wasn't one of his better languages.

The old man pointed at Miss Tarantella, who had taken a notebook out and had begun jotting down some notes in it.

"She write down sex? Hot one hot on hots! Watch go to bathroom! Take picture! All this? She is what?"

Bullock, amazed at the old man's strange grasp of the English language, pointed at Miss Tarantella. Not exactly knowing what the old man was getting at, he said, "Anthropologist. She is an anthropologist."

The old man grunted and shook his head affirmatively. "Dirty eat! Pictures of sex! Chomp! Chomp!"

Miss Tarantella put down her pen and glared at the old man. "Forget the goddamn dirty eat! Can you take us to Nocka-Nocka's cave?"

"Can take," said the old man. He dipped a handful of mud and beef stew out of the pot and slapped it on his face and chest and vigorously rubbed it in.

"Is he crazy?" asked Bullock, turning green.

"Filthy!" was all Miss Tarantella could say.

They followed the old man up the rocky trail, going slowly to accommodate the huffing, puffing fat woman whose idea of exercise was taking the lid off a specimen jar.

"Tell him to slow up! And don't follow him so close!" groaned Miss Tarantella. "You know I can't stand his smell."

"How much farther is it?" asked Bullock, who was getting tired himself.

"Chomp!" said the old man, and he kept right on walking.

"Inconsiderate clod!" muttered Bullock under his breath.

"Filthy!" added Miss Tarantella, in case somebody had forgotten her opinion.

"I wonder if he's leading us on a wild-goose chase," grunted Bullock as he tried to drag Miss Tarantella over a huge rock that the old man had managed to climb over with no difficulty. If anything, the old man was disgustingly healthy.

"I'll wring his scrawny neck if he is!" puffed Miss Tarantella, who was having a hard time getting air. Her cheeks bulged in and out like sails flapping in the wind. She floundered over the rock like a pregnant whale in distress.

"Somehow, I can't help feeling that he knows more English than he lets on," said Bullock, straining his arms almost out of their sockets trying to get the fat woman back on her feet again. "There's something very fishy about him."

Miss Tarantella wobbled unsteadily on her feet and grunted. "That's just the way he smells."

The old man stood further up the trail, motioning for them to hurry. "Nocka-Nocka!" he yelled, and pointed.

Bullock and Miss Tarantella staggered up to him. There in the side of the mountain was an enormous cavelike opening under a wall of overhanging rock.

"Is that it?" asked Miss Tarantella, flushed with excitement.

"Chomp! Chomp!" said the old man.

"It better be or you'll regret the . . ." started Miss Tarantella.

Suddenly, a heaving mass as big as a semi-truck roared out of the cave. It had dozens of green eyes, hundreds of red tentacles, and bumps all over it. It had blue eyes too and big mouthlike openings all over with big shiny white teeth sticking out here and there. It had the shape of a ripe squash and the general complexion of an overripe tomato. It swarmed and it crawled and it oozed. On what might be the top of it, firmly resting on several white bumps, sat three pith helmets not unlike the pith helmets that Bullock and Miss Tarantella wore.

As soon as the creature burst out of the cave, Miss Tarantella let off a scream that made an air-raid siren sound like silence. Bullock contented himself with letting his mouth flop open in an imitation of the Grand Canyon.

In a matter of seconds, the creature swooped up Bullock, Miss Tarantella, and the old man too. He held them up in the air with his tentacles.

"Woof!" said Nocka-Nocka.

Miss Tarantella kept on screaming. Bullock, made of less sterner stuff, immediately passed out.

The old man, however, was perfectly relaxed in the tentacle grip of the monster.

"Woof! A hot one!" said Nocka-Nocka, and he wrapped a tentacle around Miss Tarantella's mouth, cutting her off in mid-scream.

Nocka-Nocka pointed all of his blue and green eyes at his captives. First he looked at Bullock.

"Yum! Clean!" Nocka-Nocka said.

He looked at Miss Tarantella.

"Yum! Clean! Big chomp!" said Nocka-Nocka.

Then he looked at the old man.

"Yeeeeeech! Filthy!" said Nocka-Nocka, and he dropped the old man like he was a live coal.

The old man landed on his feet with practiced ease.

The monster turned and oozed and flowed and crawled back into the cave, clutching the squirming body of Miss Tarantella and the unconscious one belonging to Bullock.

The old man went near the mouth of the cave and listened. He heard an enormous slurping, gulping sound and several big cracking noises that sounded like dry sticks breaking.

Solemnly, he went over to a big rock near the mouth of the cave. Taking a piece of chalk from the pocket of his dirty shirt, he put two more marks on the rock alongside the three already there.

Then, without once looking back, he started back down the mountain.

"Chomp! Chomp!" he said to himself as he walked, and his face lit up with a smile, remembering.

THE NIGHT XENEX SANURIAN TOOK A WALLFLOWER TO THE PROM

"The thing I like about you, Bippy Poo," said Xenex, averting his eyes, "is that you have no salivary glands and can therefore stare at me without drooling."

Phenisia glazed her unfocusing eyes in agreement but paused to think it over before speaking. A lizard fly settled on her hairy forearm. Her efficient, spiky blue tongue snared the suicidal insect. She gulped noisily and her teeth fell into her lap, immediately dissolving. She smiled toothlessly at him, adoration in her dripping eyes. "Nobody can go through life without at least *one* good quality."

Xenex nodded. "There's that."

As they were leaving her parents' house, the fire department commandeered her mother. It seems they needed an extra extension ladder. Phenisia was attired in a ghetto, largely of Spanish descent. It was a stylish costume, expensive, but it could not make her beautiful. Her ears burned merrily, her face seeped a fashionable amount of wood shavings, but her essential dullness shone through her expanse of gaudy clothes. You can't make a silver sewer system out of a cow's peer.

Xenex tightened his personal antennae. How he wished the night were already over! Oh, she didn't look all that bad. She was still young, still bursting with youth, several thousand pounds of it. But behind that crowded exterior still lurked the Phenisia of old, the sideshow automobile swallower, the hired contortionist whose career had ended in disgrace when she fell off the stage and smashed the orchestra flatter than a long dead chorus girl's chest.

She tucked his car under one arm and him under the other and without honking her feet and waking the entire neighborhood (a small favor for which Xenex was undoubtedly grateful), they made their way to the funeral parlor, specially decorated for the annual P.S. 2001 Prom.

On the way, Xenex, embarrassed to be seen with her, insisted that she carry him upside down and hindmost part facing forward. The fewer people who recognized him, the better.

At the door, Xenex discovered, happily, that he had forgotten the tickets, but Phenisia held his arm out to the man at the door. He tore it in half and handed the stub to her.

She hugged his arm with her lower lip and said, "Will you carry this for me, dear?"

Annoyed and further embarrassed, he put the arm in his back pocket, where it was sure to get badly wrinkled, and followed her inside.

As Xenex and Phenisia came to the door, fifty couples and half of the orchestra went out one of the windows. With Phenisia there, it seemed a physical necessity. She apologized for this spatial inconvenience by falling to the floor, killing ten couples in her immediate proximity.

By this time, conscious of every eye being on him, Xenex was incensed. "I can't take you anywhere!" he screamed at her.

Phenisia smiled bleakly as the block and tackle lifted her off the floor. She tried to touch him tenderly, to make some gesture that would show him how much she appreciated his bringing her to the prom, even though he had not come of his own free will. His mother and her mother had arranged it, the date, the rented accessories, everything. Xenex, he had been invited to a surprise disembowelment for that same night and was really upset because he had to miss it.

Xenex, aware of her gratitude, recoiled at her gentle touch and punched her in the mouth. Only after a series of hard rights and lefts did he loosen her jaws enough to allow him to get his leg free.

"What's wrong with you?!" he screamed at her.

"I want to dance," replied Phenisia, smiling up at him as he got violently sick and threw up on her shoes. "Could we go over to the other side of the dance floor and dance with the people who are hemorrhaging?"

Xenex shook his head angrily. "I brought you here. I met your parents. But I draw the line at dancing with you! I can only take so much!"

Phenisia's ears lit up and her hair caught on fire. "Well, if you don't want to dance, why don't we go outside and intermission."

An old friend of Xenex's, Smolly Minudian, overheard this remark and hooted with hysterical glee down both of his legs. The urine turned his white socks yellow and everybody who witnessed this got a good laugh at Xenex's expense.

"This is the worst night of my life!" said Xenex. "I'll never be able to hold up my tail again. I'm ruined! I might as well end it all."

"If that's the way you feel," sniffed Phenisia, wiping one of her feet on her forehead, "you might as well take me home."

In silence they left the ballroom, Phenisia moody and sulking. Xenex, enraged and homicidal. He dropped her on her doorstep unceremoniously. She overlapped a good deal and managed to crush a fish pond and her mother's prize rock garden.

"I had a wonderful time," said Phenisia, considering her chances anywhere with anyone, and probably telling the truth.

For a crazy moment, for one totally mad, insane moment, perhaps out of force of habit, he almost kicked her good night. He managed to restrain himself as the depth of his repulsion made him break out in a series of overlapping hernias.

He drank three gallons of kerosene, which he kept in his kneecap for just such an emergency as this, and staggered home. As he slammed through the door, tearing it off its hinges, his mother rose from a vat of curdled oatmeal and rubbed her eyes sleepily.

"I waited up for you, darling. Did Pooskins have a nice time at the prom? You can't imagine how good it felt, knowing that my boy was finally going out with a nice, respectable girl for a change instead of the usual floozy you always go out with."

She reached for him. He was too tired to resist.

He sat down in her lap.

"Tell the truth, you really had a good time, didn't you?" asked his mother as she stroked his forehead tenderly with a fire ax.

He committed suicide in her arms with the sharpened edge of the fire ax and bled all over the living-room rug.

This was fatal for Xenex and he died. Later, things being what they were, they had to bury him.

As for Phenisia, when not gainfully employed as a sewage treatment plant, she spent the remainder of her days weeping sorrowfully over the stub of his arm, which his grieving mother had given to her as a prom souvenir. She lovingly kept it in her high school scrapbook, where, properly wired, it had been trained to turn the pages for her.

To this day, Xenex's mother is convinced her son died of too much happiness.

Who are we to tell her any different?

THE SECOND TEAM

They met in a bar, so crowded everything was immediacy and gymnastics.

"Are you into fertility fetishes or something?" she asked when it seemed possible that he was either trying to undress her or order another drink. The place was very tightly packed and they each had similar intentions.

"Excuse me. I don't mean to be rude," he apologized.

"How unfortunate. I was just beginning to look forward to it." She smiled at him and arranged herself in what she hoped was something attractive on her bar stool.

He smiled back because she had been so well arranged.

"Tourist or one of the local treasures?" he asked. His suit was rumpled. It had the well-traveled look of diplomatic immunity, first-class accommodations and international haste.

"Is that an insult or a prelude?" She held out a long, slim cigarette for him to light. He met her halfway with a golden lighter.

"If gunfighters were that quick on the draw, they would have won the West." She inhaled deeply as if seeking nutrition.

He frowned. "I was under the impression, perhaps mistaken, that they *did* win the West."

She looked around the bar casually. "That a fact? Or was it just something you read in the newspapers?"

He smiled at her radiantly. "You and I are going to have a lot of fun."

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?"

He waved a hand, a well-manicured one. "I'm dressed for it. Why not go through with it."

She toyed with her drink, looking for something deep inside the glass. "If you say your place or mine, I promise you I'll scream."

He waved at the bartender, held a finger up, indicating his choice of drink. "I'll help you," he said. "Two voices screaming rape. That ought to really attract attention."

"I think I like you," she said, having come to a decision.

"But you'll hate yourself in the morning," he said reasonably.

"I hate myself at night, why should I let the next morning bother me."

The bartender brought him a drink, eyed her to see if a drink was to be bought for her. She made a rude finger gesture at the bartender and he fled to the end of the bar.

"You're definitely a hostile one," said the man, running his fingers around the rim of his glass.

"Look, what do you want? It's a bar and I'm a smart American woman sitting in this bar so men can make advances. At least that's how the story usually goes. So what do you want, Hi Ho Silver and away?"

"I came in here to get a drink. Mainly because I like the taste of it. I talked to you because I was on the point of tripping and falling on you. I'm not exactly racing my motor at the sight of you but I'm not exactly in reverse either. Would it help any if you knew my name?"

He was dark-haired and dark-eyed, finely muscled, well kept, as it were. Hair beginning to edge with gray in a sophisticated sort of way. Late thirties possibly, money and power in his manner. Good looks the cutting edge, a keen mind evident in his talk.

"What if I said I've met you a thousand times before in a thousand bars?" she said. "What if I had met you in the dark and had mugged you? Would knowing your name make any difference?"

He took some of his drink, swallowing, frowning. "Can't quite figure you out."

She smiled. "You a Harvard graduate?"

"Only once," he said. "I dropped out after the Ph.D. Didn't seem any reason to go beyond that."

"I am a graduate of graduation." She blew smoke up at the ceiling. She turned slowly in her seat, trying to see through the crowd. "It's so murky in here I can't tell if people are having fun or picking flies off themselves."

"We could go for a walk."

"We could. But only if you promise to limp and look pathetic," she said. "I love it when people limp pathetically."

"Perhaps we could forgo the experience altogether," he suggested, feeling a trifle put on.

"You'd miss the most thrilling experience of your adult life," she said. Somehow, despite the space problems, she managed to cross her legs and they were very much legs, crossed or uncrossed. She was really quite the most lovely thing he had seen.

"I'll have to think about it," he said, for a second wondering if he should be coy. "O.K." That was long enough to think about it. "You're on. Does it matter which foot I limp on?"

"Both, if you can manage it," she said, picking up her handbag. She ground out her cigarette on the bar top. She took out a twenty-dollar bill and slammed it on the counter top, indicating with a wave that she was paying for his and her drinks. The bartender reached to make change but she waved it away. The bartender bowed such deep thanks his forehead smacked into the top of the bar. He'd been sampling a little of what he sold.

The place was much too crowded for any kind of movement together. They contented themselves with wriggling their own separate paths through the crowd. They went through the heavy metal front door together, took each other's hands, as if preparing for a joint parachute jump, and pushed their way through the door.

Washington, D.C., in winter assaulted them. People dressed up like scarecrows pushed and shoved, each with the expression of a rude vegetable on his or her face. Shopping-bag ladies leered at them from empty ice-covered doorways. A black guy with no coat danced in the cold snow with a radio inside his tattered red shirt.

"Now what happens?" she asked, looking first to the right, then left.

"We walk," he said. "You leading, me limping."

"Where to? I mean."

"Anybody else's place but our own?" he suggested. "Or Arlington National Cemetery. Maybe we could get involved as an innocent bystander in some crime of violence."

The wind came roaring down the sidewalk like the icy breath of a three-days-dead wino. She shivered in the icy blast, so did he.

"Listen, let's cut out all this jazz," she said, her face turning red with the cold. "Take me back to your apartment or to your hotel or whatever you call home."

He tried to smile but his teeth were chattering and it ruined the effect.

He stepped to the street, held up his hand authoritatively and flagged down a cab. The first one he sighted pulled over to the curb. He looked back at her. "You're making yourself surprisingly easy."

"No. I'm not," she said, tucking her honey-blond hair deep inside her thin coat. "I get more difficult by the minute. Besides, I'm scared to death." He eyed her in puzzlement. "And I hope you find out why."

They rode in the cab in silence. She sat as far away from him on the seat as possible. The cabbie took the name of his hotel and offered a number of insights about bad weather, baseball, and the garbage strike, all of which fell on deaf ears.

The doorman touched his cap deferentially as they got out of the cab. "Evening, Mr. Cameron. Evening, ma'm."

They crossed the lobby in silence. She was in a dark mood which made her look even more lovely than the dim light in the bar had. He was looking uncomfortable, as if he accidentally had cheated at solitaire and won.

As they got in the ancient elevator, she smiled at him. It wasn't much of a smile. It was the kind of smile you aim at someone who limps pathetically and you mean to be encouraging.

"I didn't limp. Will you ever forgive me?" he asked, pushing the button for his floor.

"You I forgive. It's me I have a problem with," she said. She was still shivering with the cold. The elevator played music at them. Elevator music.

He listened to the music coming from the ceiling of the elevator. "If black people ever leave America and go back to Africa, the way you'll be able to tell is if you turn your radio on and there isn't any music, that means the blacks are gone," he said as the elevator crept its way upward. "How you can tell the white people are gone is you get on the elevator and if there isn't any music, then the white people are gone."

She opened her eyes wide at that. Thought about it for a second. "That's hysterically funny," she said. There was no expression on her face.

"You have the quietest lapses into being hysterically convulsed of anyone I've ever met."

The elevator stopped at his floor and let them out.

"So sue me," she said. "Have you got anything to drink?"

They walked down the hall. "You mean like alcohol?"

"Comedian."

He opened the door and she swept in as if he was hired to open the door for her.

"Excuse me, ma'm." He bowed politely at the waist. "Shall I have the room repainted for you or will you just flounce about in it as it is?"

"I'm rude." She sat in an uncomfortable chair of a particularly revolting but fashionable style. His room was very, very expensively decorated. It looked like a room in a Holiday Inn. She dug through her purse for a cigarette. "I'm rude because I practice at it. It's all I have to keep me warm through the long winter nights."

She started dumping things out of her purse onto her lap. A compact. A .38 revolver. Wadded tissues. A large set of keys and finally a crumpled pack of cigarettes.

He shut the door behind him. He had a great deal of expression on his face. "Funny thing," he said, unable to think of a single funny thing. "I have the distinct impression you are either trouble or in trouble. Forgive me for prying. I wish not to offend. But your artillery interests me. Is it the latest in feminine hygiene?"

She stared at him intently, as if sizing him up for a new suit. "Do you know which end of a gun shoots a bullet?"

"Korean War. Three years and I never got it wrong once the whole time I was there."

"Fascinating. Thrilling. You are funnier than a wienie roast in hell," she said, fumbling with her cigarettes. Her hands were shaking so badly she couldn't separate the filter tips to get one shook out of the pack. He came over and helped her.

He got a cigarette out, put it in his mouth, lit it, and handed it back to her. She took a long drag on it as if it were about to save her life.

He went to the door and turned the dead bolt, locking it. She stared over at him, making no comment on his actions. "Not locking you in. Locking an as yet unexplained something or somebody out."

"You ought to know," she said.

"Ought to know what?"

"You'll find out."

"You are a woman of mystery." He smothered a yawn. "I had a woman of mystery once before. She was French on one side of the family and had a grandmother from Texas on the other. She slept in a hammock and snored. She died of something unfashionable." He scratched the end of his nose lazily. "I think she was killed by music."

She blinked her eyes, not quite believing her ears. "Killed by music?"

"She was living in a one-room apartment and learning how to play the tuba. Her husband shot her. He got off. Justifiable homicide."

"I was right. I am going to like you. In fact, I think I am madly in like with you."

He laughed. "But you don't even know me. I might be Attila the Hun in a suit. Or Jack the Ripper living in a better neighborhood."

"Or you might be Gregory Cameron, in charge of special security for the President of the United States," she said, nervously dragging on her cigarette.

His back stiffened and the look of amusement faded from his face.

"Suddenly this conversation has taken a turn for the worse." His face became hard, his manner changed completely, became almost coldly professional.

She bent down to her lap, her fingers found the gun, the combat dagger, and stuffed them hurriedly back into her purse. She was aware of how intently his eyes studied her least little move.

"The fun has gone out of the fun before it even got to be too much fun," she said. "I'm sorry I spoiled your night."

"Not spoiled necessarily. Just changed considerably." He came over and stood beside her, held out his hand. "Do you mind?"

She shrugged.

He took the handbag from her, turned, and walked over to the coffee table. He upended the purse, dumping its contents on the shiny glass tabletop.

He examined the items. There were a few feminine things, lipsticks, hairpins, and the wadded tissues. Then there were the dagger and the revolver. An extra dozen or so .38-caliber cartridges were loose in the bottom of the purse. What was missing was any kind of identification.

She said it for him. "So you wonder who I am?"

"A little. No, change that. A lot."

"Does a name tell you anything?"

"Perhaps not as much as your not wanting to tell me it."

"You're quite bright. I like that in a man."

"And I think you've got a great potential for being dangerous. I like that in a woman, sort of. It's fine in bright daylight but what happens when the lights go out?"

"I don't think it's any great mystery," she said with a little laugh.

"Your name?" he asked with a tight smile.

"No. What's going to happen when the lights go out." She moved slightly, stretching like a cat that had fallen asleep in the sun. She seemed much more relaxed, calmer. She almost seemed like a different person.

The cigarette in her hand was close to burning her fingers. She seemed to have forgotten that she had lit it.

"What are you frightened of? Is someone after you?"

The question made her nervous again.

"No comment," she said, reaching across an end table for an ashtray. With shaky fingers, she stubbed out the remainder of her cigarette. She looked up at him suddenly, her eyes like ice. "I take it you've lost interest in me. Sleeping-wise."

He sighed. "I don't know. Your looks haven't gone back on you but you don't seem to be in the same movie I'm in."

"Do you always talk like that?" She had her eyes on the things from her purse.

"Sometimes I lisp," he said. "Usually after a lot of limping."

"Can I have my purse back?"

He methodically refilled the purse, stuffing her things back in, locking the snap. His eyes met hers.

"Are you going to say you feel naked without it?" he asked, handing it back to her. She took it from him, putting it in the chair alongside her thigh, within easy reach.

"I'll let you know when I feel naked," she said smartly.

"How about a drink?"

"You got 7-Up?"

"Yeah."

"Great. Make me a martini."

He started for the bar, turned in midstride, frowned at her.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "A joke," she admitted. "I have no sense of humor. I'll take vodka, if you have it. A full glass of it, no ice."

He grimaced. "I don't know which is worse. Vodka straight or a martini made with 7-Up."

He made himself a whiskey sour, a double. He rummaged through the kitchenette and the bar for clean glasses but couldn't find any. He improvised. He poured his drink out of the cocktail shaker into a cracked china sugar bowl and handed her a measuring cup full of vodka. "Did you want an olive in that? I don't have any but I could give you a grape instead."

"Classy," she said, taking the cup. "I bet you use a tuning fork for a swizzle stick."

"Which reminds me," he said. "I'm sort of expecting some kind of explanation. Like who you are, what the artillery is for, are you in danger, that sort of thing." He took a long sip of his drink, looked at her over the rim of the sugar bowl. "And since what I do and who I am is a secret or is supposed to be, I kind of would like to know how you know what you know."

She took her shoes off, threw them on the floor. She tilted the measuring cup back, drank deeply from it. She emptied it.

"You're bright. Why don't you figure it out." She didn't react to the stiff jolt of the vodka. It could have been water the way she handled it.

"The only place I've seen people drink vodka like that is in . . ." He let the sentence trail off, his eyes narrowing.

"Moscow. They drink vodka like that in Mother Russia." She studied his face carefully. "Does drinking like a Russian make you one? In any case, I'm not Russian. I was born, in case you're interested, in Detroit. And I drink like that so I can get drunk so you can take advantage of me."

"What kind of trouble are you in?" he asked. She crossed her legs and he found himself staring at them.

"Various kinds." She held out the measuring cup. Her hands were now steady. "They don't trouble me at the moment. Let's not think about them."

He made himself another whiskey sour and refilled her measuring cup with vodka. He knew they were both going to get drunk. He removed his tie, unbuttoned a few of his shirt buttons. While he made the drinks, she moved to the sofa.

He sat down next to her. She moved over until she was almost sitting in his lap. She kept her purse with her, never letting it out of easy reach. He noticed and it bothered him.

"Let's see, what sort of menace shall we pick? You're the daughter of the American ambassador and you want to defect from Washington, D.C., to America? No, much too probable. You borrowed too many books from the Library of Congress and they are dangerously overdue. You are being chased by several irate librarians with brass knuckles. No. None of those?" He shrugged, putting his arm around her. "I give up. Unless you're a Russian spy, in which case, I might as well tell you, the room is bugged."

"That's it. I'm a Russian spy born in Detroit." She put her head on his chest and took one of his hands in hers. "To be more accurate, I'm a free-lance assassin working for the KGB and I bet you're kidding about the apartment being bugged."

He liked her perfume, the silky feel of her hair. She was really quite beautiful.

"I've never kissed a free-lance assassin before."

"Try it."

He did. It was even better than he thought it would be. Much.

"Do all free-lance assassins kiss like that?" she asked him, knowing the effect she had on him.

"I don't know. I haven't kissed them all." He kissed her again.

There was a knock on the door.

"Expecting someone?" she asked, turning away from him. Her hand touched her purse.

"I'll shove milk and cookies under the door and maybe they'll go away," he suggested.

The knock was repeated, louder, more insistent.

Reluctantly he got up from the sofa and moved to the door. He put his hand on the doorknob,

made as if to open it, but looked back at her to see if she approved. She was pale, her eyes were almost shut. She had her purse in her lap.

He put his eye to the peephole in the center of the door, which gave him a clear view of the hallway outside the door. A bullet went through the lock a scant inch from his hand.

He dove sideways, his hand going inside his coat for a gun. He wasn't going to have much time.

She moved even quicker than he did. She had her gun out of her purse and already aimed before he got out of the way of the door.

The door burst open, a heavy foot sending it crashing back against the wall. A heavysset man, face obscured with nylon, rushed through the doorway, a huge .45 caliber booming explosively in his hand as he entered. The bullet crashed into the wall above her head. His eyes went wildly about the room, trying to find Gregory. Too late he realized he had run past him.

Gregory brought his gun up from the floor, barrel aimed at the intruder's torso. The gunman lowered his gun, trying to pivot, get a bead on the man on the floor, but he was moving too fast. Gregory shot, taking the man high on the right side, too high, not a heart shot but still a solid hit.

The man was not completely out of position. Gregory had more than enough time now. He sighted carefully, the heart this time.

Another shot thundered in the room. Not the .45. A hollower echo, a smaller-bore gun. Gregory held his thumb on the hammer, pulling up his next shot. It had been suddenly taken out of his hands.

The right side of the gunman's face exploded in a mess of shattered bone and flesh. She'd hit him solidly in the head. The gunman spun around involuntarily like a drunken dancer, the .45 flying from his hand. He was dead before he toppled over on his back. He fell like a man without bones.

Gregory got to his knees, moving slowly, trying to think. It had all happened very fast. The left side of his face was splattered with the dead man's blood. He'd turned his wrist in his awkward dive for the floor. It throbbed. He put his gun back inside his coat, dropping it in the holster, and got all the way to his feet.

He stood over the body, his eyes going back to look at her. This was one fine mess.

He studied what was left of the man's face. He'd never seen it before now, he knew after a moment's study. He had a good memory for faces. It had been part of his training. The clothes told him nothing, off-the-rack ready-mades. He suspected the pockets would contain no identification.

"One of your friends?" he said, watching her face.

Her hands were shaking, the gun still held out in front of her face in an awkward two-handed stance. She acted as if she had never fired a gun before.

"I killed him, didn't I?" she said, her eyes closing as if to shut everything out.

"Maybe," he said, looking down at the body. But he was sure she had. "Chances are, he would have died from my shot. Can't tell." He was sweating, a nervous reaction beginning to set in. He'd had a lot of training for this kind of thing but still it affected him. He was not quite made out of steel.

"Can you . . . can you cover him up with something?" she said, her voice a trifle unsteady. "I don't want to look at ... at that." She was surprisingly calm, all things considered.

He took off his jacket and laid it over the dead man's head. He stepped to the door, looked out into the hallway, found it empty. With one foot, he pushed the door back against the doorframe.

The door did not hang right. He put a chair up against it to hold it closed.

"Keep the neighbors out," he said. "Not that I expect them to come. This is the kind of place where gunshots cause instant deafness."

She lowered the gun slowly until it rested in her lap.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked. He gestured at the body on the floor. "Do you know who he is?"

"I don't know him. Never saw him before. But I know what he was. I know he's a professional assassin."

"After you?"

She didn't say anything.

He kicked the .45 on the floor with the toe of his shoe.

"Charming," he said. "You've got such charming friends." He looked back at the door. "Can we expect more of him, or is this the whole crop? Ordinarily they don't travel in groups."

"Not a friend. He nearly killed me. I swear I felt the bullet go by my head."

He glanced up at the wall behind her, saw the bullet hole, nodded. "Four inches to spare but that's pushing it. Consider yourself lucky."

"I guess this ruins everything," she said. She sighed.

He was moving toward the phone. "What?" he said somewhat absently.

"Are you going to call the police?"

"Well, a plumber wouldn't exactly be a logical choice, would it?"

"I didn't want the night to end this way," she said, smiling at him. "I may have pretended hard against it but I know what I hoped for." She smiled at him, the faintest suggestion of a blush on her face.

He had the receiver to his ear, his fingers poised to dial. His eyes met hers. "You can't be serious," he said, wondering if she meant what he thought she meant. "There's a dead person on my floor."

"I want to make love to you," she said. "Since I first saw you, I felt that way. I still feel that way. I want you."

His finger hesitated on the dial, hitting the first number.

"Now there's going to be cops and reporters and statements," she said. "We've wasted all that brilliant conversation."

"Ah." He sighed. He looked at her. His hands shook. He couldn't tell if it was from shock or arousal. He suspected the latter. She was quite the most lovely thing he had ever seen. "You read too many women's magazines."

"I saved your life, didn't I?" she said. "Shouldn't there be some sort of reward?" She loosened the top two buttons of her blouse.

"For the record, I tried valiantly to resist and..."

"Failed," she finished for him.

The phone went back in its cradle and he moved toward her. She grabbed him with one hand and pulled him down on top of her. Her other hand still held the gun.

She ripped at his clothes. His hands fumbled with hers. Their mutual desire was intense, their haste awkward. Her top opened to his clumsy fingers, revealing lush breasts. Her skirt rolled up over her waist as she tugged his pants down to his ankles. She struggled futilely with his shirt, unable to get it off because of the shoulder holster.

They joined as violently as a gunshot. Her back arched under him, drawing him deep within her. Her body rippled and contorted, her elbow thumping into the back of the sofa. She still held the gun in her right hand, which was behind his back. It seemed like she had forgotten it existed. Her nails dug into his back, drawing blood.

He drove against her, driving, taking them to a mutual climax, a heavy and almost violent consummation. They collapsed against each other, suddenly spent, perspiring.

"That was good," she said, her face flushed.

"You taste as good as you look," he said, and he had his mouth on her neck, biting gently, moving against her slowly, still inside her, reluctant to move off her.

She put her hand against his chest, pushing him away gently. He sat up, resting between her legs, gazing down at her body, thinking he would take her yet again, still feeling a fire in his

loins.

She raised the gun, holding it at eye level, the barrel aimed squarely at his head.

"What's this?" he asked, a mocking smile on his face.

"The second team," she said.

He turned his head, looking back at the coat-shrouded figure on the floor. He didn't believe her. "You know what I like about you?" he said, looking at her breasts. "You never lose your sense of humor."

"I never had one," she said, the gun never wavering.

He started to move closer to her. She drew back the hammer with her thumb, cocking the gun. He frowned. "Let me see if I've got this right? Pulling a gun on me is a new method for provoking a second erection?"

Her finger tightened a fraction around the trigger. He saw it. He swallowed nervously, one hand jerking, the one that would have gone automatically for his own gun, if he had had a chance.

"Hey!" His voice betrayed his alarm. "This isn't all that funny."

"Like I said, no sense of humor." She smiled at him. "I liked it. You weren't the best I've ever had but you're close. I like the way you make love." Her body was still twitching, still hot from lovemaking. Her neck was a mild red with a sexual flush.

"Somehow, I don't feel complimented." He licked his lips nervously, all passion dead within him. He shrugged his shoulders, moving his holster to the right by that movement. It was a little closer, reach-wise, to his left hand now but still much, much too far away. "I'm beginning to think you're serious."

"I am."

He leaned toward her just a fraction, pressing with his knees against her outstretched legs.

"Don't." Her voice was like ice now.

He stopped moving.

"Back up." He leaned away from her, sweat beading on his forehead. His trigger finger on his left hand ached.

"I don't understand," he said, but he felt a wintry sensation in the pit of his stomach. On the contrary, he was afraid he did.

"It's no mystery," she said. "Tomorrow when the President leaves his hotel, he's going to be assassinated. You won't be around to complicate the action."

"Some fun," he said dully. "But you killed your friend. That doesn't make much sense. The first team, I think you called him."

"He was stupid. Like something out of a bad gangster film. It was no extra trouble to kill him. You would have killed him anyway. Besides, I was amply repaid for the favor." She smiled and her body shuddered as if it remembered something delicious.

"Uh, yeah." He looked back at the body on the floor, then back at her. He did not look happy.

"A question of money too. If the first team doesn't make it, the second team makes more money. Ups the price, so to speak."

He sighed. "There's that, I guess." He stifled the urge to reach for his gun. He knew he'd never make it.

As long as she kept talking he was safe. He tried to think of something to prolong the conversation, anything, but his mind drew a blank.

"Now you know why I'll hate myself in the morning."

Her finger was tightening against the trigger. He looked her in the eyes, seeing a lot there but no mercy. He was professional enough to know he had no chance unless she made a mistake and the likelihood of that was infinitesimally small.

His voice was sorrowful, almost wistful.

"The only thing that bothers me," he said, meaning it, "is what must be going through your mind right now."

"Did you ever hear the story about the atom bomb that wanted to be a bullet?"

"No." In spite of himself, he grinned.

"It's because, said the atom bomb, I miss the personal touch."

"Ah." He nodded as if that explained everything. "Still, we just made love, how do you feel?" He wasn't exactly sure he knew why he wanted to know. Somehow it seemed like the right last question.

She's like a female praying mantis about to devour the male after mating, it suddenly occurred to him. A revolting idea.

"As if it mattered how I felt?" she said, and there was some anger in her voice. "You've never asked a woman that question after making love, have you?" It was an accusation.

It was true. He shrugged. "So what. I'm asking now. Call it professional curiosity. What do you feel?"

She put the first and only bullet one inch above his left eye. He sprawled away from her, tumbling across her legs to the floor.

"Postcoital depression," she answered him, but he did not seem to hear.