



The
Art of Dying

T. L. HULSEY

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The Art of Dying:
Ars Moriendi

by

Terry Hulse

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Foreword

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T.L. Hulsey

Singer: The Incorruptible Stars

Five thousand years ago, somewhere in Scotland along the Firth of Fay near present-day Dundee, two small naked figures lay on the shingled strand under a warm July sun in the late afternoon, each with a forearm across the eyes. Below them, a girl of about seven, also naked, collected shells from the strip of sand between her parents and the sea.

The man and woman appeared to be in their late 50s, although in fact both were 35 years of age. Yet the man appeared oldest, with a gaunt line descending from each nostril into a scruff of gray beard. His cheeks were hollow, and every rib could be counted on his chest, which was entirely red from a rash caused by the stiff reindeer hide lying nearby to dry.

Miraculously, his top front teeth were intact, though most of the others were gone, and he worried the spaces with his tongue as he lay there. The wife was very small and thin indeed, and after washing the family's hides and placing them on the shingles, she was glad to rest. As she had done this, the man had cast a net made of braided roots into the sea until he had caught six fish. These fish he placed into a natural slough which he had dammed with a rock. The girl squatted here now, fascinated by the silver flash of the sides of the fish as they turned, avoiding the stick that she thrust at them. These fish were to be their evening meal.

“Muirne!” the man called to the girl. “Leave the fish alone.”

The girl dropped the stick and came over, and with exaggerated care, bent her round and shapeless face to her father and kissed him on the forehead.

She rose and, wiping her hands together as if she had completed some great task, turned to go.

“One for momma Ceanal!” said the small woman. And the girl returned and kissed her mother in the same way. The woman sighed.

“Muirne, bring me that round fish you found earlier,” the man said. “Yes, yes, that one. That’s it. Bring it here and I’ll show you something.”

The little girl eagerly brought over the living disc with faintly moving cilia around its perimeter. The father broke it in half, revealing a small pink star shape at the center. He shook it into his palm, the shape alive and slowly flailing. Muirne bent down and fearfully cupped her own palm. The father shook the star from his hand into hers. Still holding her hand carefully, she stood up with wild excitement and made loud, glad noises with her thick, disobedient tongue.

“That’s a star that has fallen from heaven, my love. Go cast it into the sea, and it will return to its brother and sister stars, born again.”

Muirne ran off to do that.

“Are you happy, Finn Ros?” said the woman.

He kept one arm over his eyes, but put the free one on her shoulders as the woman raised her head for him.

“Yes, Ceanal. Though our only child is seven years on this earth, and still cannot speak, I am happy. Our dearest little mooncalf will guarantee that I

will always have a little daughter, as long as I live.” Then he laughed and said, “Also, the air is nice — the clegs and midges aren’t out at all.”

And he reflected, thinking that in spite of everything he truly was happy. For he had achieved the thing he most wished for.

When he was young — so few years ago! — he was known all along the coast as Finn Ros, The Singer. Not only did he know all the stories, but he could toss back his head covered with long golden curls and truly sing those stories in a wonderful tenor. He could sing of the one who turned into a fish, was eaten by a woman, and delivered again into life by her; he could sing of the one who healed others by his breath; he could sing of the fearless journeys of their champions into the Otherworld. This had been his gift. Now he could no longer sing. Not only did he not have the power in his lungs, but he faltered on the rhymes. And then there were those other reasons.

Sealbhach Dubh the Two Fingered envied his gift. Finn conceded Sealbhach’s prowess as a warrior, and even told him of the day when he would be a great king, when he would be glad to add to Sealbhach’s renown by becoming his singer. But the rule prevails for man at all times, whether five thousand years past or five times five thousand to come: There is little to appease the envier. The other reason was the beautiful Dearbhail, Finn’s true desire. Her blue eyes filled with tears as Finn sang, and grew large with the enchantment of his song. Everyone saw their love, and wanted them, the golden youth, flesh of their flesh and voice of their tongue, to be together.

Then after one of those Samhain celebrations long ago, when Finn had sung particularly well, Sealbhach walked home with him, talking in a friendly way and sharing from a leather bag the last of the medd, the fermented honey that had set the whole village to wild dancing, until they reached the opening to Sealbhach's peat house. Here Sealbhach suddenly grabbed Finn by the throat and dragged him inside. He pushed Finn against the sodden wall and brought his face up close, one side illuminated sweaty and red by the banked fire in his hut. He snarled through the fummy air and held the remaining two fingers of one hand before Finn's face.

"I swear by the sun and moon, I'll poke your eyes out if you don't stop ogling Dearbhail."

Finn coughed, as much from the fumes as from the grip on his throat.

"Sealbhach, I have already said that I am willing to be your singer. I...."

"— Don't try to flatter me. Dearbhail doesn't want a weakling like you, not really. And what is this village without me? Without my hunting of reindeer, rabbits, and the rest of it, you'd all be eating fish and crab at every meal. And what would it taste like without the mushroom, the berries, and the spices that I bring out of the forest?"

It was all true. Finn was far weaker. Dearbhail deserved Sealbhach's strength, and so did the village. Even if there was law to restrain Sealbhach, the village would not put its very survival at stake to enforce it. And really, what would his presence be like as some self-appointed singer at the court of Sealbhach? It would be nothing but constant tension, constant worrying among everyone that some violence would break out, likely over the

paternity of Dearbhail's children. There was simply nowhere for Finn to go, nothing for him to do about it. How fatuous he had been, dreaming of legendary singers and royal courts, when just a moment's clear thought could scatter those dreams completely!

And so Finn had swallowed his pride, saving some scrap of it by refusing to speak again to Dearbhail, by spreading the word that he no longer cared for her. Several months later he had taken Ceana to live with him at his own peat house. At first he didn't even know if he cared for this small woman.

Several years on, Sealbhach prospered, and with him, the village. He moved into a great crannog, a clean home made of young saplings, pushing out over the water into the firth as it stood on wooden piers. He gave his peat hut to his first son by Dearbhail, a strong and clever lad. Meanwhile, Finn plodded along. He found a hard stone one day, finished making it round, and set himself up sharpening axes and knives for the village, putting aside singing forever. He began lining the inside of his peat hut with stone and rebuilt the roof with new wood so that it vented properly — a clean place now, and almost cozy.

Then something struck the village. Some began coughing up blood. Many died. What power greater than themselves had they offended? Yes, there had been some offense, it was obvious. The powers around us do not act in a capricious way — the sun comes up every day in the same place, and goes down in the same place. There is winter and summer in a predictable way. It was very obvious then that there had been an offense that compelled these powers to lash out at them. And what had changed? What was different now, compared to the time before the illness had struck?

Why, it was their prosperity, that was what had changed. It was all very clear, once you thought about it. And who was the most prosperous of all?

So one day the entire village gathered around Sealbhach when he returned from the forest. They wanted him to give up something, some profound part of his prosperity in order to compensate for the offense. He knew what they wanted. He argued with them into the night, but they still wanted it. And so a great fire was built that night, a wicker cage was built, and Sealbhach's first son, the strong and clever lad, was placed into it and burned alive. Dearbhail and Sealbhach retreated into their splendid crannog and sat in separate rooms as the boy screamed in a slow, agonizing death.

The great illness subsided.

And though Sealbhach continued his role as chief provider, in his heart he hated everyone in the village. He hated them as they greeted him, hated them as they praised him, and he hated them as he smiled back at them. He wanted some pretext to cut their sons to pieces. He wanted war with a neighboring village, the axes and arrows flying into their flesh, the spears made slippery with their blood.

Several months after her son was burned alive, Dearbhail the beautiful died. Before dying, she lay on her bed and summoned Finn. Sealbhach himself did not care that they met.

“Finn, I know well why you went from me. And I know that it was right. It was right not because of the benefit to the villagers — may they all be swallowed in a bog. It was right because it gave me a perfect thing, the memory of your song. I have it untouched by my bitterness, by your

haggard face — untouched by the power that condemns us all to nothing but suffering.”

Finn lay on the shingled strand and thought of all these past things. It had become night. His little wife Ceana had seen that he had fallen into one of his reveries, and she had gotten up wordlessly to clean the fish and place them on sticks over the fire.

Ceana now approached with these sticks of cooked fish and a little kelp that she had found washed up on the shore. At the same time his little girl Muirna ran up with a handful of dozens of little pink stars, broken open from their discs and soon to die. At first Finn was angry that she was killing so many of these harmless creatures, but he controlled himself, especially since it seemed that she was excitedly trying to tell him something. She kept holding out her hand with the little creatures, then pointing upward.

“Star! Star!” she said, speaking her first words.

Finn looked overhead at the great wheeling path of the Milky Way.

“Yes! Yes!” he said. “Yes, Muirna my little love, yes. Come give me a hug.”

Muirna hugged him then tried to pull away, but he held her fast, and pulled Ceana into the embrace. He did not want Muirna to be infected by his sadness, which she would not have understood anyway. He did not want her to see the thing more numerous than all the bright points of the silent explosion overhead, now streaming down his haggard cheeks: The tears of our suffering.

Reflection: It Is As It Was

Every week or so it's the same thing. Today it's Eesa or Eashoa or whatever his name is. Ten days ago it was Joshua, and before that Yahshua and Yehoshua and Yesu and Hoshea. I've even had a Eesho M'sheeka. *Mebercule!* Why don't all of these troublemakers just call themselves Joe and be done with it? Ha, which reminds me: A few months ago I even had a Bar-Abba. Do you see? Yes, Aramaic, the local tongue. Every "father's son" is in this game!

I tell you, Marcellus, I'll be very glad to get back to Samnium, my vineyards, and the blessed smell of cut grass – yes, just outside Beneventum. I've gotten irritable here, and soft as well. You see, I'm having this man rub my palms in tung oil. Comes from somewhere far to the east. Feel that hand. Just like a slab of marble. But I can't even remember the last time I touched a javelin or really kept myself fit. I just sit here, wearing red silk covered by fine white wool. Here, give me your shoulder and I'll help myself up. Ah, that's splendid workmanship you're wearing – leather soft as butter. And feel the nice detail in the metal. This is good, but I think the Spaniard's shop is the best, the one off the Via Salaria. – You'll never find it, though. Have my servant in Rome take you, if you're interested.

Come, let's walk down this colonnade. – *Creatura!* Prepare the loggia for us to meet the Jews. – The loggia is still in the shade now. It will be pleasant. But stay alert. This is your first lesson in how to deal with these people. Slimy business. You'll see right away what I mean. Have you ever caught eels? Imagine pulling one out of the muck while standing in it yourself. But I won't give everything away just now – we'll talk again after the interview

with the Sanhedrin, their judicial council. Kaifa is the high priest, their main man. Yes, Valerius Gratus had a high opinion of him. I can't see it myself. But you will judge with your own eyes. As I say, stay alert. You'll be on your own here soon enough.

Ah, here we are. Come to the balustrade before we sit down. We'll feel the sun on our faces for a moment. You can see all of Yershalaim to our left, can't you? Sounds like it. On the right they tell me is a public pool where lepers gather, and beyond that the Sheep's Gate, leading out to Kedron Creek, which separates the city from Bald Mountain. *Bene*, let's sit in the shade now. And here, just taste one of these; the boys have brought us some chilled figs and ice-cold water. The water is from a deep well that my Greek man says he's revealed only to me. Ha, lying Greeks. *Exquisitus*, yes? Imagine that most people live their entire lives not knowing the taste of water. Well, I hear them coming. – *Gaius!* Bring them in now. – Just a final caution: Do not smile or respond to their banter. Strictly business here.

Fine, fine. Enough flattery, Kaifa. “Distinguished prefect of Judea” is proper and sufficient. Shall we get down to business? It's the same matter once again, isn't it? Why is it that you come before me?

Ah ha, I see.

Healing on the Sabbath and blasphemy are not matters of concern to Roman law. Both are fully within your jurisdiction, and you need nothing from me to act. Do any of us choose the day on which to get sick? If he has healed someone, thank him for the gift of Aesculapius. If he has in fact blasphemed, why, stone him to death according to your custom – I could care less. As for the claim of kingship, this is not a univocal term. Is a *rex*

mundi king of the world, or king of the toilet? Does this Eashoa set himself over Tiberius?

I'm hearing contradictory things from you, Kaifa, as usual. Your man Nikodemos here, whose name I shall remember for his courage, thinks Eashoa is not making such claims. The rest of you don't seem interested in the truth. Remember that you are playing with a man's life. Would you have Rome more circumspect with your own countryman than you yourself?

Now you accuse him of two more matters. As for insurrection, I've heard no reports of any disturbance in the past month, not from Eashoa, or Joshua or Hoshea or M'sheeka or any of these lice. As for interfering with tax collection – excuse me a moment – *Scriptor!* Is there in fact a Levi of Capernaum collecting Roman taxes in that city? Well. And is he still at his post? Very well. Is there in fact a Zacchaeus of Jericho collecting Roman taxes in that city? Well. And is he still at his post? Very well. It seems, Kaifa, that your man of the moment is not only a shabby insurrectionist, but can't even persuade a single publican to defect from his service to Rome. Yes, one of these lice did have a tax collector in his following, but that was a year ago. Do let's attend on the matter at hand, shall we? No, you babble; as for myself, I take the sun to witness that I find no fault with this man. What precisely do you want from me?

Here we are at this same pantomime again, Kaifa. You want me crush all these threats to your authority for you, don't you? It serves your purpose that Rome is seen as the oppressor, when we – you and I, Rome and the spiritual leaders of Judea – are in truth in the same golden ship, riding this sea of common humanity. But you want the people to believe that it's you

and them in one great ethnic bond of solidarity against Rome. You don't dare to crush these threats yourself because the people would cast you off at once. The game would be up. You would have to find something better to do than trading incense for your fat livings. Excuse me, do I touch a little too close to home? Oh, stop that blather! I've heard enough for one day. Your words are not tools for finding truth, but conjuries for attaining your whims. You tire me. Go out at once.

Are they out of earshot? There, you see that I'm exasperated with it all – by the lares of Pontii, I've had enough. You're right: These are not men. In a final disagreement between men, there is always a battlefield near enough. Give me the Picts or Germanii any day, instead of these double-dealing Jews. – *Creatura!* Bring water into the sunlight at the balustrade. – Your shoulder again, Marcellus, and we will walk over there – thank you. Agh! Dealing with them, I feel I have touched something unclean. *Merda bubula!* Pour the water, boy. There, I wash my hands of it.

What are your thoughts of this little interview? Good. Well, you will see it again. What else? There. So. Yes. Then it boils down to two choices. This world shall be ruled; and it shall be ruled by the sword or the crozier. There is no other way.

Now, it's entirely unnecessary in this case, but I think that you should see one of these Eesa-Eashoa types. – *Miles!* Bring in the accused. – I've certainly crucified enough of them – those who set themselves up as insurrectionists, that is – have no worry there. No, you haven't seen a crucifixion? It's just a single post, with the miscreant's hands nailed together above his head. The feet are nailed together below him, making him seem to dive into the clouds. They all know that we are not capricious

in applying this terrible punishment – it takes hours to die – they all just think that they are clever enough to skirt the law and keep doing as they please. You will come to see that the names and faces may change but that they are all the same figure: The embodiment of the mob – bold as a herd, cowardly as a man.

Behold the man. *Scriptor!* The indictment.

You are accused of healing a leper. Did you heal this leper before visiting one Simon Peter's house, or did you heal him after this visit? Well, which is it? – You see, Marcellus? All equivocation. – Or maybe in one case it was Yeshu, and Hoshea in the other, ah?

You are accused of healing a centurion's sick servant. Did the centurion approach you himself, or did he send others? Well, which is it?

You are accused of healing the daughter of Jairus, or, ahem, of raising her from the dead. Which is it?

You are accused of healing a woman whose daughter was possessed of a devil. Was this woman a Canaanite, or a Syrophoenician?

Well then, who are you, really? Your father's name was Joseph. Was his father's name Jacob, or was it Heli? What? Is it common practice among the Jews to look at the female line, or is that just your peculiarity?

Where were you born – Nazareth, or Bethlehem? Sorry, it really can't be both, can it? – Well, I suppose it can if we confuse Yehoshua with Eesa. *Scriptor!* Put down that the accused claims to be from Kristlheir.

Have you ever been to Egypt as a child, yes or no? We aren't confusing you with others in the mob of spiritual opportunists, are we?

You're fond of preaching. Was your first sermon on a mount, or on a plain?

Miles, bring this man closer to me. You're not making a very big impression by your answers, whoever you are. Does it thrill you to prod and poke the authorities, to play cat and mouse with your equivocations and get away? Do you try to drag this city and its laws into your personal struggle with the Sanhedrin? Now I ask you, with the caution that an affront to the august Caesar Tiberius is a capital crime: Do you call yourself King of the Jews? No, *I* don't say – *Mihi non aestimet caca*. I'm asking you what *you* say. Your kingdom is in heaven then. What establishes your kingdom? Belief establishes nothing, no more than saying something makes it so. I may sincerely believe that I can walk across the water, but shall I drown for weakness of belief? Belief is of the truth, then. What is truth? Ha! Are you serious? Heaven in *every man*? Well, if that is your answer, it seems that we are going to be in for a great novelty of sects – a number equal to the count of people upon this earth. You're a charlatan: You want to twist every word out of your mouth to serve your whim, not to serve the truth.

What? Did this *cacator* try to strike me? *No centissime*, you'll see what that gets you. Time for a little cloud diving, *Oedipe*. Take him out, flog him, and crucify him. Put a crown of thorns on him, and walk him bound in a *furca* to his crucifixion post, over which you will write: "This is..." – whatever his name is, "King of the Jews." Since he's too cowardly to claim it himself, I'll do it for him. No, Marcellus, I don't care who it offends. I will have that

above his head. What I have written, I have written.

Think of it, Marcellus. I said that the world will be ruled by the sword or the crozier. This *furcifer* offers a third alternative: A world ruled by each man himself! Don't you see what that would really mean? It means a herd fearful of eternal punishment, enslaved by those with no such fear. – All under the lie of a single, just heaven, known identically by each man! This is the alternative that the Jews are putting before us: Heaven replaces truth.

I reject it. He is a charlatan. Even a blind man could see it.

Hafiz: The Moral Hazards of Indiscriminate Cloning

His clone approached him on the beachfront sidewalk about fifty yards away, swinging his arms and bouncing up on his outward-pointed toes with each step, an unsolicited grin on his face.

He despised him utterly.

While pretending to read the local newspaper, the original peered over the top, the brim of his straw hat pulled down low. He thought the clone was going to turn into the restaurant before which he was now seated — the same restaurant where he had first seen the clone and where he had nearly choked yesterday on his sauerkraut in the moment of self-recognition. It had been lunchtime and the clone was finishing off a Reuben sandwich. The original had covered his face with the dinner napkin when he coughed, and had kept his face obscured, vowing to himself to somehow see him again and make sure that his eyes weren't deceiving him.

So here he had come, again at lunchtime, and had waited on the bench out front. The clone had been late. Maybe he had slept in? Likely he was on vacation as the original was, it being June at Hilton Head, South Carolina. Nor was there anything terribly special about this restaurant to assure a return visit, other than the fact that it was the only German eatery in town.

But the clone walked past, and the man's lowered head swiveled from page five to page six, following him. He put down the newspaper. Where was that idiot going? He put on his sunglasses and followed him.

Once he thought the clone had noticed him, so he spun around, looking at

the sea, scratching his ear so that the lifted arm was between them. False alarm. The clone continued down the sandy wooden sidewalk and turned in to Marmeladov's Bar, the shabbiest in town, which the man knew well.

"It figures!" the original said with disgust.

The original dipped into a side street, fairly ran along another street parallel to the beachfront, then turned again so as to enter the bar from the opposite direction. He breathed deeply several times to catch his breath, standing back from the door. Fortunately he could see the clone now before he entered, the back of his flowered tropical shirt facing the beach, his shoulders hunched over his drink. The only disadvantage that he could think of was that if he took a seat at the other end of the bar, the light from the window would be illuminating his own face. He whipped out his cell phone, cackling softly at his cleverness.

"Beachside Bar," answered the voice in his ear.

"Hey, man, love your bar, great place."

"We ain't got no takeout here."

"Huh? No, man, I don't need takeout."

"Whatcha need?"

"Look, I'm real thirsty, but I got this sunlight disorder. Can you close the blinds so I can come in?"

“You got a sunlight disorder and you come to Hilton Head beach in the middle of June?”

“Buddy, I can’t explain this on the phone. Can you help me with the blinds?”

“Jesus. Yeah, OK. I was about to crank ’em down anyway.”

“Hey, I appreciate that. See ya soon.”

He was somewhat surprised, but very satisfied with himself, when the bartender indeed came to the window and lowered the blinds. He entered the bar and sat at the far end, and held his folded newspaper in front of his face. Hovering over the middle length of the darkened bar was a cobalt blue globe with the word “Schlitz” on a belt girdling the equator. The room smelled of dried beer.

“What’ll it be?”

“What’s that big guy in the flowered shirt down there having?”

“Him? Piña colada.”

“Pfft! Lady’s drink!” he scoffed. “Give me a Manhattan, extra dash of bitters.”

He turned his profile to the bar, watching the clone out of his left eye while pretending to study the newspaper.

The clone was talking with an unshaven man sitting next to him. The unshaven man was smoking, but he seemed to be always tardy flicking off the ashes: They kept falling midway on the bar in front of him. He was just nodding to the clone, not holding up his end of the conversation.

“Look at him!” thought the man at the other end of the bar. “He thinks everybody in the world is his friend!”

After a while — a long, annoying while, the man thought — the clone got up and left the bar.

“Say, bartender!” the original quickly called out.

The bartender nodded but continued away from him to retrieve the empty glass of piña colada.

“Bartender, *bartender!*”

“Yes?” he said, glowering, holding the empty glass in his hand.

“Do you mind if I have that glass?”

“This dirty glass? Shouldn’t I wash it first?”

“No!” he almost shouted. Then, lowering his voice: “I mean, no. I’d like to see it. Ya see, I’m a painter, and I’m doing a still life. I need a dried piña colada glass just now. In fact I was very pleased when you said it was a piña colada.” The original marveled secretly at the fluency of his own lying.

The bartender held up the glass and looked from the glass to the man with his head cocked suspiciously, one eyebrow raised.

“You the guy who called about the blinds?”

“Blinds? What blinds?”

“Never mind. You know, I’d say someone like you would pay \$10 to have this rare glass with dried piña colada in it. Let’s say \$20, or I wash it.”

The original reached for his wallet with a scowl on his face, and placed the \$20 on the counter. Getting the glass, he held it to the light and saw the fingerprint. He placed his own fingerprint beneath it and examined the glass again. Close — very, very close indeed!

* * *

Because the blinds were lowered, the original could not be sure in which direction his clone had turned when he left the bar. But an even greater indecision faced him: What should he do with the now certain knowledge that he had a clone of himself in the world? In particular, should he confront the clone and demand some answers, or should he glean these answers more carefully? After all, the clone was brought into this world for a purpose, was he not? Who was his creator, and what did he intend? Or maybe he, the original, was a pawn being used by agents greater than himself in some convoluted plot involving the use of a clone. He must make the right choices so as not to foil this strike against unseen, infamous powers! For his every move there would be a future accounting! On the other hand, if he was such an almighty important pawn who required a

clone, these invisible agents might have had the decency to suggest what they were up to. They had no right to demand unquestioning belief from him that they were working in his favor.

To stop himself from chasing these thoughts he spoke aloud something calm and sensible as he walked back along the sandy wooden sidewalk to his hotel. “Bah! This is like a child imagining stuff under his bed at night. It’s time to just stop this nonsense and turn on the light.”

He went back along the sidewalk where he had seen the clone earlier. He would go into all the hotels in that direction, looking for the clone. He thought of disguising himself, but discarded the idea when he considered that someone might hail him under a different name, providing an excellent opportunity for him to play along and find out about the clone by impersonating him.

He went into all the hotels along the boardwalk without any luck. He said hello to the desk clerks not casually, but with an effort to fix their attention on his face. Nothing. The beach began to narrow and the inland began to flatten toward the distant lighthouse, an area known for its sudden, dangerous tides.

The last place he came to was a bed and breakfast shaped like a small ancient Greek warship, with one gable curling outward like a prow. There were a few people on the flat roof, looking out to sea, protected by a green and white canopy. At that moment none of them were talking, and they were all looking at him. He had the unsettling feeling that they were all waiting for something. He passed his hand down the back of his head. He opened the low wooden gate. The sign on the left read “The Crystal

Trireme.”

He greeted the clerks at the front desk, getting no conspicuous sign of familiarity in return, and proceeded up the stairs to the roof. He passed close to each of those sitting or standing near the beach side of the shaded roof, smiling or nodding to them without anything unusual happening. He stood for a moment near the prow with his hands on his hips, looking at the sparkling, brooding sea.

Then he turned and caught his breath in an audible gasp. There was the clone standing one foot in front of him!

“Looking for me?” said the clone flatly.

“I...” The original felt his face turning red. To dignify his embarrassment he coughed and said with some anger: “I want to know what’s going on here.”

Several of the guests were looking at them now. One man kept looking back and forth between them, blinking his eyes.

“I think it would be better if we walked,” said the clone. He turned toward the stairs and the original followed him down. Once outside the clone turned toward the lighthouse. He walked to where the wooden sidewalk suddenly ended, and he stepped off into the warm sand of the beach, turned to his likeness descending the stairs behind him, and waited. Sea breeze ruffled his hair. From the beach came the white noise of the waves, softly crashing white necklaces of foam into the teal water.

“Why have you been cloned from me?” said the original as he caught up, looking at the other without breaking his stride.

“No, why have you been cloned from *me*?” said the clone, his brows gathering with offense.

They were both walking toward the water.

“Listen, you,” said the original, angry now. “If there’s a clone, it’s you. And I want to know how this happened, and why.”

They paused for a moment, looking at each other, their faces red and the veins in their necks pulsing. The clone took a deep breath.

“Let’s think,” he said. “Could it be that we are identical twins?”

The original gave a plosion of laughter.

“I know my past,” he said. “I know my parents and where they came from, and where I came from.”

“Where?”

“The family is from Georgia. My dad worked with the people who mapped the human genome.”

The clone stared at him.

“My mother....”

“— was from Romania,” said the clone.

“Yes.”

They stood looking at each other a moment. Then they turned to silently read the sign in front of them, fixed to one of the pilings going out in a pair of rows into the sea. It read:

DANGEROUS TIDES BEYOND THIS POINT.

Without a word they climbed the low sand hill that was in line with the rows of pilings and continued their walk. Here the beach became very flat, extending in a bright causeway of gold between two looming blue seas, ending at the bleached lighthouse about a half mile away.

A thought came suddenly to the original, and, stepping slightly away from the other, looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“I can think it would be diabolically useful to have a clone of oneself,” said the original.

Without another word, the same thought came to the clone. Both cast a swift, involuntary glance behind them, wondering whether the cry for help would be heard. And would it be his own cry, the victim, or the cry heard by himself, the perpetrator? The clone laughed uneasily.

“I suppose one of us could kill the other, and take his things very easily,” he said.

The original laughed in turn.

“You have limited imagination,” he said. “And anyway, it’s not as easy to kill someone as people think. Even when you’ve justified it to yourself and the victim is truly bad... — not easy. You approach him with your gun, and suddenly you notice a shaving cut on his chin. And then you know that you are about to silence forever someone who is made of the same flesh and blood, the same frail protoplasm, as yourself. Now, *group* killing... — well, that’s another matter, isn’t it? But in any case, I was thinking of something more ambitious, and more morally antiseptic. I was thinking that one could commit a really spectacular but fiendishly sloppy crime and get away with it, if a clone was handy.”

“‘Fiendishly sloppy?’” said the clone. Mesmerized, he could not suppress a chuckle and a smile.

“You know, leaving the telltale DNA marker, knowing that the clone had at least the opportunity to commit the crime.”

“So the clone is arrested while I get the loot,” said the clone with a smile.

“So the clone is arrested while I get the loot,” said the original with a smile.

They walked on for a moment.

“Why are you so unwilling to accept that we might be identical twins?” said the clone.

“Well, I do rule out schizophrenia, which would have the benefit of giving you someone different. Or is there any form of mental illness so noxious as to give you yourself all over again?”

“Is the afterlife a disease?” said the clone.

“Is self-consciousness?”

They both laughed.

“You might worry whether clones even have an afterlife,” said the original.

“Yes, you might worry,” said the clone. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

“Well, OK. We are not identical twins because of dad’s — my dad’s — work. And because I *know* my own past.”

“Er,” said the clone, “I wouldn’t want to annoy you with an echo.”

Then the two men stopped on the hard wet sand and looked at each other.

“Of course there’s another possibility,” said the clone.

“Just what I was thinking. Go on, say it.”

“No, you say it.”

“No, no, no. *You* say it.”

“Together then, on three. One, two, three.”

The two spoke the words in chorus: “*Maybe we’re both a clone.*”

Both laughed. The clone dropped to his knees in the sand and wiped tears of laughter from his eyes.

“This is not happening,” he said. He suddenly recovered, and looked at the other hard and soberly. “How would you tell a clone from an identical twin, anyway?”

“Well...

The clone had gotten to his feet.

“— The difference would be that the twin would insist that he knew his own past, while the clone would not.”

“What about the differences in genetic...?”

“— Completely irrelevant. Think about it. The twin would insist on a past; the clone would come to terms with having no past.”

“How do you ‘come to terms with having no past’?”

“Sorry. The question is everything — and I’ve misstated it. I mean, maybe it’s not a problem, *not* something to ‘come to terms with.’ Maybe it’s a blessing of not having to carry a great deal of human baggage, most of

which is fictional anyway.”

The original waited for the explanation.

“Consider... — OK, what? Consider a group of people who glorify one of their kings as ‘The Hammer of the Scots.’ This person is praised in song and verse down the ages as the very model of a major modern monarch. But on close inspection he’s nothing more than a neurotic, bloodthirsty villain. Now fast forward a few centuries, and this same group of people who were so smug about hammering the Scots have joined the Scots in hammering another group of distant relatives across the Channel. That’s some historical baggage that could be cast off.”

“Careful there,” said the original. “Do you think that after you’ve cast off all that ‘baggage’ you’d have a tidy unit of fact and logic in each person? No, you’d have a computer. In fact I’d say that people wouldn’t have *any memory at all* without the stuff that you call ‘baggage’.”

“OK, let’s hear an example of that.”

“Consider Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect. While in the womb his mother envisioned him as a great architect, and she decorated his room with images of great buildings. Designing was in his mother’s milk, so to speak. Or consider the fairly low intelligences that achieve great things because they come from families with a great tradition in whatever it is they excel in. Or consider a boy who’s forced to memorize the Koran — he pretty much has his whole mental landscape in a neat package for life. Or, a simpler example, consider the people who live up to whatever name is stuck on them — Mr. Overcash becomes a famous banker, Mr. Rattle a

famous conductor. You may think all of that pure baggage — or worse — but it's the manure that not only people, but whole groups of people, grow from."

"So we can just make up stuff, not only for this or that clone, but for whole groups of people?"

"I'd say that for a clone, this stuff is just a bag or a hook to hang a personality onto, and pretty harmless. For groups of people, I'd say they can't be self-conscious as a people without a fable about themselves."

"— And pretty dangerous."

"I guess it depends on who's the gatekeeper of the fables."

They stopped and looked about. They were half-way between the lighthouse and the hotel whose roof showed as a distant green and white speck.

"You know, dad was something," said the original. "There was only one time when I ever saw fear in his face."

"Stop. Let me tell you. It was in this situation. I was only six years old and he, mom, and another couple were walking out from a beach at low tide, talking seriously about something. Then he chided himself for being so careless. The tide was rising, and they were far from shore."

They turned back toward the hotel, starting a brisk walk.

From far away the two men looked like the first self-aware hominids, pursued by some unseen beast on some grassy veldt in some place beyond memory.

Parsees: Darkness in Ra's Lanuf

Tefere Mehta looked north from the highest point of Chinvat Bridge to the scattered points of light below that constituted the town of Ra's Lanuf. It was a moonless night and there was blackness on its southern approach whence he had come, walking more or less with the others who were returning from Egypt now that the fighting had stopped in the town. Beyond the town, farther north, lay the Mediterranean, an inky blackness that merged with the sky without horizon. He knew it would be stormy this time of year, and he wondered what it must be like to be on a boat there now, heaved and tossed with no light anywhere.

He had gone to Egypt not for the safety. He had gone to bury his uncle Abasi in his hometown of Siwa. At the time of the fighting he had felt no special danger in being in Ra's Lanuf since Gaddafi's forces held it at that time, and he was securely in their camp. He in fact had immediately volunteered in their forces the first time they had swept through. It was exciting to wear the uniform. For the first time in his life he felt himself part of something larger than his small concerns, part of something important and powerful. When the jeeps mounted with .50 caliber machine guns buzzed past, kicking up dust, he swelled with pride. The belts of heavy ammunition, the oiled action slammed cocked by the soldiers who struck the bolt with their open right palm, and the guns' primed, deadly implication filled him with a sense of power, although he himself carried just an old carbine.

Several times, as control of the town shifted between the loyalists and the rebels, it had been necessary for him to hide his uniform in the basement of the building where he normally worked as a janitor. However, no one,

loyalist or rebel, had turned him in to the new government during these alternations of power mainly because no one knew him: He seemed invisible in his insignificance. In the upheaval, employees routinely went absent for various reasons, and whenever he returned to the building in ordinary working clothes someone would just say, "Oh, you're back," and hand him a mop. Wordlessly he would take the mop, do the minimum of work, and then go somewhere alone to have a cigarette. During the entire month of fighting probably less than a hundred words had come from him.

But now things were different. People were going to hear from Tefere Mehta.

When he was walking alone on the dirt road that led back to the town, he kept plenty of distance between himself and others by watching the fireflies of their cigarettes. This distance he maintained not out of some desire to conceal himself, but simply because he did not want to talk. But now, lost in his reverie, he had allowed a dozen or so returning refugees to catch up to him and crest the bridge where he stood. He looked over the edge at the miserable stream below, so as not to talk with them. A wagon loaded with figs and pomegranates pressed him close to the side of the very narrow bridge, and it was followed by a wide double baby carriage with melons instead of a baby on one side. Someone held a portable radio playing Shimabukuro's "Trapped."

The group passed. Turning his head instinctively away, he looked back along the dirt road that led somewhere beyond the dark dunes into Egypt. He thought of his dead uncle Abasi, and of his visit to the town of Siwa, which he had seen for the first time only a week ago.

Every time uncle Abasi spoke of his hometown of Siwa his eyes seemed to light up, and he seemed suddenly to be talking not to Tefere but to someone behind him, over the top of his ear. He described rows of date trees heavy and glistening with fruit, he described the single well at the bottom of a hill where one night beneath a meteor shower over the desert he had met his wife, he described the high rock at the edge of the town where on a clear day, he said, you could see the golden domes of Mecca as a tiny wavering point of light.

Well, he had been there. The splendid rows of date trees where nothing but five withered sticks with no fruit; the well near the uncle's home was just a hole in an unpaved street; and the rock offered an unrelieved view of nothing but sand. And it was not as if uncle Abasi were talking of a place of long ago and far away: He had never been absent from it for more than several months during his entire life. What on earth was he dreaming of?

It should have been the responsibility of Tefere's parents to bury uncle Abasi, but no one could find them. Tefere was glad that they hadn't shown up in Siwa. All he remembered of childhood with them was beatings, ceaseless beatings, ear-twistings, and cuffs to the face and head for the slightest infractions. He had a sister, Bolour, just a year younger. She caught it, too. But whenever they were both beaten together they would embrace each other and he made sure that he turned so that she caught the least of it. Often he would even lie for her, taking the blows intended for her. For this she rewarded him with kisses on the cheek. Because of that, he did not mind the blows. But then one evening the parents tied her to the bed and took turns beating her for hours. The next morning she was gone. Tefere asked where she was and, of course, he was beaten, and he was told that he, Tefere, had knocked her down for stealing one of his toys,

and that they had to take her to the hospital. What toy was that? He had only the tricycle rim that he rolled down the street with a stick. Well, it was gone, for sure, but he didn't remember Bolour stealing it.

He looked north, back to Ra's Lanuf with its handful of lights.

There is something wonderful about a city seen from a distance at night. It reminds everyone, if only unconsciously, that he is part of a shared human project, which, even if he does not know its destination, he should cherish and protect.

But Tefere did not share this feeling. Looking down at little Ra's Lanuf, he thought himself somehow superior to all those many souls who were now sleeping, and that in their unvigilant state it would be so easy slip a knife into the latch on their doors, creep in, and kill them all.

He walked off the bridge, going toward the town. He hadn't gone far when he saw a jeep speeding along a road crossing from the east, kicking up a plume of dust. As it came near he moved back close to a row of mud huts for safety. He could hear the occupants laughing and talking loudly now. As the jeep slowed for the turn he could see them all clearly in the doorless jeep. The one in the back nearest to him looked Western and wore a photo identification badge around his neck. His hair was neatly groomed, and though his blue sleeves were rolled up in workman's fashion, there was no spot of sweat at the armpits. His khakis looked neatly pressed. "Journalist," remarked Tefere bitterly to himself.

Then his upper lip curled to a smile. Yes, this was where he would strike. This was how people were going to hear from Tefere Mehta. He began

running after the jeep.

He followed it for five minutes as best as he could. It hadn't traveled far, but in any case, if there were a Western journalist inside there was really only one place it could go: The International Hotel. He went there. The "I" and the "O" were missing from the word "INTERNATIONAL" on the shabby portico, but as he had guessed, the jeep was still parked there. Soon the group reappeared, minus the journalist, whom they had doubtless escorted inside. They were clearly all rebels, all in high spirits over the recent recapture of the town. One had on a white shirt and sat in the passenger seat up front. He looked well educated. Laughing, they roared off, but luckily for Tefere Mehta, they didn't go far. After stopping at a house at the end of the road, they all got out and went inside.

Had they driven just a minute more, likely he would have lost them. But Providence had delivered them into his hands! And, Providence willing, he would not fail. He quickly walked down the road and turned down the alley on the opposite side from the house, putting himself completely in darkness, away from the one streetlamp that buzzed and flickered some 30 meters away. He felt inside his pocket, took the object out, and squatted in the darkness and waited. After about an hour he had seen the figures pass several times before the light inside, casting their shadows onto the curtained window. Another hour passed.

Then the opportunity presented itself. A vertical seam of yellow light appeared at the door, and the sound of men talking in Arabic spilled out into the street. Still with talking, an arm showed itself holding the street side of the door handle. Half a man appeared in the doorway, talking to someone inside the house. It was the man in the white shirt! He walked to

the passenger side, opened the glove box, and rummaged inside.

Swiftly Tefere Mehta unfolded the knife and, pressing its blade against his right leg, ran across the street. He had seen news clips of cameramen running while filming, the camera jogging unsteadily. Oddly, he had that feeling now as he ran, as if he were hovering above the running Tefere, who was this camera. He could see through the eyes of this jostling camera, but it was not him — he was hovering above, watching himself run.

He struck the man hard in the ribs on the right side. The man suddenly turned, a startled, quizzical look on his face. They both faced each other for a brief second, looking at each other in bewilderment. Then the man in the white shirt felt with his left hand and realized what had happened. He opened his mouth to shout. Tefere Mehta struck blindly at the man's neck, and a jet of hot, slippery blood sprayed his cheek. The man gave a congested, phlegmatic cry.

Tefere Mehta ran, feeling his heart pounding wildly in his chest. He would go to his basement, into his janitor's room where the loyalist uniform was hidden. He would put it on in preparation for the return of the power, the return of the speeding jeeps with their bands of ammunition, the rows of soldiers dressed all alike, the power of which he, Tefere Mehta, was now the spear point! The adrenaline, the surging power in his veins confirmed it!

Ill Humor: Animals in Translation

Rex was an unmarried accountant who treasured his weekends. It was a Sunday morning in March, and he was sitting in his favorite armchair, looking out the window into his little flower garden, doing his favorite Sunday activity, the *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

On the Persian rug under his slippers feet, at the opposite end, was his best friend, a male black Labrador. His chin rested on his paws in front of him, his intelligent head the crown of a shiny black coat that was testament to his owner's love and care. He had gotten the dog as a puppy from a co-worker from Finland.

“What should I call him? Lassie?”

“That's a female,” said the co-worker. “If he turns out anything like his parents, Lazy Ass would be more fitting.”

“Ha. Well, just pull something out of the blue, then.”

“OK. Let's see. Let's whip up something in the blender. Try Lasiastia. How does that sound?”

And so the dog was named.

He now took a sip of his latte, took up his sharply pointed pencil once again, and adjusted his circular eyeglasses.

“I know that word,” he said. “Twelve down. Starts with ‘cy’. *Sure* to stick

out before all eyes.’ Dang, I hate that — I know it, but can’t remember it.”

The dog lifted his head and said: “Thyno-thure, isn’t it?”

The point of the pencil crumbled into the newspaper, and both slid from Rex’s hands. The sparse hair on the back of his head and neck rose like hackles, and he marveled incongruously at how that really does happen when the old limbic brain is suddenly aroused.

“Lasiastia... I almost thought... I could have sworn that you....”

“That I thpoke? Yeth, I did. Forgith me, I hathn’t got the hang of it yet. I weally don’t hath the wight equipment for it, you know.”

Rex slowly got down on his hands and knees and cautiously approached the dog, crawling the length of the Persian rug. His eyes were bulging out of his head.

“Do that again.”

“What? Thpeak?”

“I can’t believe that. Do it again.”

“OK. Woof! Woof! Ha, ha, juth kidding.”

Without bothering to change out of his pajamas, robe, and slippers, Rex got up and went to fetch the dog’s leash.

“I’ve got to show this to someone. This is beyond science!”

“It won’t do you any good,” said the dog.

But Rex had already fastened the leash and was leading the dog out of the house. He walked — running part of the way — to the home of his nearest friend. He repeatedly rang the doorbell and his friend came out, looking at him in consternation.

“You’ve got to see this — got to hear this,” Rex said. “OK, Lasiastia, come on boy, say something!”

The dog barked and wagged his tail.

“Lasiastia, come on, now! Let’s hear it! Speak!”

The dog barked again and wagged his tail.

Rex’s friend gave him a sidelong, dubious stare.

“You’ve got a barking dog, Rex. Congratulations.”

“No, no, it’s... the dog, he really....” Then Rex straightened himself, tilted his head from side to side with a soft crunch of cartilage, and looked at his friend with the greatest dignity.

“Don’t say we accountants don’t have a sense of humor,” he said. He smiled a weak, feigned smile. Then he turned curtly and led the dog away.

Man and dog walked along the sidewalk, their heads down glumly.

“I’m thowwy,” said the dog. “I juth can’t do that wight now.”

“I’ll take you to the vet Monday morning.”

“It won’t do you any good,” said the dog. “I won’t thpeak out-thide the houth.”

Then after a pause the dog said, “You don’t mind, do you? Aw you afwaid?”

“What? Afraid of what? It’s just that you — this — is so god-blessed uncanny.”

* * *

In the following days the life of Rex and Lasiastia entered a new stage.

In the past Rex had looked forward to coming home and seeing Lasiastia dancing around, his tail wagging, and he would bend down and let the dog lick him in the face. There would be happy feeding time, and a good walk through the park near his home. There was the man’s loving care, and the dog’s unconditional love, both exchanged freely. There was no need to explain absences, no need for Rex to explain what he was going to do and why, no need for the constant dialog that humans require — even as meaningless chit-chat — as the lubricant for the close meshing of their social machinery, and without which there often arise suspicions, recriminations, and even threats, born of not knowing the true events

inside the other human's skull. Their friendship was the transcendent form of that state of friendship between human beings where neither feels the need to fill the silence.

But now Rex would approach his home in a black mood.

It was Thursday evening, and when Rex entered the house, Lasiastia just looked at him.

“Evening,” said Rex.

“Evening,” said the dog.

Rex set out Lasiastia's food while a frozen dinner for himself heated in the microwave. They both ate in silence. They seemed like a couple at the end of a relationship.

“I really don't know what to do!” said Rex helplessly, his eyes brimming with tears. “In the past I could pet you, and you would have fun fetching the ball in the park, and I would enjoy giving you dog treats for reminding you of your tricks. But now, what is this?”

“We thtill love each other, don't we?”

“Yes, yes!” said Rex. And he got down and put his arms around the dog's neck. Lasiastia gave a soft whine.

* * *

In the next week Rex and Lasiastia found a new interest in each other in exploring the scientific aspect of the dog's transformation. Also, Lasiastia's enunciation had gotten much better.

"When did you know that you could speak?" said Rex.

"I don't know. Maybe a month ago."

"But that must have been an epiphany!"

"Epiphany?"

"A transforming moment when all the lights come on. What was that like?"

"To tell you the truth, I was violently, retchingly sick. I felt I was going mad."

"What! But why?"

"I could now see beyond the moment. The past was nothing but a long ache of regret, and the future nothing but terrifying uncertainty. The world suddenly had a depth and complexity that made me sick to my stomach. Prior to this, life was a narrow path of simple, immediate pleasures and a few quickly forgotten pains. But now I was thrown into a black forest where looking back showed me images of what I could not change, and looking forward showed me images of what I did not know. I hated it. I did not tell you because I hoped that it would go away."

"Could you tell anybody? I mean, well no, that's foolish for me to suppose

you could share this with other dogs.”

“True. That was the other aspect of the madness: The loneliness. I felt that I was suddenly an alien to all of nature around me, and also an outcast from the creatures that looked so much like myself. If I had known how, I would have destroyed myself to make this sickness — consciousness — go away.”

* * *

The next week Rex and Lasiastia felt closer, drawn closer by the long conversations they were having regarding Lasiastia’s acquisition of speech and human awareness.

But now Lasiastia wanted to go out and do things that Rex was doing. Lasiastia wanted to drive a car. Rex laughed and explained that the dog couldn’t reach the brake or accelerator. Lasiastia wanted to use the computer. Rex explained that his paws weren’t articulate enough to use the keyboard. And playing baseball? Out of the question! — As well as was playing rugby, talking on the telephone, shooting a rifle, and every other peculiarly human activity.

Then one evening Lasiastia jumped up on the desk chair and managed to get a pencil positioned in his right paw. Rex watched him with great amusement. Lasiastia wanted to draw or write down something, but he just could not do it. He kept trying, until finally in exasperation he barked angrily and clawed everything off the desk with his paws. Rex laughed uproariously.

The dog jumped down and left the room. Before entering the bedroom, Lasiastia stopped and turned to Rex, looking at him intently and growling. His great canine teeth showed fiercely. Then he turned to the bedroom, but before entering, looked back again over his left shoulder. At that moment Rex saw the face of Cain, the face of envy. It was not born of the difference between the man and the dog; that had always been there. It was born of the dog's new faculty of comparison that allowed it to look across the vast gulf between them, born of the dog's awareness that despite their closeness and familiarity the gulf could never be bridged.

* * *

On the last day Rex returned home and did not immediately see Lasiastia. He called for him. He put down his briefcase and, still calling, walked apprehensively into the living room.

Lasiastia was there on the Persian rug, looking at him as he lay on his stomach. Somehow he had gotten the new bottle of vodka out of Rex's cabinet, dragged it to the carpet, and managed to chew off the cap. Apparently he had lapped it hurriedly when the bottle fell over, for the bottle was on its side more than half empty and the dog's eyes were glazed and his head unsteady.

"Sit down," said the dog, glancing to Rex's armchair.

Rex did so.

"We seem to have gotten along best when we were having an intellectual exchange," the dog began. "Let's go back to that.

“What is consciousness, Rex?”

“Well, I guess... I guess consciousness is memory....”

“You asshole! You don’t need to raise your tail for me to see that. There are two aspects of the definition of consciousness, my friend.”

Rex was shocked by the dog’s profanity.

“Does my speech offend you? Ever wonder why the swear words are the first ones learned in a foreign language? There is a power in words you know.”

The dog’s head wavered a bit, and he blinked his eyes.

“You think you’re better than me?” Lasiastia asked. Below the moist nose the teeth were visible. The dog continued.

“Consciousness is the power to negate the natural.”

Rex looked at Lasiastia with the fascination of a mouse charmed by a cobra.

“You mean *imagine* the negation of the natural. It’s hard to negate an anvil that’s really falling on your foot. — Hard to negate being hungry when you won’t work.”

“You think the world works by science, or by economics, or by...” — here

the dog raised its head and barked what must have been a laugh of scorn — “...*justice?* Look around you at your rulers, your leaders, your champions. Models of the right and the true, do you think? Which brings us to the second aspect of the definition of consciousness: Consciousness means using words to hold power over those who will insulate you from the negation of the natural.

“Now listen carefully, my hairless friend, as I intend to say this but once. I judge myself the equal of any human being, and it will be so because I will make it so. I join this class of superior consciousness. Henceforth I am to be, as you so poetically style it, top dog in this place.”

Rex looked across the space that separated him from the dog at the other end of the Persian rug. The evening light dimmed between them. There was nothing more for Rex to say. In his helplessness and fear he breathed a soft whine.

Zuleika: Green and Gold

“Youth is wasted on the young,” it’s often said. To this the young might reply: “Wealth is wasted on the old.” And it’s often said nowadays that everyone has a novel, oftentimes already printed and gathering dust in his garage — a vain waste. But in truth, things are in order. It’s good to be poor for a time while young. Experience, the best teacher, etches in the soul that so much can be discarded, and the greatest lesson of all becomes possible, the lesson that to be poor and happy is to be content with oneself. As for the unread novel, it doesn’t need to be read. It’s a testament to the writer’s faith in the old verities, to the truths that outlive us all. We all should have one, written at least in our hearts, if only to be burned to ashes like Rodolfo’s drama in a Parisian garret.

Our poor young poet works in a liquor store in Dallas, Texas. But he isn’t a clerk selling the water of life to the parched Southwest; to himself he is Angus Og, god of love and poetry, with four mockingbirds, two at each shoulder, hovering above him. The liquor store (the court of Eochaid, to Angus) is at the southern end of a park (the Forest of Arberth) just west of Central Expressway (the impassable river Llinon), and Angus lives at the north end (at Bru na Boinne). Between the court of Eochaid and Bru na Boinne and on a path near the river Llinon is the tiny apartment of Ceridwen, an older woman who is a probably too frequent customer at the liquor store. Still she is beautiful, and equally important to Angus, she has a mystery, a sadness, that he wants to know. But since she is older, he must be careful: She might swallow him like Gwion!

On this Friday night late in October Angus has closed up the liquor store at nine o’clock as usual. But this is the night of the quest. Ceridwen, after

many conversations with Angus at the court of Eochaid and by telephone, has at last invited him to visit her. Angus makes his way north through the Forest of Arberth, knowing that the giant boar Twrch Trwyth roams there. Worse still, the evil trickster Efnysien is known to prowl its darkness. Many leafless trees etch themselves against a sky that umbers dark red to black. The four mockingbirds at Angus' shoulder have flown in fear. But a marbled moon filled full with cream is rising, transforming the dark path in patches to a silver stream.

Angus wends through the rocks, and at the last turn Ceridwen's stone hut appears on a lonely outcropping overlooking the river Llinon. Its thatched roof is argentine beneath the moon, and a small window wavers warmly from the candlelight within. He lifts the heavy iron pendulum and lets it drop against the hewn oak door. Bare footsteps slap softly on stone in approach, and the door opens with a groan giving way to a sigh. A wisp of a scarf is around the shoulders of Ceridwen, and the candlelight behind her seems to shine through her white arms like light through alabaster. Her hair is as black as the raven; her lips are like red berries upon the snow; and her eyes are two dark cauldrons wherein a young man might gladly drown.

They sit on a great wooden bench covered with animal skins. Ceridwen pours Cutty Sark for them both, the first glasses of many. There is small talk for a while: she leans forward and laughs at one point, her mouth like roses filled with snow; she makes a point by touching Angus' forearm. Angus seems to smell a light scent of pine and crushed pomegranate seeds breathe from her as she reaches for her drink. Then, when time has stood still for them, Ceridwen tells her tale.

She had been married to a photographer in New Mexico. They were happy

and had a child, a girl named Crystal. One night as the father and daughter were driving home in the snow, there was an accident. The father died, but Crystal was thrown harmlessly into a snowbank. Ceridwen resolved to raise the child on her own, and underwent many sacrifices in order to save for her. She dreamed a great dream of Crystal going to Britain for school and marrying an English gentleman. Yes, she would save ferociously! She would make it happen! Crystal would become her pure vessel of happiness, and she would tell no one of her secret ambition. She dreamed often of the distant day when plump, rosy-cheeked British-American grandchildren would sit in her lap and lisp in love in their endearing accent. These many dreams dreamt in poverty she strung on her rosary of hope, elaborating them, rubbing them until one day, she hoped, each smooth bead would become a reality. But like so many unshared dreams, it was foolish. Crystal indeed went to Truro School for Girls in Cornwall, but there was no English gentleman. Most of Crystal's classmates went for expensive outings in London, summer vacations in Biarritz, and ski trips in Gstaad. But Crystal did not have the money for that. And lonely as Crystal was, her mother could not afford frequent visits. Thus Crystal became a bitter girl who hated the mother who, out of love, had denied her love. She hung out with the "ragamuffin girls," as the well-heeled girls called them, wasting the carefully saved money from home on cigarettes, and later, on tattoos and body piercings. And since she knew her mother's marital ambition for her very well, she shoved it in her face by becoming flamboyantly lesbian. Ceridwen's heart was broken.

Ceridwen stands before Angus at this moment, her lips parted. He marvels at the lack of blemish in defiance of her age and at her perfect symmetry. He remarks to himself how most faces are not so: Looking at the right side of a face by covering the left, then reversing to see the left side, the two are

often surprisingly different. Indeed so much of the intrigue of a face lies in this very difference, this lack of symmetry.... — Then comes the crash at the door! — shattering at once both Angus' reverie and one panel of the oak door, casting splinters against the opposite wall. The beak of a great bird tears at the remaining panels, as the bird screeches. Immediately Angus reaches for his furious sword Moralltach and swings roundhouse. But the blade hits obliquely on the tough horn of the beak and vibrates painfully in his hands, falling at the door where the claws are tearing, though the beak withdraws with a deafening screech. To retrieve the sword is death. There is not a moment to lose! Angus turns and throws a great animal hide over Ceridwen and just manages to grab his harp of Teirtu as three giant claws, and a fourth opposing, enclose them both and pull them through the shattered door.

Angus knows at once it is Menw fab Teirgwaedd, the shape-shifter, who is carrying them aloft, far above the watch fires of Arberth and Bru na Boinne, appearing now as weak embers in the black forest below. He knows too that Menw will soon plunge, bearing them to Annwn, the final kingdom of Arawn. His hair whipping in the wind, Angus speaks the incantations, the calculated cadences for the harp of Teirtu. Of its own, unstroked, the harp pours forth its music of another destination, of Tir Nan Og, the isle of heroes. It is the music of Debussy's *Sunken Cathedral*, but much louder, more plangent. Menw screeches and flails at his prey with his free claw, tearing the animal skin on Ceridwen, who screams, and he tightens his grip on the pair. Again, despite the fire in his constricted chest, Angus speaks the numbered syllables, and more loudly than ever the harp of Teirtu sings. Again the constriction, the fire, the enchanting music, until the white phlegm comes from Angus — until at last the sorcery of song enfeebles the flailing claw, and in the other relaxes the pair to gulp freely of

the cold night air.

Thus Ceridwen does follow the advice of Angus and remarries. She too hears the music of heroes, and turns away from the endless scab-picking of the past, the heart-numbing regret, the constriction into the puny self that would give up its own happiness in order to remake the world into its own self-pity.

And one day, when Angus is no longer poor, but yet impoverished by the near forgetting of the Forest of Arberth and the green world that we so easily throw away, he receives a letter. It is the notice to attend the reading of a will. It is the will of a woman who once lived just west of Central Expressway in Dallas, Texas.

In an office building along that same expressway the hopeful beneficiaries and their families are seated in a row of chairs facing a lawyer's desk. The daughter Crystal is notable by her absence. Behind the lawyer, a great pane of glass separates them from the summer heat. A wasp thumps against the outside of the glass. The lawyer says that the envelope in his hand, taken from a safe deposit box revealed just before her death, holds the woman's wishes for the disposition of her personal property. There is silence in the room. The lawyer opens the envelope with a letter knife. He reads.

To my only daughter Crystal, one American dollar. To Angus Og, the brass Celtic torc also in this safe deposit box. To my dearest beloved husband, all other personal property.

The beneficiaries look at each other with some puzzlement, repeating the word "torc." The lawyer produces a great ring with a gap of about an inch in it. Opposite the gap, 180 degrees from it, is a swivel that allows the ring

to be twisted into the shape of an “S.” Turned in this way, it can be placed around the neck and closed, as one can see in the Roman statue *Dying Gaul*. Celtic snakes intertwine all about the ring, with two greater heads facing each other across the gap. In the mouth of one snake is a small crystal globe. The lawyer concludes the little drama, and the beneficiaries and their families gather around the curious torc, marveling with still puzzled laughter over its intricate and frenetic Celtic patterns, holding the object which, as they note its heaviness, would be a little uncomfortable to wear.

Not having been in Dallas for some time, Angus Og goes alone to the Forest of Arberth, and stands in just the spot where, one day long ago, a sprite had told him Tir Nan Og must open to the mortal world. He holds the torc aloft and looks at the crystal carefully. He sees script within, very small. He chuckles, drawing it near to his eyes. Holding it carefully in the light, he turns it just so, and reads:

Dearest Angus, it is all of gold.

And with mockingbirds singing above him, Angus Og turns his face to the great star of life and laughs the laugh of heroes.

Paradise: Philippians 1:18

It was the bellerin', what got me and Slim to look up.

We was leanin' against the back of his old pickup, starin' into the bed and whittlin' off this plug of venison jerky when we heard it. You know, like the sound of a train comin' in to a station, gettin' louder like. Well, we look up, and what do we see but a man fallin' out of the heavens. Right about then old Herschel was a-makin' his rounds in his single engine plane, pullin' that sign of his: JESUS SAVES. And this man fell right into the JESUS part of it and kindly furled it up. That there was what saved him, if you want my opinion. Anyway, directly he *un*furled and got slung out and *up*, soft you know, and landed in the top branches of that big oak tree on our place. He whacked down through them limbs, his bellerin' turnin' into a kind of stop-and-go "Oof!", "Ow!", "O!", and so forth, as he come on down. The last big limb sprung him — real gentle like, warn't it, Slim? — onto the roof of the barn, and he slid off, clawin' like a cat for somethin' to grab, then bounced between two big rolls of hay like a pinball betwixt two bumpers in the arcade.

Me and Slim run over to him, and to tell the truth we was surprised to see that he warn't too bad messed up. Not even a broken bone, far as I could tell. But it was strange. He was wearin' a flowerdy shirt, Bermudy shorts, and sandals with black socks — you know, like some tourist on the beach. Miraculous, he even had a camera still about his neck on a strap. And this man was black as the ace of spades — shiny black, if you know what I mean — so black that a chunk of coal would have left a white mark on him. And he groaned a bit, then opened his eyes. The whites in that black face of his shone like two flashlights in the wilderness.

“You awright?” I assed him. Kindly a dumb question to ask of a man in that situation, but that’s what come out of my mouth.

“Where am I?” says he.

“You in Texas, brother. I’m Emmanuel and this here is Slim. Care for some jerky?” And that was real good jerky, too — put up from venison the year before. I helt out a plug to him betwixt my thumb and the blade of my pocket knife.

“I’m haertin’,” says he. “Cut dat honky-ass jive and git me to the hospital.”

* * *

It *was* a miracle, warn’t it? I mean the Church of Rome, they got a whole squadron of folks that study up on every miracle case put to ’em. It’s got to pass muster, you know. But this here.... Well, look at the facts. He was lit’rally *saved* by *JESUS*, warn’t he? And comin’ down thousands of foot — you just don’t *survive* somethin’ like that. It’s outta the ordinary course of nature. Of course, there’s my name too, Emmanuel, what’s addin’ some dab of luster to it, if and I may say so. So it kind of speaks of itself as a miracle, and I believe it as sitch.

Pastor Larry at the Baptist Church shore looked at it thataway. Me and Slim was standin’ beside the hospital bed of old Alistair Carmichael the Third — for that was the name of this black man — when he come in, all red-faced and out of breath. He was dressed in his white shoes and brown polyester slacks with a white belt, and was wearin’ his best tie, that real

wide one that didn't come near makin' it to the top of his white belt. It was a get-up you don't hardly see no more. You know he looked sharp. He picked up old Alistair's right hand and shook it. You could see he was forcin' hisself to speak in a calm voice, you know, like when they shove a microphone in some athlete's face for a interview after he done run a mile.

"Mr. Carmichael, I'm Pastor Larry Brown, down here at the local First Baptist Church." He took in a big breath of air.

Ali — that's what me and Slim went to callin' him — kindly grunted, not real wide awake. Pastor Larry was still holdin' on to that handshake, and had his left hand clapped over the top in a kind of two-handed job. He went on, still not turnin' a-loose of old Alistair.

"We have been prayin' for this miracle for a great while."

That might have been a stretch, right there. Of course they all pray in the church, but for *this* miracle? I mean, they couldn't have seen it comin', could they? Anyway, he went on.

"We all down at the First Baptist wont to *hep you* in this time of suffering. I have set up a prayer vigil for you, runnin' twenty-four-seven."

I don't know how he set it up so durned quick, but let it go. Ali had come to real good by this time. Pastor Larry cleared his throat and went on.

"Brother Carmichael, this can be a great blessing for all of us, if we work it right. This here is a *seed*. Together we can work it to a *harvest*, a *rich* harvest for ever *body*."

That was the way Pastor Larry talked on his Gospel Hour on one of the high-numbered TV channels. I seen it once. But they warn't much seed, and consequently not a whole lot of harvest, stirrin' at two o'clock in the morning.

Ali seen right away what Pastor Larry was wantin'. This black man was real sharp, real quick on the up-take, if you know what I mean – slicker'n a plate o' boiled okra. "What you got in mind, my man?" said he.

When Pastor Larry went to scratch his haid, Ali was able to pull and git his right hand back.

"I figure it this way," he commenced. "If you will agree to exclusive and regular appearance on my Gospel Hour, I will be able to move to prime time. Now, Mr. Carmichael, *exclusive* and *regular* are key words here. If the television station can't be assured of that, they won't move me up."

"What's my take?" says Ali.

"Twenty-five percent."

"Now is dat dere twenty-five of advertisin', or what? I assume you doin' some advertisin'."

"Yes, we are *in* this world though not *of* it, and we must do some advertising of Christian products and services. And yes, twenty-five percent of that was what I had in mind."

“I’ll take fifty of dat, plus fifty of what you git off all de plate-passin’ — includin’ mail-in money, phone-ins, credit cards, ever bit of it.”

“Mr. Carmichael,” commenced Pastor Larry, tiltin’ his haid to one side and kind of smilin’ soft. “Be reasonable. You’re a Christian, aren’t you?”

“Jest as Christian as you. Take it or shove it.”

Well, Pastor Larry looked real irritated, but he reached inside his polyester coat pocket and pulled out a paper. He done had it all drawed up. Of course they was some scratch-outs to write in the fifty percents, and Ali had Pastor Larry sign his name alongside all where they scratched out. Also, Ali had him write in that he was obliged to just thirty broadcast appearances, at which time they’d have a new document drawed up. That Ali — sharp as razor soup, didn’t I tell you?

* * *

What a revolution we had around here then. They was national TV hook-ups, *international* satellite broadcasts, ever televangelist in the country payin’ Larry to come in as guest preachers. And Ali, he was a real natural at it. He worked up this thang of his own where he come on stage kindly stooped and wore out, approachin’ Pastor Larry who was dressed all in white, holdin’ out the Word of God to him as he inched up. Then a man dressed as the devil would come up in behind Ali and put a big gold cape on him, sayin’: “Here are the thangs of this world, it’s gonna be awright, you come along with me,” etcet’ra and so on. Then Ali would sling off that gold cape — I mean really *sling* it off, you know — stand up tall, and bust out with a mighty shout: “Yeaaaaah! I feel *good!* Like I knew that I would now.” It was

just *like* James Brown, only sanctified, you know. Then he would do it again — like a person backslidin' and returnin' to sin — and then he bust out one more time. It was one goddamn hell of a show, let me tell you.

Well, it warn't a month before Pastor Larry had his own private jet — a *Leer* jet they called it, I reckon so's he could leer down at this sinful world that he done brung under the Word of God. Then they got a *international* ministry goin'. Pastor Larry had his *Diamonds of Praise* tape done up in a dozen languages, and no eight-track job neither, but real *See-Ds*. They built The Rock, what was a Temple of Praise, out over the lake, blamed near big as a indoor football field.

Then Number Thirty come up — you know, that last appearance that Ali signed up for at Pastor Larry's church. Brother, it was a doozie. It was just like the half-time show at the Super Bowl, only twice as big, if you can jest pitcher it. Pastor Larry had a hole punched in the middle of the roof of the Temple of Praise just special for the event.

Ever-body in the Temple had cards under their seats, which they helt up when the big teleprompt in the roof told 'em. All 30,000 of 'em looked like the Chinese Olympics or somethin', holdin' up the cards to make a giant image sayin' "John 3:16", and then next a pitcher of Jesus with the American flag wavin' in behind Him. They brung that wavin' part off by makin' the folks move they cards up and down a bit. They even had a special-rehearsed bunch do the eyes of Jesus to make it seem like he was lookin' up, down, and all around. It was really quite a spectacle.

Then they uncovered this big platform at the bottom of the Temple, right under the hole in the roof. It had special lights or somethin' to make it look

just like a lake. And Ali and Pastor Larry went out on it, “held above the waters by the Hand of Almighty God!” as Larry bellered to the crowd. And there they done their James Brown thang, with Ali slingin’ off the worldly cape of gold, and bustin’ out with praise and salvation and what not. They was fireworks all around the outside of the Temple that went off, and that crowd went wild.

Then Pastor Larry brung ’em down. He got ’em all quiet, and he cupped his hand around the microphone, all out of breath from all them doin’s that went on before, and in a whisper he said, “Brothers and sisters... quietly now, quietly... for a moment of prayer. I aim to work a miracle, right here before you, right here on this night, right here before the eyes of the entire world.” Boy, you coulda heard a pin drop. He had ’em all so wrapped around his little finger, I believe he coulda said “piss” and they’d all a-done it. And they musta been a hush the world over, cause the news said the audience for this here broadcast was ten times that of the last Super Bowl — *ten times*, if you can imagine that. Guaranteed shore as the world, the maternity wards was plumb vacant nine months after *that* broadcast.

“Brothers and sisters,” said Pastor Larry. His voice was gettin’ louder, and quiverin’, excited like. “There ain’t been but two folks in all time go direct from earth to heaven: The prophet Elijah, and our Lord and glorious Savior, Jesus Christ.” Larry got louder, and with still more quiverin’. I thought he was about to lose it. “Brothers and sisters, tonight there will be a third! This man of flesh and blood, this Alistair Carmichael the Third, will tonight ascend directly into heaven!” Boy, you shoulda seen it then. They was screamin’ from wimmen, and men standin’ up, both hands raised over they haid, bellerin’ till they was red in the face. A big slew of ’em fainted,

and they was passin' the bodies overhead in they hands to the exits, just like at a rock concert — “slain in the spirit” they call it, and a mighty slaughter it was. Gideon hisself couldn'ta killt more Midianites as that.

Then a great stairway seemed to rise up out of the platform. They was Ali at the foot of it, and at the top was a big crystal ball. All the lights went out, except for one blindin' beam that followed Ali as he went up them steps, slow like. This loud organ music went up higher and higher along with him as he went up. By and by he got to the top, and he raised his hands over his haid, lookin' up out that hole in the roof. A ring of lights around that hole shone down on his face. That organ was really screechin' high and loud by then. The crystal ball split in half, and Ali stepped in and closed it behind him, rays of light glarin' off of it ever which way.

Then it all went black. They was a blindin' flash of light and a ear-bustin' explosion. Thick smoke was ever-whar. Then that ball went up like a big roman candle, just like a rocket lift-off at Cape Canaveral. Ever-body was leanin' in, peerin' up that hole to foller it.

Well, whew! Give me a sec here to kitch my breath.

The short of it was, that that was the end of Mr. Alistair Carmichael the Third. He warn't no-whar to be found, though they did find the crystal ball — empty. The police, they come in, they was a big to-do of a national search for him. The district attorney come on the TV and said they ain't a thang he can do without no body as evidence.

Pastor Larry built and moved in to an exact copy of the White House. He didn't need to have bothered, in my opinion: The President of the United

States had him over all the time. Their pitchers was all over the news all the time showin' Larry councilin' the President, and doin' that double handshake with his eyes closed as he ministered to his spiritual needs.

As for Ali.... Well, maybe I ought not be sayin' this, but a few months ago I got a newspaper clippin' — a pitcher cut out — brung up to my door by a taxi driver in a envelope. They warn't no mark as to whar it come from but for some printin' on the back of it in some foreign tongue. It don't matter, cause I done burnt it, just like the note inside assed me to do. Anyways, it was a pitcher of a black man what looked just like old Ali, sittin' on this wicker stool with a leopard skin over it. They was wimmen all around him — *good* lookin' black wimmen and not wearin' much — and thar he was with his arms hung slung around the necks of two of 'em, a quart of malt liquor in one hand and a fifth of Seagram's gin in the other. He had a smile bigger'n the grille of a '57 Buick — the corners of it coulda plumb washed both his ears out, I do believe.

Yessir, old Ali looked like he done died and gone to heaven. And like he said to me onest: Likely we all *have* done died and gone to heaven, and to be whinin' and hollerin' for yet another'n is just plain blasphemy. But jest like the Jews cain't tolerate the notion that Salvation done come, Christians nowadays cain't tolerate the notion that Glory done come.

Well, that's the miracle of old Ali, bless his soul. And it couldn'ta happened nowhar but right here in this unique country in all the world, right here in God's country, the U.S. of A.

Pechersky Lavra, the collection of churches and caves southeast of the city of Kiev on the Dnepr River, is the spiritual heart of Ukraine, and, it could be easily argued, of the entire Orthodox world as well. This national shrine began in 1051 when St. Anthony of Lyubech came from Mount Athos in Greece and settled in a man-made cave there. Possibly he came at the invitation of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, who after tiring of his more than 800 concubines, had converted to Christianity, and who had converted the entire city of Kiev to that faith in a single day, marching them down to mass baptism in the Dnepr River in 988.

Visitors from all over the Orthodox world have visited the site since the eleventh century, with currently half a million of them coming every year. As they have for centuries, they take their beeswax candles down the low, narrow caves, pausing before various icons — typically framed paintings — where they bow and cross themselves three times with the exaggerated motion of the Orthodox style and set one of their candles. In other places glass vessels — reliquaries looking like the transparent caskets of infants but holding the relics of a particular saint, are the objects of their devotion. Here they pause and murmur soft prayers with their lips against the glass, departing after leaving a kiss on its surface.

A number of miracles have been associated with the site. One day in 1911, a pilgrim was in the cave beneath the Khrestovozdvyzhenska Church, placing a kiss on the glass vessel containing the relics of St. Anthony, when he noticed Cyrillic writing forming inside the glass. Ecstatically he ran out and returned with a number of followers that entirely filled the cave. As they stood about the reliquary they heard an eerie murmuring chant,

originating in none of them, the description of which later formed the work for male chorus and organ entitled *De Profundis* by Arvo Pärt. By wavering candlelight they watched the complete writing slowly form on the underside of the glass cover:

Помоги мне.

That is: *Help me.*

The writing disappeared and the crowd went out, awestruck and terrified. The news quickly reached Tsar Nikolai II, ruler of Russia at that time, and he descended into the cave and witnessed the miracle himself. The patriarch of Moscow was summoned, a council was held, and the event was officially proclaimed a miracle. They also concluded that the significance of the mystic words was this: The people should help the tsar in all his endeavors, and give him their loyalty and obedience.

Whether attributable to the lack of forthcoming popular help or not, Tsar Nikolai II, the last of the Romanovs, was shot to death seven years thereafter, along with his entire family in Yekaterinburg. The mysterious writing went away, seemingly for good.

A generation later, at the height of the Stalin Purges of 1938, the writing reappeared. This time a group of avowedly atheistic scientists descended into the cave. After months of the most careful measurements, they ascended to proffer the following explanation: Radiation from the relic was emitting elliptical patterns somehow linked to the magnetic poles of the earth, and these patterns were activated by the moist respiration of the pilgrims as they murmured their prayers and kissed the glass. To be more

exact, and to complete the explanation as to why this was only now occurring in 1938, this effect was linked to the respiration of one particular man, who, alas, no longer respired: He had been tortured and shot in the Lubyanka prison. But an autopsy of his body, which, alas, was cremated thereafter according to the wishes of his family, revealed that his blood contained the exact chemicals necessary to excite precisely these elliptical patterns. The names of these chemicals had been written down by the highly respected pathologist M. Bulgakov, whose document and person had thereafter gone missing, alas.

As for the formation of these patterns into the two familiar words *Help me*, that was evidently a matter of chance, and certainly a matter of conjecture, since the words no longer appeared. Yet notwithstanding this voluminous, and to every reasonable patriot conclusive, finding of Soviet science, the authorities launched a spirited *Help me* initiative throughout the country aimed at helping them stamp out anti-revolutionaries, fascists, and all their capitalist stooges.

Then on November 22, 2004, and the weeks thereafter, when up to a million of the Ukraine's 48 million citizens gathered in Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square, to protest the theft of the Presidential election from the democratic Viktor Yushenko, the mysterious writing again appeared.

An international consortium of scientists recommended by the United Nations arrived to study the matter, and by the time of Viktor Yushenko's swearing-in as President of the new Ukraine on January 23, 2005, they had reached a definitive conclusion: The magnetic concentration of so many bodies on the square during the democratic protests had amplified the low-

frequency murmuring of the pilgrims, and this had aligned fine particles of iron beneath the glass vessel, much in the way electricity aligns the magnetic powdered ink in a modern laser printer. These particles of iron had been stirred up by the rather clumsy experimentation conducted by the Soviets during the last pareidoliac appearance. The particles had formed the by now familiar and less than awe-inspiring words *Help me* because pilgrims had recently taken to writing out the words on the glass as they spoke their prayers, tracing the cursive with their fingers, and in some cases, with their noses. In other words, the nose vibrated the glass as described and the iron filaments aligned beneath. Naturally the two now pedestrian words ceased to appear after the dispersal of the crowds of democratic demonstrators.

As is well known, the administration of Mr. Yuschenko has had less than spectacular success in reviving the economic fortunes of the Ukraine since 2005. A new candidate has recently appeared on the political scene: Mikhail Rybachenko, a fervent nationalist and flamboyant anti-Semite. There have been reports from his supporters of the writing *Help me* reappearing inside the glass reliquary of St. Anthony beneath the Khrestovozdvyzhenska Church, but the current administration has scoffed at the idea, and there is no independent scientific confirmation as yet of the veracity of these reports.

Timur: BWV 1129

Seiji Ozawa had discovered it, and Placido Domingo was to perform it at the Dallas Meyerson Symphony Center: The newly discovered oratorio *Timur the Lame* by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Actually Ozawa had not discovered it by himself. The Japanese pianist Chieko Hara, before her death in 2001 had bequeathed her library and papers to the conductor, and among these papers was an intriguing note that Bach had written to a farmer near the famous composer's home in Eisenach. The note had simply said: *Herr Glasreichsapfel, Bewahren Sie bitte diese Papiere für mich, im gewöhnlichen Orte.* That is: Mr. G., Keep these papers for me in the usual place. Evidently the scrap had been kept not for its obscure and in any case pedestrian message, but for the fact that it contained Bach's familiar signature. Ozawa had gone to this farm, situated in the valley below the Wartburg castle and still in the Glasreichsapfel family, and poked around. Below a rocky outcropping completely protected from the elements was a tree to which was glued a large patch of heavy paper, put there to heal some kind of arboreal injury. Peeling it off, he found the score.

Now, all of this would be thrilling enough, but there was another element which made the occasion at the Meyerson absolutely electric: The climactic aria, sung by the Turkish ruler Beyazid I before his torture and death at the hands of Timur the Lame, contains the same theme used in Beethoven's Choral Fantasy (opus 80), and the same sequence of C major chords: C, F, D, G, E flat, with the final chord played in fortissimo, which theme and chord sequence Beethoven later used in his Ninth Symphony. That is to say, the discovery of Bach's *Timur the Lame* demonstrated a lineage from

probably the greatest composer of all time to probably the greatest musical work of all time.

Music lovers from all over the world descended upon the Meyerson to get tickets. Two of these music lovers were Michiko and Toru Kobayashimaru, a Japanese couple in their eighties. There was a lottery, probably inspired by the Vienna Philharmonic's method of distributing its always sold-out New Year's Eve gala, and they got two seats, near the stage and far to the right.

Mr. Ozawa, no stranger to controversy, had taken the liberty of beefing up the choral section, in order to underscore the similarity between this and Beethoven's works, as he explained to the press. Though this modification was generally accepted by the musical world, it caused some consternation among the management of the center, inasmuch as over a hundred paying seats were lost to the choir. Also, the conductor in general did not like the 42 ton canopy foils above the stage, and after many rehearsals with them in various positions, he had them raised as far up as they could go so as to get them out of the way.

At last the evening began. A glittering crowd filled the great marble crescent within the center surrounding the hall itself. The Sultan of Brunei was there, and Queen Noor of Jordan, and countless dignitaries of the musical world, and the men who look at home in ponytails, designer boots, and earrings. The diamonds on the breasts and ears, and the gold on the arms and fingers of those assembled there could have bought the city.

Michiko and Toru Kobayashimaru were helped to their seats by two ushers. Mr. Ozawa came on stage, then Placido Domingo, there to sing the

role of Beyazid, and the crowd stood up and applauded for over a minute. There was a sudden hush after everyone had taken their seats, Mr. Ozawa lifted his hands, and the music began.

In the first act the chorus remained seated as the music described the confrontation between Beyazid and Timur the Lame on the battlefield. Bach used an arabesque and generally ascending leitmotif to describe Beyazid, and a coarse insistent leitmotif in the bass to describe Timur the Lame.

Without interruption the second act described Beyazid's apparent betrayal by his daughter Asteria, who wants to marry Timur the Lame. The treachery of course is revealed to be an act of filial devotion, an attempt to save her father from death at the hands of the bloodthirsty Timur.

In the final act, again with no intermission, Beyazid and Timur come face to face for the first time. Timur delights in describing the tortures awaiting his enemy, and Beyazid nobly sings of his indifference. Then Beyazid — Placido Domingo — is alone, and the themes that captivated Beethoven begin to show their power. The chorus, singing a high and ghostly melody in E minor, scarcely audible, seem to bring forth the spirits of all those who ever died unjustly, victims of power otherwise forgotten but for the music here. Tears stream down the painted cheeks of many of the women there, and men not easily moved feel their eyes brimming. Toru Kobayashimaru, his head tilted far back to read the Japanese among the other languages displayed above the stage, cannot prevent the hot tears from coursing alongside his nose. His mouth opens. His wife Michiko clasps his hand.

Beyazid, the powerless victim of hate, sings — to what? To love and strength! At last he has escaped the puny shell of himself, its weakness, its perpetual hunger, its sickening cowardly worrying obsession with itself, itself, itself. He sings to something beyond himself, greater than himself, and he becoming everlasting in the moment of identification with that greater thing, though followed by annihilation.

Michiko stands up, she calls out in Japanese, passionately. But she cannot reach the aisle from the far right, and she cannot be heard, for the sequence of chords is loudly, relentlessly progressing, as the chorus sings:

We enter the sanctuary of peace and joy, drunk with fire!

We are all brothers, all creatures of joy!

There is no power to chain us!

To the whole world we give this kiss of joy!

The entire audience has seen her — another woman stands up, several men there, more stand. The entire audience is on its feet! The mighty E flat fortissimo sounds as the chorus sings with the doomed Beyazid:

Above the canopy of stars — above the stars a greater thing must dwell!

Toru Kobayashimaru's head is far back over the top of his seat. His mouth is agape, and he stares sightlessly at the words flowing past on the screen above him. Michiko is desperate, calling out around her, imploring, not wanting to cause a scene, but yet wanting someone to save her husband, who no longer responds to her grasp.

But he is no longer with her. Like a golden disc flung deep into space, or a

disc of crystal, of warm crystal, of living crystal cast into black space, he
voyages alone.

Parables: The Man Without a Shadow

Fiery red tufts that had been his comb-over straggled from his temples and from the side of his head, almost to his shoulders, as he sat in the darkness of his hotel room with a towel around his naked body, looking through the French doors onto the still dark morning streets of Halikarnassos, taking slow, luxurious drags from the hookah on the floor beside him. Directly behind him a dozen candles burned beneath the mirror above the small table there. His four a.m. smoke was the dregs of a ripping good drunk that he had started late in the previous afternoon.

He knew this was coming when he arrived two days ago in this resort town at the far southwestern corner of the Turkish coast. After the hot bumpy ride from the airport at Milas he had showered and walked out under the hard Mediterranean summer sun to find a meal on his own near the castle at the center of the bay. He had phoned the president of the International Educators with excuses that he wasn't feeling well and had to add some finishing touches to the paper that he was to present at the conference the next day — both of which statements were true — so that he could skip the reception held on the first evening. He had done some shopping in the market. Then he had ordered his first hookah and double scotch and opened the balcony doors and smoked, just as he was doing now, twelve hours after that same presentation.

The paper, honestly stated, was nothing less than an argument for the capitulation of independent educators to state authority, with that argument disguised as a panegyric to capitalism.

“Quite a feat, Mr. Wilson!” the man said now to the empty balcony before

him, raising a shot glass of twelve-year-old scotch to himself.

This capitulation *qua* panegyric was accomplished by proclaiming the virtues of capitalism in the market for education while at the same time demanding that private educators submit to government regulations in the most minute detail, even demanding that they lobby bureaucrats to devise more regulations. In this way they could anticipate, and surely control, the making of laws to their advantage, and they could....

“— Blah, blah, blaaaah,” said the man aloud to that endless mental playback of his performance.

And what a performance it was, he thought. He had actually finished without puking in self-disgust. And the cherry swallowed to land — plop! — on top of the vomit was their praise. Yes, hallelujah, they were nuts about it, why hadn't they thought of cutting their own throats themselves! Hours later, when the Mediterranean sunset had contended with the cerulean lights at the bottom of the hotel pool, they were still clapping him on the back. The president of the International Educators congratulated him and peppered him with small talk.

“Magnificent tournedos at tonight's dinner, weren't they?” he said. “I'm sure I gained a belt size.”

“A waist is a terrible thing to mind,” the man said, already on his fourth drink.

After a half second the penny dropped and the president's face beamed.

“Ha, that’s good, William!” he said.

Then the Brazilian girl came over. She had the even, firm subcutaneous fat and the fine dense skin of youth. Her every feature was an exaggeration: Two big dark eyes, a big nose, a cavernous mouth full of beautiful teeth, and, well....

“Dear gawd! Has there been a missile attack?” the man said. For indeed her torso was large and dually pointed.

“What missile attack ees this?” she said with her Portugese accent, a storm gathering in her big eyes.

“Ah... the missiles of praise that must surely rain down when a beauty like yours appears,” he said, and kissed her hand. She laughed with the small circle around them, who had been collectively holding their breath.

After this near-death solecism, he was on a roll. His every word was mephistophelean mirth, as he realized that he was among European girls: They were turned on by ideas, those idiots! One of them had her drink go up her nose with laughing. And that was before the karaoke segment.

Recollecting, he was pretty sure he had sung *Good Lovin’* by the Rascals, and something or other by Brian Setzer. He was definitely sure he had done Neil Diamond’s *You Got to Me*, even snatching up a harmonica — where did that thing come from? — and slaughtering that part with his hands cupped around it and the microphone.

At least he had ended the evening with his pants still on and — bonus! —

unwettered and unsoiled. Two girls, laughing, had slipped under each arm and helped him to his room. Strangely, the only part of that ascent on the stairs that he remembered was his aroused musing about the Brazilian girl: At the moment of ecstasy, would each of her big toes be pointed skyward — *we're number one!* — or would all of them be splayed in jubilation — *high ten!*

Now here he was a four a.m., looking through the open door at the lights winking around Halikarnassos Bay. He exhaled the last of the hookah through his nose. He groaned, staggered to his feet, and walked through the doors onto the balcony. He took a great breath of clean warm air and leaned on the rail.

Far to his right the great back of the island of Kos was etched in black against the sky, still discernably royal blue. Looking to the left from Kos he saw the yacht lights gently bobbing in the west crescent of the bay, the party lights in the nightclubs in the east crescent, and, between them, the spotlit Castle of the Knights of St. John. The red flag of Turkey waved above it, a beam of light from below showing the star pinched by the quarter moon of Islam.

“Looks like the enemy triumphed, boys,” he said aloud.

He smiled as he imagined each of the lights as one of the people at the convention. There was Hans, bright along the bay. Earlier, when told that his laws for the creation of economic wealth were in fact obvious, he had said: “Easy, like making an egg stand on end, right? How would you do that?” When he received embarrassment instead of a reply, he had a waiter bring an egg and a saucer from the kitchen. He made it stand on end — by

spinning it. “*Das Ei des Columbus!*” he said. And there was the light for Guido, who, though he was given tenure as a sop by the statistis in France, was proving quite a nuisance for them all. There was the light blinking red and blue at the mooring — Justin, who had gotten a threatening government letter from Homeland Defense earlier in the month because he had dared to criticize its Middle East policies. And there was Lew — his website a beacon in the darkness for similar reasons, though under constant denial-of-service attacks from an unknown source. And Sean, and Paul, and Christian, and Thomas, and Robert, and....

He imagined bitterly how all those true and good lights would appear, flickering out beneath a tide as red as the flag now waving above the Castle of the Knights of St. John.

To the left, close in front of him on the street opposite, was the tallest part of the city’s largest hammam. This taller part had long ago been the narthex of a Catholic church. Now he noticed something lower down on the structure: The word “Montessori” very faint on the whitewashed wall, painted in light blue, Mary’s color. He laughed aloud.

“And so our declension,” he said to the building in front of him. “From church, to school, ending in a whorehouse.”

A decade ago the man had been pastor of one of the largest Protestant churches in Texas, until he made a public statement of an uncomfortable fact: That a very prominent politician was a member of a sect that worshipped a star with a thousand-year day at the edge of the solar system. He had been driven from his position and had ended up as head of a nonprofit institution that promoted the teaching of the classics in

American high schools.

As he looked at the wall directly opposite, the man suddenly thought of his first evening of smoking and drinking. At that time the candles behind his chair had cast his shadow on the opposite wall, and, clowning, he had poked up his hands to make his head an antlered shadow on the wall. He had thought of Andersen's short story and, half drunk, had stood, taken his room key, and cut his own shadow from his naked feet. His shadow had not left him. But now, alarmingly, there was no shadow on the opposite wall, in spite of the same blaze of candles behind him. He capered around, waving his arms. No shadow. But there was something else now: A horrific stench of putrefaction emanating from within his room.

“Looking for me?” said the voice from the chair.

What the man saw in the chair from which he had just risen would surely have made his hair, if he had any to speak of, to stand on end. Seated within the dark room between himself on the balcony and the row of candles on the far wall was a being with a pale face that the man could not bring into focus. Around the face was a wavering aura that seemed to come from the head as if it were ablaze.

“You know, you look pretty silly out there, hopping around like an African woman in tribal exaltation,” the being said in a brisk, sniping voice. He stood up and hopped back and forth on each foot, ululating loudly and flapping his arms.

As the man blinked speechlessly, the being suddenly appeared beside him. Still he could not focus on the wan face that wavered in flame a few inches

from his own. The stench was overpowering, like that of a long dead animal on the side of a road on a hot summer day.

“Pardon my cologne,” said the being. “But I know what you want. Whassa matter — cat got your tongue?”

The man tried to speak but made a wet clucking sound instead.

“Yes, yes, that’s just what I meant,” said the being. “Glistening genitalia, rampant protuberances, etcetera, etcetera. Here, take a look.”

The being pointed to a land telescope which had not been on the balcony until that moment. It was pointed toward the island of Kos.

Terrified, wordlessly, the man bent over and peered into the glass. He suddenly jerked his head upward.

“Oh, don’t be such a prude! Go on, have a good look,” said the being, nudging him downward.

Helplessly the man looked again. He clearly saw the Capitol dome with the Washington Monument in the background. Scampering up the side of the dome like a spider, naked, presenting rearward, was the Brazilian girl, smiling at him. The flaming being screamed in his ear.

“How about some orifice options on that number, eh, buddy? Woo hoo! Aw, you *know* it, baby!”

The being put one cold, flaming arm around his left shoulder in

consolation.

“Shucks, why the self-pity?” the being said. “Here stands you, busted up, looking out on the Lights of Integrity, pissing and moaning.” — Here he sniffled and sobbed melodramatically, then made the sound of a wet fart. — “And what’s the ‘how come’ of it? Doesn’t make sense. Just put some skull time on it. A person of integrity has a hard-etched boundary about himself, ain’t it so? And you.... Well, you’s been a boundary-buster from day one, ain’t you?”

“I...,” the man said, and dropped his head.

The being slipped into the voice of John Wayne and gave him a soft, cajoling punch with his free hand.

“Sure as shootin’, Pilgrim. So ya better smile when you say that.”

He returned to his sniping, ironic tone again.

“Sure you have! You, the churchman, pretending to dish up a human nature bounded and fixed since the time of Adam. But offering an ideal man that is without reason, without conscience, without free will — a rather strange keg with all its hoops popped, eh?”

The being leapt apart from the man and pretended to smoke a cigarette held professorially, pinched between thumb and forefinger, taking a drag from the cupped side. He held up the index finger of his other hand and declaimed histrionically.

“*No reason!* — First Corinthians, Thirteen, verse Twelve says you ‘shall know fully,’ not darkly as you do now, what with reason being so mighty goddamned dark. And fully knowing them causes and consequences, no need to get off the sofa and think; no need to socialize with any of those surly bipeds since you’ll all agree on *everything*. But on t’other hand, why agree on *anything*? Reasoned discussion is for joint action; joint action is to remove a felt discomfort; and felt discomfort doesn’t exist in the eternal lounge chair in the sky, eh?” — He held up a second finger and faked another puff from his cigarette. “*No conscience!* — Being conscious, you will be able to consider alternatives, yes? I mean *real*, possibly *sinful* alternatives, even though you be as good as gumdrops. Oh, yes-yes-yes; but them mighty powers gonna look close at your considerations, Pilgrim, evens if you be an angel. For as Second Peter, Two, verse Four says, ‘God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell.’ Jesus H. Christ on a goddamned crutch, when does a guy catch a break!”

Here the being stamped his foot like a child, then ran three tight circles on the balcony, pretending that something was snapping at his hindquarters. Then he suddenly appeared at the man’s other side, his right shoulder, giving him maudlin consolation again.

“I mean piss, Pilgrim: In the worst gulag on earth a chappie has a little privacy between his ears, don’t he? But not in heaven! And with privacy to a conscience as water to a trout, *whatcha got?*” Here he grasped his own neck and choked and sputtered, then suddenly stopped, drawing close. He gave a wild, face-twisting wink with his mouth open, then whispered conspiratorially: “So, till time moults away his wings, no mental pawing of them Brazilian haunches, all righty-poo?”

Then the being shouted angrily: “*Ergo!* Having no reason, having no conscience, we conclude: No free will and no human nature! *Quod erat demonstrandum!*”

As the man looked back into the room, the being was suddenly was in front of him doing the Maori *Ka Mate* haka, complete with eye bulging and priapic tongue thrusts. But his face was nothing but a shifting pattern of tattoos. Then he suddenly waved his hand down with annoyance and straightened up.

“OK, enough of that shyte,” he said. “Boundaries of nature — *ker-pop!* Boundaries of sexual identity — woo hoo and *ker-pop!* Boundaries of this earth —” Here he grunted powerfully with his fists held under his chin and at last gave a loud, popping fart. “The point being, you’s been a whoreson consistent boundary-buster whose integrity deserves a salute. In fact, I just gave it, ha ha. So, now — all seriousness aside — let’s conclude the conference with a fitting god-by-you, okie-doke? The last day is an outing to go up on a balloon ride. And — *snicker-snack!* — what have we here but our own little Assumption kit.”

With salesmanlike hand flourishes he pointed to items in the room and boomed with a stentorian voice.

“Here are the weather balloons of the spiffiest manufacture. Attached thereto, here’s our finest lawn chair for all your sedentary requirements — perforated with four cup holders for imbibical enjoyment — and do let’s stuff a hoagie or two in there to thwart that visceral gnawing feeling, yes? And here’s your... – OH MY GODDAMMIT, IT’S A PISS-STOOL!”

He gave a girlish scream and held up a pistol between thumb and finger like a dead rat. Then he put the barrel into his mouth and leaped headfirst across the room in a gymnast's mat exercise. After landing a twisting back flip to stand erect in front of the man, he pulled the gun out of his mouth and spoke in a flat, pedestrian voice.

“Relax, Pilgrim. It's a pellet gun.”

With the pistol held casually in his hand, he fired a round, and the pellet zinged and caromed about the room. His face became bug-eyed with excitement.

“Whassat for, mate? Huh? Huh? Huh? Whatcha gonna do widdat?” Then he relaxed again.

“Oh, come on, dumb-ass! You have to descend, don't you?” With a flourish of his hands, he pointed out another item.

“And mos' impo'tant, massa, here we gots yo hair gel. *Whassat for, mate? Huh? Huh? Huh? Whatcha gonna do widdat?* Why, bozo, we gonna wax up two lovely red spikes on either side of that walnut home of everything you are and ever will be.”

Then, with his hands clasped beneath his chin, he gushed in the voice of a Southern belle: “Oh, *Ashley*, won't it be bee-yoo-tiful?”

At last overcome by the stench on the balcony, the man ran into the room, into the bathroom where he fell to his knees and retched into the porcelain bowl. He heaved long and deep until he was gasping for air, until thick

yellow bile came up, leaving his mouth bitter. He put his head against the wall and sat there for a time with his eyes closed, groaning. Finally he pulled himself up to the basin and washed his face with cold water, rinsing and spitting out, then drinking with his cupped hands. He dried without looking into the mirror. Turning to the room, he saw the bright predawn light of the summer morning flooding through the balcony doors, a few lazy motes of dust drifting from invisibility to visibility and back again. The being was not there.

The man stepped quickly into the room, looking for him, then stepped out onto the balcony whose rails were now glowing in the morning light. He turned back toward the room. What he saw was his own wan face in the mirror on the opposite wall, with red hair straggling disheveled beside it, with a few guttering candles on the table beneath the mirror. The shadow of his body seemed to support the mirror as its head. Perplexed, he shook his head, and he rubbed his face with his hands. He stepped into the room again. He gasped.

Behind the sofa was a folded lawn chair, several boxes marked “weather balloons,” a pellet gun, and, on top of the boxes, a flat glass jar of hair gel.

He backed onto the balcony and turned around. He looked at the laughter of the ceaseless waves of the Aegean, at the gray mass of Kos in the luminous mist, and he heard the voice of the muezzin that, from its rasp of amplification and from the clarity of the air, seemed to etch itself into his ears: *God is great*. That Great Inversion of all our lies, cowardice, and stupidity — yes, by that, very great indeed.

Then a bitter smile passed over his face as the revelation came to him: Man

is not the “ungrateful biped”; man is the self-justifying biped. To maintain his consciousness he must repeat a consistent and benign story of himself; so he cuts corners, embellishes, until at last, through years of smoothing over the lies, cowardice, and stupidity, that crafted story is itself a lie. Integrity is the selective vision of ourselves that can’t possibly be true. — Except! Except in one case, yes?

Here a second piercing thought flooded upon him. Each of us will always be broken upon a cross that we carry with ourselves from the moment of consciousness: The cross of being able to visualize the perfect — that dangling crystalline jewel always out of reach, that incessant reproach of shortcoming. There *had* to be some god to embody the predicament — like ourselves, a being with perfection in himself yet doomed to suffering in spite of it.

The gold of morning burnished the battlements of the Castle of the Knights of St. John as he made his final discovery. His shadow was right in mocking the illusions, yet the need to assert those illusions was still there. He looked into the awe-sickening canyon between what cannot possibly be and what his mind demanded must be. He could not accept the fantastic absurdity of men vomited alive by whales, of promenades across lakes, of the spinning earth suddenly coming to a stop at midday, of dead people rousing from their graves on command like hibernating bears, of the morass of self-contradiction that was the afterlife... — And here was the discovery: *nobody else did, either*. They pretended to believe, just so they could have the icon that promised them the one thing that they really wanted: Integrity. Integrity. Every one of them was willing to say anything and do anything for that. They would even drown the world in blood to have its nearest iconic substitute.

He would go to the launching ground with his own gear. He would fix the weather balloons to his lawn chair, buy helium from the bottles there, and ascend. And, yes, not to forget those waxed red spikes, since it's all a great comedy anyway. There would be laughter and sport at his great send-up. How to handle it: With grand slapstick, or with cool, arch witticisms? Well, time yet for decisions and revisions. Then, up and away! He would get a great view of Halikarnassos where Herodotus worked, of the vain stones of the Mausoleum, of Kos where Hippocrates worked. Ascending further, he would look north up the coast to the Miletus of Thales, to the once-great library of Ephesus, to the island of Patmos of John the Revelator. Quite a busy corner of the universe this once was!

To do what he had to do, a pistol was not strictly necessary.

Love: So That All Awaken

Snowflakes on his cheeks awakened him — the sharp snowflakes of a very cold sky. He sat up in the snow. The gibbous moon shone a sparkling path to him across an undulating blanket of snow between the firs. He stood up and tramped out of the shadow of firs toward the moon. With each step a hard, sparkling crust broke through to softer snow beneath. *It's gotten very cold recently*, he thought.

There seemed to be a light of some kind glowing from the other side of the firs up ahead. Despite the cold, he liked this breaking through the crust of frozen snow, compacting the snow below with a creak, and he walked faster. But where was he? He turned around anxiously to look behind him. There was nothing of the path he surely had just made; there was just a virgin blanket of gently undulating snow, and farther on beneath the shadow of fir trees, an uneven row of marble slabs thrusting up like the misaligned teeth of an ogre. *Where was he?* He turned back to the moon and ran toward the glow of light beyond the trees, kicking up his knees in the snow like an awkward drum major. He was breathing heavily now, but he was puzzled by not seeing any wreath of it from his mouth. He looked down at his feet: There was only untouched snow. He held his hands in front of his face: There was nothing except the sheen of diamond-cruled snow below the moon. In fear he ran forward clumsily, and the illuminated sign appeared suddenly above the low hill: *Memorial Park*.

There was blackness.

* * *

On awakening he found himself in his younger daughter's bedroom. The shadow of leaves was shifting a pattern of light and dark on the curtained window above her head. She was sitting at her desk looking at a photo album that she had made when she was seven years old. The cover read: *Me and Dad.*

Helen! he called to her.

There was no response. He went closer. *Helen!* She did not turn. He reached out to pinch her ear. And although he felt his arm lift, felt his thumb and finger press hard her soft ear, there was no arm of his visible; no hand, no fingers. — And no response from his daughter. He reached and took the photo album from her hands. He held it in his hands and touched the yarn bow on its cloth cover, printed with pastel flowers. He opened it and saw himself carrying Helen at age four on his shoulders, and he smiled. Then he looked back to Helen at the desk, sitting undisturbed, looking at the same book, as he supposed it, that he now held in his hands.

He exhaled a deep sigh of enlightenment. He nodded his head in affirmation to himself and thought of a test. He had never seen the final page of the album. Helen had told him that she had added this page, but he had never taken up the album again. He had forgotten this until now. So he flipped to the back of the book in his hands. He lingered for a moment on the penultimate, familiar page, then turned it. There was nothing. More exactly, there was not a blank page, and not the inside of the back cover. That is to say: There was not a something with an absence, but a nothing. He just could not see at that moment. On turning to this unseen page, it was as if he had suddenly lost consciousness, and, on turning back to the last familiar page, had regained consciousness once again.

The book in his hands was not the book itself, but a simulacrum formed of his memories.

Someone called his daughter from the other room. She stood up and he saw the bright oval of her face, saw her brush the tears from her eyes, and there was blackness.

* * *

On awakening again he saw city lights at night below a wall of glass. He smiled in remembering this. The lights far below, blurred slightly by a light fog from the China Sea, were the wide crescent of the Bund in Shanghai. After her promotion his daughter Miranda had taken him there to see her own office, a vast room with this splendid view of the city. He had been sick then, but his febrile brain had recorded it all. A spreadsheet flickered on the computer screen before her, but her face was turned away, paused in looking at, but seemingly not seeing, the purple glow of the Oriental Pearl Tower in the crescent of the Huangpu River. The clock on her desk showed 2:08 a.m.

He was sure of the result, but he called to her anyway. *Miranda!*

This may not be a good test, he chuckled to himself. She never listened to you anyway. Then after a sober pause he thought: No. She was always listening. Why do you think you're here now? It's because she's thinking of you.

Miranda took a deep breath and exhaled the words to herself: "I've got to get this proposal done."

There was blackness.

* * *

The earnest, relentless, descending chords opening Brahms' First Symphony awakened him. His wife Qiong glanced over the top of the illuminated notes at maestro Jahja Ling.

Guest conducting, he supposed, for as he looked around he saw that this was the renovated Boettcher Concert Hall, the venue of the Colorado Symphony, which was not his orchestra. But he laughed to see that Qiong had at last made principal second violin.

She knew how you loved this piece, he thought. He listened with satisfaction, but — as he was embarrassed to admit to himself on his return from nothingness, when he heard the repetition of the theme at the end — he had forgotten some of the middle of the movement! Then, as his wife's full attention returned to the work, removing even the subconscious light whose glow had animated him, there was blackness.

* * *

This checkered life — the bloodless, will-less, feckless life of a spectator — repeated itself for him for meaningless time thereafter. As there is no disembodied memory, his memory had taken life in those who loved him. In those cases where people remembered him in thought only, without reference to familiar feelings, his restoration was fleeting indeed. At first he had dismissed these latter cases, which at first seemed so dissatisfying in

their brevity. But when he saw that these were instances where the person was a stranger who was remembering some anonymous act of kindness from him, often in a desperate place and, though clearly remembered, far from places familiar to him, he took time to think during those other moments, sometimes hours, that were sustained in the thought and love from his family. These longer moments had given him time to make some discoveries.

He thought of all the many occasions of Helen's infinite sympathy and intuitive sense of rightness, which were reflected not only in those acts but in her paintings and writings as well, and he abstracted a single essence from them all. This essence he identified with her corporeal self: With her fine brow, her face, her lips, nose, eyes, and eyelashes.

In a similar way he abstracted all the wonderful habits of Miranda — her industry, her mental endurance, her essential *hardness* that tied her youth to his youth, a hardness that she would surpass with age — and he formed a single essence that was less an image of her dark eyes and lovely mouth than of the habits themselves.

Of his wife Qiong, passion consumed itself and burned away all but music, whose life-giver she was. The remembered kisses became more like the kisses given by the celebrant to the raiments before holy communion, and to the objects in the devotional act itself: Kisses of transfigured passion. The dross and ashes fell away, leaving music itself as her only flesh.

* * *

Thinking over infinite, interrupted time of these three essences, he at last looked up into the remembered heavens of Dante's *Paradiso*, at the concentric rings formed in the vast universe above his head by every noble mind that he had read or heard. Not in a single plane did they form themselves, but in tangents and elliptics they spun, their finitude made infinite, like the fractal of the English coastline. As a wineglass struck on its rim from a single point sends concentric rings forth and back on the surface of the wine, so the words spoken from these minds, or heard to be spoken from these minds, did ring concentrically into and out of this vast universe.

At the crystal locus of this vast colloquy was he.

At this center point where the remembered and understood thoughts arrived at the locus of his being, at the moment where they stood instantaneously still before their reflection to the wheeling tangential minds that set them in motion, he lived, sustained by his remembrance of the essences of sympathy, habit, and music. At that moment his sporadic, interstitial life was transcended, and the eternal conversation was begun. His memory, and therefore his continued life, did not fail on something ill-seen, misheard, or badly sensed, but blossomed on the remembered association, on the nuance that was shared not merely among the original minds, but among all those in his present condition who had understood in part. He had transcended blackness.

As the mystery of the finite made infinite was resolved, so now the mystery of his everlasting self was resolved by its annihilation in impersonal truth, his ephemeral sublunary love made permanent in the love that turns the sun and other stars.

Cupbearer: No Earthly Music

The pines raced to zenith 30 meters above his head, where their tops wavered gently and in slow-motion to the opening of Wagner's *Forest Murmurs*. The string sections toyed in turn with the perpetual, undulating theme, as one section then another came to prominence and permuted it, slowed it, accelerated it in timeless lassitude. Far above, the pine tops seemed to finger the cirrus shredded in the even more distant azure. Long moments later the flutes, sounding as songbirds, burst in upon the theme.

Here Katashi Bezrodny yielded to the intrusion and removed the clip of the Shadowcaster that passed over his head, temple-to-temple, ear-to-ear. He rubbed his eyes and saw not the ascending pines, but the tunneling starfield with its splayed vision of stars sweeping past on either side of the giant screen.

In truth it was not the flutes that had distracted him. He had told himself earlier that on their entry he must go: There was too much to do, especially when one was doing the work of three. In the next room less than 30 meters away was his workroom and the Sensate Chair, which shared much of the hardware and algorithms of the Shadowcaster, but he knew that even as a fit man of 50 years of age he should do some walking. He headed to the stairwell, to descend to the command bridge at the front of the spacecraft hurtling him, a clot of protoplasm, of warm protoplasm, of living protoplasm cast into black space.

The starship *Eulenbachbrücke* was primarily a great cylinder some 50 meters in diameter and 100 meters in length. This cylinder housed its dual plasma and hydrogen fusion propulsion system. At "slow" speeds the plasma

system worked, but for all-out power and when sufficient speed was attained to permit it, the oncoming hydrogen atoms were scooped up in the front and detonated at the rear in a controlled fusion explosion. Even now, as the vessel decelerated from its maximum of nearly the speed of light, the sparsely scattered hydrogen atoms generated enough friction to vaporize the entire vessel, but for their electromagnetic deflection into the cylinder's combustion chamber. But now this chamber was not at the rear; the atoms were being electromagnetically redirected to the front where the combustion worked to slow the craft. And since intake and exhaust were sharing the same end of the ship, deceleration was less efficient than acceleration. Efficient or not, this capacity was also vital for the maintenance of earth-like gravity aboard the ship. During the departure for its destination, the craft maintained a steady 1g while accelerating. Then, after a moment of weightlessness like that of a ball tossed overhead at the top of its arc, the thrust had to reverse to maintain the same 1g of gravity for the final approach. Attached to the side of this controlled explosion, and tapering along its length, was the vessel's human payload. During the moment of weightlessness this entire payload structure had to slowly revolve from back to front on an axis attached to the cylinder; otherwise floor would become ceiling when reverse thrust began. As it made its way through the void the spacecraft resembled an enormous basking shark with its mouth open, with an outsized remora clinging to its side.

Katashi jogged down the spiral stairway situated beside the shaft of the lift that he had spurned. At the bottom of his descent a sheet of steel opened for him with a hydraulic sigh, and he stepped out, his hands on his hips, breathing satisfying draughts of air into his lungs, and taking in the great panorama of stars sweeping past on either side. The vision never ceased to delight him, especially when its glory was uncontested by the lightless

room. It did not trouble him that he was looking at the convex image of stars that were in fact rushing toward his feet, not his toward his head, as the retro thrust slowed his approach to his destination. Although by design the room was meant to be command center for the vessel, the three-person crew seldom used it even when all had been on duty. There were too many ways to monitor and control the vessel from other places within it, and there was too much work to do in those other parts of the ship. So it remained dark, a space that seemed to defer in quiet awe to the vision that was the “real” image of what was being transmitted below to the giant screen of the Shadowcaster a few minutes earlier.

Katashi’s footsteps resounded on the polished floor as he approached the dimmed bridge. There its panel of lights illuminated the bottom of his chin and the tops of his eye sockets in dark blue light. His eyes were those of his Japanese mother; his chin and rather square large head were those of his Russian father. The Phoenix Project in the twenty-second century of a desperate and dying earth to find another world elsewhere had chosen him, at least tentatively, at age seven for this mission. This was not too early an age, considering all that had to be taken into account.

As he looked at his destination — a small cluster of stars at about 11 o’clock in the panorama before him — Katashi Bezrodny thought of Bishop Anthony Lyubech of Mount Athos — better known as Father Placid. He was the lead consultant for flight candidate selection. The earth-bound minds directing the program were most anxious to choose those who could overcome what was for them the most fearful human problem: The desperate loneliness of space. Katashi snorted softly and smiled: They had no idea, he thought. They thought of their earth as a lonely blue droplet of life in the infinite void, the unique infinitesimal pinprick in the

leaden black vault woven with foresight for the purpose of magnifying their puny solitude. It was not like that. The life of a supernova was like the unfolding of a flower on earth; above the earth were not lifeless stars but infinite possibilities beyond the keyhole perspective of the five senses, and certainly pregnant with life like our own. Yes, there was the inhospitableness of space. But it was a mystery of the predictable conjoined with the infinitely variable — quite unlike the unpredictable and inhospitable human beings that had destroyed the earth in the first place. But somehow they had been right in finding Father Placid. He knew that solitude was the true “wormhole,” that word which was the *deus ex machina* of those at an imaginative dead end about space travel. Solitude would worm through the maya of appearances and open onto that universe that only the solitary had glimpsed.

Father Placid’s choice was also important in finding the second great qualification in candidates of the program: The capacity for meditative focus. For within the brain of each candidate was implanted a hippocampal crystal containing everything they had ever experienced or learned. To access the knowledge stored there synapses fired an impulse from one side of the crystal to travel among the microscopic facets of its interior and emerge to stimulate synapses on the other side, all under the direction of the meditative focus of the mind holding the crystal. Without that focus the crystal was useless. Without it also the expansive capacity of the crystal was useless. For each night during sleep an atom’s thickness of living tissue — the day’s experiences — was calcified over the outside of the crystal as a growing reef of knowledge. Possessing the focus, each mind had that seemingly “unconscious” immediate access to all their past knowledge. The hippocampal crystal was the realization of Aristotle’s exaltation of the pleasure of knowing — a mental pleasure more intense and satisfying than

that of any drug. The galactic voyagers bore within themselves universes of their own.

Katashi stretched out his left hand before him at 11 o'clock. Except for one thin spray of stars, his hand blotted out his destination. That destination was the Capella star system located about 42 light-years from earth. Its central feature was a binary star of the G type, like the earth's sun. Although both the stars of its binary system were bigger than earth, they were similar in temperature, luminosity, and in having the presence of metals. In the past year of the approach to the system, four elusive dots had offered themselves as potentially earth-like planets within the system. Their presence had by no means been assured. It was these that excited Katashi's interest; it was these which were the jade beads of longing, the promised jewels that lifted the weariness from his ceaseless hours at the instruments that measured their orbits, densities, mass, and sparkling possibility.

The first destination of the starship *Eulenbachbrücke* almost 10 years ago — a period experienced as nearly four decades on planet earth — had been Tau Ceti, a star 12 light-years distant from earth. There had been nothing habitable there. Nothing. It had taken the three astronauts about three of their own years to get there from earth, and once in the “neighborhood” they spent months of eight-hour shifts among them, scouring for any sign of a rock with an atmosphere friendly to human life. They had been realistic about their chances of discovery. Indeed, they had not slowed *Eulenbachbrücke's* acceleration, knowing that to do so would have meant no one surviving to reach their alternate destination of the Capella star system. Had they found an earth-like planet in Tau Ceti, they would have had to spend over a year in deceleration, doubling back to their prize. But there

was no prize. Disappointed, they composed a terse message for earth, with a statement of course adjustment for Capella. They had never received a message from earth, nor had they ever expected to, but they were sure that there would be disappointment similar to their own on the blue planet, if it even existed now.

Since their starship had been the first, their message was sent not just to earth, but to several prescribed coordinates projected along the flight path of three planned following ships. All of them would have to adjust course for alternate destinations among their own very short list of probes for habitable planets. Possibly it would mean that these sister ships would cast a wider net of search, and thus make more difficult any chance of reuniting at the planet that one of their number must surely discover. But what of those three ships? There was no guarantee that the people of earth, even when steeled with the imminence of extinction, could muster the purpose and will to assemble those ships and put them on their course. There would have to be some luck. The same kind of luck that brought a speck of protoplasm within the void of nothingness to self-awareness a few thousand years ago.

Katashi dropped his hand from the panorama of stars slipping past along either side of the convex screen. He walked briskly to the lift and in a moment ascended to the room where now most of his time was spent. He sat down on the curved chair with part of his weight shifted to the knee rest in the front of the seat. Here he could spend hours without tiring. A few dwarf stars between him and his four candidate planets had interfered with his measurements for several months, but the encouragement was that with each recalculation of their distance, orbit, and atmospheres, the probability of earth-like qualities rose. Especially promising was one of the

four, tentatively named Capella-88d. As best he could tell at this point, it had a 30-hour day and was 90% the mass of earth. Now there's one way to shed some weight, he mused to himself: A 42-light-year diet! He re-did the spectrography again, spending two hours at it, and once again saw the promise of carbon and oxygen. He forged ahead, forgetting the clock.

At about 10 p.m. Katashi had graphed two of the other planets. Not too much promise there, but they were worth continued investigation. He felt this to be a good stopping point. He stood up and stretched. With his hands clasped behind his neck he twisted his elbows left and right, thinking. He felt very satisfied. He would sleep well. He dropped down and did a hundred push-ups, this time with fingertips on the floor, not his palms. He stood up and looked over the room once again and proceeded along the path that he always took before bedtime. He took the lift down to the heart of the ship, to the Seed Pod.

The sheet of steel opened upon a dark room, barely illuminated in deep blue. Deep within its interior were two horizontal elongated crystal domes, illuminated by two distant ceiling lights. The music of Tibetan singing bowls seemed to increase slightly with each step that Katashi took toward the two spotlit domes. These were his fellow astronauts. These were wife and son.

No one could predict the dynamic of having a family of father, wife, and son on a distant voyage, but the designers of the starship provided space for only three. And since their best astronaut was about forty years of age with a wife of 40 and a son of 20, both of whom were very prominent in the program, these three were chosen. It seemed to have worked. Almost perfectly.

Lying on his back and visible beneath the nearest dome was Chresto, Katashi's son, a young man in his early twenties, his heartbeat slowed to twenty beats per minute, his respiration once per minute. A thin chiton outlined an athletic body. His shoulders and face gleamed in the oil that would keep his skin from drying over the unknown number of years before the summons to awaken to others like himself, gathered at the dawn of a new world. If there were a failure in the environment that kept him in this suspended metabolism, a canister beneath the pod would immediately freeze him without the formation of destructive ice. But revival from that state would be far more problematic.

Chresto, like his mother, had invested great hope in finding an earth-like planet at their first destination, the star Tau Ceti. Katashi had not exactly played the skeptic during idle conversation at the dinner table, but he had been cautious. Not Chresto. His enthusiasm kept him at the instruments for hours during the months of search on their approach. But several months after the disappointment Katashi came upon him in the Shadowcaster room, and he stood watching long minutes of aimless daydreams cast upon the screen from the young man's imagination. Katashi did not know how long the boy knew of his presence, but Chresto had not altered his thoughts — he had just let the whimsical images run, knowing his father was there. Then he had taken off the headpiece and stood up in silence, facing his father.

“I've lost focus,” he said, and tears began to stream from his eyes. He seemed to Katashi to be standing in a rowboat without oars, being swept helplessly from a mooring out to sea. Katashi embraced him.

“Oh, come on!” Katashi said. “There’s nothing wrong in feeling disappointment. Feel it. It will pass.”

“No. The crystal’s useless in me. I don’t *want* to focus. I don’t want say what I think about Capella, either.”

And so there was only one thing to do: Enter the pod, as they all knew they must one day, hibernating during the wait for others to come to the planet they would find — if they ever found it... if the others ever came.

The disappointments of Tau Ceti and Chresto overtook the mother soon after. This was Spira, the wife Katashi now approached. He thought now that she had chosen her words carefully before he had sealed the crystal.

“I don’t even need to ask for a promise that you won’t be infected by this sadness, Katashi,” she had said. “Finish the project. Find our new home.”

He quietly asked the audio projection to choose one of the Tibetan bowl themes that they had played together while sitting on mats in the command bridge. He bent his face to the surface of the crystal. He looked at the veins beneath the almost translucent skin at her temples, at her large brow, her flared nostrils and the full lips covering the slight overbite of her dear mouth. He waited for the almost imperceptible fall of her chest, then kissed the crystal at the point where he thought he might have felt her breath, leaving a vanishing halo of warm breath on its surface. He pressed his cheek to the surface for a long moment. He heard... he heard... faintly, the rhythmic beat of... sleigh bells... and heard Mahler’s flutes and the poet’s words:

*There is indeed no music on earth
that can be compared to ours.*

He straightened and walked to the lift. He had meant to go to the sleeping quarters, but now he thought that the long-running query that he had launched earlier might be done, and he was eager to see the result. Inside the lift he gave the voice command for the work level that he had left only a half-hour earlier.

Stepping into the room, he saw at once from a row of green lights on the work panel that the query had completed. He walked to the desk and tapped the main screen without sitting down. But that sound — what was that? It sounded like rushing water. He gave a tense jab at the emergency monitor — nothing listed. His eyes darted about the room. The sound of rushing water was coming from the helmet of the Sensate Chair.

The Sensate Chair was like an old fashioned Geiger counter, writ large. Just as that ancient device represented insensible radioactive particles as sound in the familiar popping crackle, the Sensate Chair represented otherwise imperceptible events to the prehension of five senses. With its viewer focused on some distant star, and with its helmet and gloves in place, one could smell ammonia if spectrography revealed that substance, one could see a hypernova burst of gamma rays not just as red light but as felt warmth on the skin.

And now, with the Chair left in focus upon the planet Capella-88d, its helmet was representing the presence of water — water in abundance!

Katashi turned up the volume and laughed, laughed with the happiness of discovery, of the release of fatal tension. He returned to the worktable and flicked the screen, scrolling to the bottom of the long-awaited query. He roared — he was beside himself with joy. For Capella-88d was a planet with seasons: Not seasons born of earth's 23 degree tilt on its axis, but from the binary star about which it revolved. As the outer one of the paired stars revolved about the inner one, its proximity to Capella-88d created winter and summer as it was farther or nearer, respectively. In three bounds he returned to the Chair and pulled the helmet over his head. Capella-88d was now clearly in focus: A planet with a mild winter. With tears streaming down his cheeks, Katashi felt snow on his face. Snow — blessed, sacred snow! He opened his mouth and tasted melting snowflakes, laughing like a child.

All was fulfilled. It was done.

He would arrive soon. He would place the starship *Eulenbachbrücke* in orbit at 30- or 40-thousand kilometers above the planet. He would set the beacon to announce his discovery to the earth and to the sister ships. Could he bear not to awaken Chresto and Spira — they, life seeds of a new world — or must they await the arrival of the others? But he could descend! Descend to sweep his hand through grass wet with dew, to smell the wet earth of a new planet, to hear songbirds undreamt of warbling across a lake, to pull a thrashing, glistening, gasping trout from its waters! To... to... — to do so much, so much. He could almost touch, almost taste the gift of days to come. He had time. He had all the time that one could ever ask for. He was home.