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By Tim Cloudsley

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VOLUME ONE

IN THE PENITENTARY AT USHUAIA

There was a criminal, accused of murdering a woman in Buenos Aires, who spent many years in

the Penitentiary at Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego. He was supposed to have killed the woman early one morning, believing she was a prostitute wandering the streets, in order to steal her financial takings. But, according to the reports, she actually worked at night as a telephone operator, and was returning to her home, where her children were asleep, needing her to prepare them to go to school.

The man, known as Rosario, denied having committed this horrific crime. He had not even been in the neighbourhood where the murder took place, and claimed never to have had unlawful, let alone murderous, inclinations. But he spent at least twenty years in the prison in Ushuaia, in a cell very small, but not as bad as many a prisoner has had to survive in, here or anywhere else, in this period or any other of human history. The window of his cell, rectangular, measuring about one foot by eighteen inches, looked over the mountains that surround Ushuaia, and the door of his cell opened into a corridor which, like the four others in the prison, led into a central, almost circular rotunda.

The design of this prison, like many all around the world, was the brainchild of Jeremy Bentham, who imagined this arrangement perfectly manifested and complemented the philosophical principles he called Utilitarianism. In the winter, the ground around the prison was covered in snow; in summer, and often also during winter, dust blew in from the nearby mountainous rocks, whose soft hue allows the continuous formation of dusty particles that settle everywhere, indoors and out of doors in Ushuaia, crunching under human footsteps in a very likeable way. Indeed, even the smell of this dust, forever in the air at Ushuaia, although the chest is caused pain by it, is very pleasant for some inexplicable reason. Surprisingly, it relieved the monotony of Rosario and the other prisoners as they undertook hard labour near the prison, breaking rocks which of course created more dust, to prepare the ground for the construction of a railway to Lapatria; and partly assuaged their craving for tobacco, which they could only obtain through arduous efforts in the prison, using both their wits and the very modest pittances they were paid for their six days a week of labour, ten hours each day, on the preparation for the construction of the railway.

Rosario had grown up in a poor area of Buenos Aires, at the beginning of the 1900s. His parents were a mixture of Paraguayan and Italian, and by no means members of the lowest strata in their neighbourhood. His father worked for many years as a street-lamp maintainer, a proud occupation in the modernising streets of Buenos Aires, with their symmetrical criss-crossing development into a new urban phenomenon. His mother worked for some time as a maid in the hotels in the city's centre, but after giving birth to Rosario's younger sister, her seventh child, she became weak, and worked outside the house no more.

Rosario appears to have been an inmate at the Ushuaia prison from 1926 to 1947, when the prison was closed, but where he went then is not known.

He may have been transported to another penitentiary elsewhere in Argentina, or he may have been released, to return to Buenos Aires or to try his luck in a different Argentinian city; or he may have stayed on in Tierra del Fuego. If he did stay, he would probably have built himself a wooden house from the trees surrounding Ushuaia, or in another, even smaller settlement. He could have earned a living from trading wood, working on fishing boats, or selling imported

items to the occasional traveller who visited the island. After all, he was an enterprising man, who had learned a number of useful skills during his time as a prisoner, and could certainly have taken advantage of the opportunities available in Ushuaia in the 1940s and 1950s.

There is no information as to when he died, or where; in 1947 he would have been in his late forties, so he might have lived on for a few decades more. There is a photograph of him in his cell, taken about 1935, in his standard striped prisoner's uniform, and in this he looks healthy, sturdy, and somewhat taciturn, in the manner of a convict who has decided to live through and survive his imprisonment. Little is known about his personality, save from a newspaper article of 1926, in which he is described as a tough, hardened criminal; and the fact that for the first five years of his incarceration in the prison at Ushuaia, he was always accompanied by two armed guards when taken to work outside the prison grounds.

This brings us to the only point of real human interest of which we know, concerning Rosario. In the nineteen twenties and thirties, Argentina took a number of immigrants from Galicia in northern Spain, who were destined to work as jailors in the Argentinian prison system. One such Galician immigrant was called Pedro Ponce, and he left Spain for Buenos Aires in 1919, when Spain, in common with most other European countries, was in economic depression and facing an uncertain future. He was a peasant, who worked, like his father, on a vineyard, but he had for some years supplemented his income and contribution to his family's welfare by working as a prison guard. He was the ideal immigrant to Argentina at this time, and thus he arrived with his young wife Maria, first in Buenos Aires and then shortly afterwards in Ushuaia, where he proved an effective prison officer - well-respected by his superiors, and apparently, not greatly detested by the prison inmates, if the fact that he was never physically attacked by any of them is anything to judge by.

Now, it appears that Pedro Ponce developed a certain friendship with Rosario, who was a prisoner under his charge between 1926 and 1940, when Ponce either died, or disappeared, it is not known which. To begin with, the relationship was one of mere mutual respect: Rosario, though understood as dangerous, never undertook any aggressive action either towards his guards nor his fellow prisoners. Pedro Ponce on the other hand, seems then at least to have been a calm, down-to-earth man, not given to harsh or vengeful emotions; an earthy character of an essentially honest, tough kind, not given to humour nor wit, but decent, and apparently well-loved by his wife Maria.

As time went on, through dusty summers and snowy winters, the two men apparently began to speak to one another about certain subjects. It transpired that they had something deeply in common: Rosario felt that his mother, the only woman towards whom he remembered feeling any real emotion, had not loved him as deeply as he her. She had been caring, certainly, and he remembered the smell of perfume falling from her hair as it formed a tent around his face when she kissed him goodnight in his bed as a child. But somehow, he had always felt a hollowness, a cold emptiness that burnt over him from time to time, and he rigidly associated this sensation with an unrequited feeling of yearning for his mother.

With Pedro Ponce the situation was more complex. He confided to Rosario, after some years of effective mutual confinement in the prison at Ushuaia, that he could not overcome a distressful

emotion concerning his wife Maria, which sometimes enveloped him in his dreams, so that he woke up starting, gulping, and shouting in his bed in the quiet little town of Ushuaia, much to Maria's concern, and a little fear that neighbours might hear these strange noises, nearby as some of their houses were.

Pedro Ponce had met Maria in 1918, on the day the armistice was signed at the end of the First World War, a very troubled time he recalled to Rosario, even though Spain had not been directly involved in the carnage. At that time Maria was a girl of eighteen, but almost as soon as Pedro met her at a village dance and began to court her, she confessed to him that she was pregnant by another man, a butcher by trade who was married with a family, and lived in the same village as she and Pedro. To begin with, Pedro was calm and resolute, loving Maria as he did, and feeling that he, some six or seven years older than she, was bound by honour and maturity to understand her situation sympathetically, and to protect her. When the baby, a little girl, was born in June 1919, Pedro was quite prepared to accept her as his own, and wanted to marry Maria without further ado. But Maria was not happy about it; she felt her baby had resulted from foolishness, an attitude that was not helped by her family, who had among them two cousins in the priesthood, which caused them to think in rather traditional and harsh ways. She wanted to give the baby to the Church to be adopted, which would not have been a particularly complicated move at that time, especially as she was not yet married.

Pedro consented to this: but just as the handing over of the baby to some nuns was about to occur, Maria changed her mind, entering a state of extreme emotional excitement, crying or despairing loudly much of the time. Pedro was no longer sympathetic; angrily he insisted that Maria had agreed to hand over the baby and that now she must. In the end she did, but for many months she was not herself - she seemed to have lost her lovely girlishness and lively disposition, although these returned in time. And so, when they were married, and soon after left for South America, the two seemed as happy as any couple can be in this non-ideal world; Maria having forgiven and forgotten Pedro's temporary anger, as he had forgotten her temporary moods of depression.

The backgrounds to the two men, Rosario and Pedro Ponce, allowed of congenial conversation between them for some years, yet by no means always in a deadly serious vein. It was only in the year 1932, it now appears, that both of them came to feel intensely lonely, Rosario contemplating his entire remaining lifetime in the prison, and Pedro feeling he could not escape his guilt over his wife's baby by the butcher in Galicia, and an anxiety over whether she would not at some time in the future erupt in regretful emotions and perhaps resentments towards him. Rosario recommended that Pedro and Maria have children of their own now they were established in Ushuaia, and indeed Maria gave birth to twin boys in 1931. Pedro was delighted over this, but strangely it did not remove his distress. Instead, he began in 1932 to believe that a trader in seal-skins living in Ushuaia, by the name of de Noort, a Dutchman, was paying attentions to his wife.

"But does she take any notice of him?" asked Rosario wisely.

"I don't know," was all the increasingly distraught Pedro Ponce could reply.

Some months passed, and due to the arrival of a slightly more liberal-minded prison governor from Mendoza, by the name of Gutierrez Lanterre, visitors were now permitted to enter the prison on certain occasions; and so Pedro asked Rosario if he would like to meet his wife and twin baby boys.

So, on a cold day in July 1932, Maria came to visit Rosario, in the company of her husband, but left her babies with a neighbour. It was not the first time she had walked through the cold stones, glanced into the washrooms that looked rather like byres, though they held men rather than animals in them; but never before had she entered a prisoner's cell. There she beheld the bed, the window, and a small table on which stood Rosario's crucifix, a tin cup, a photograph of his mother, a box of tobacco, some cigarette papers, and some torn pieces of newspaper. Pedro brought in a chair, as allowed by the new regulations brought into being by Gutierrez Lanterre, and Maria sat down, whilst Pedro remained standing.

It appears, at least according to the account given later by Pedro Ponce to a superior in the prison service, that nothing unusual occurred at this meeting that was supposed to be entirely friendly and commonplace. Evidently Maria and Rosario took to each other quite well, and discussed things like the weather in Ushuaia, questions of children and families, and the miracle of photography. This last topic arose due to Maria's remarking on Rosario's photograph of his mother, which prompted her to speak of photographs she had of her parents, and of the photograph that hung in her and Pedro's bedroom in their house in Ushuaia, of their wedding-day in Galicia. After perhaps one or two hours of conviviality, Maria left the cell, and was seen to the prison gates by her husband, whence she walked the one or two kilometres back to their house.

Neither she nor Rosario appeared perturbed, according to Pedro Ponce later, by anything that had happened. But Pedro sank after that encounter into an ever-deeper moroseness. He broke off his familiar communications with Rosario, much to the latter's unhappiness, dealing with him thereafter only in the abrupt forms that are normal for a jailor dealing with a prisoner. How life was at home between Pedro and Maria no one knows, because after her husband's death or disappearance in 1940 Maria returned to Spain, courtesy of General Franco, and went to live again with her parents and her twin sons, now nine years old, never to speak again of her marriage nor of her years in the Argentine, at least not to anyone whose conversations with her have been recorded. All we know about these three people after that meeting on a winter's day in July 1932, is that Pedro Ponce entered into a clandestine trade in illegal goods, including firearms, unlicensed alcohol, and certain unspecified native Indian artefacts, which by the later 1930s, when the Yahgan and Ona were becoming extinct, were emerging as items of some commercial interest amongst collectors, travellers, and certain anthropologists working for museums around the world. He withdrew from social contact with his fellow jailors, and from most of his former acquaintances living in Ushuaia, and though not apparently malevolent, grew increasingly taciturn.

The explosion came in February 1940. The Second World War had by now broken out, and one day there arrived in the harbour of Ushuaia a ship of unknown flag, though some suspected it was from Nazi Germany.

The reaction of people in Ushuaia to this arrival was ambiguous, as the attitude of the Argentine government to the new conflict was not entirely clear at that time. But it appears that Pedro Ponce must have made contact with the crew of this ship, perhaps hoping to sell them some contraband, or perhaps to buy something useful from them.

At any rate, on the sunny morning of February 9th 1940, Pedro Ponce was seen, by dockers working in the harbour, climbing the steps into this mysterious ship. Two or three hours later there were gunshots, though whatever affray had taken place must have occurred below deck, as nothing was seen above deck. Officials from the Ushuaia Legislature arrived, and then there were more gunshots, but before the authorities were able to force an entry onto the boat, it broke anchor, and made off into the ocean. Apparently some effort was made to pursue it, but in vain, and no one knew what exactly had taken place in the ship on that day. Pedro Ponce never reappeared, and the world slipped and slithered beneath the clouds of the Second World War, with all its surprises and uncertainties. Maria, as we have seen, returned by a ship with other Spanish returnees from Argentina to Spain, departing from Buenos Aires late in 1940. Rosario, without ever again meeting Maria, languished until 1947 in the Penitentiary, his fate thereafter being a matter of speculation. As for Pedro Ponce, he may have been killed in the fracas beneath the deck of the strange ship that arrived in Ushuaia harbour in February 1940. Or perhaps he lived, and sailed away in the ship to Germany or to some other place; but of that no one can possibly guess.

AT THE KING'S HOTEL

It is very curious sometimes, the way that a story comes your way which you have not yourself experienced, but which enters your mind with such clarity that it feels you have experienced it. Such is the case with the following, an account given to me one evening in a very ordinary bar in Buenos Aires, by a man who had lived in the city for a few years, after arriving there from Zurich. How he entered into his narration I cannot exactly remember; I had wandered around the junction of *Avenida 9 de Julio* and *Avenida Corrientes* for some hours, bumping into various acquaintances that I had made in the weeks I had been in Buenos Aires, and was just sitting down at an open-air bar, thinking about how Marcel Duchamp had apparently not liked this city when he came here to live for a while just after the First World War. I was thinking how silly he had been, if his reasons for not liking it had been that it did not live up to Paris or New York: for it is quite pointless to compare one place with another, or one person with another, or even quite often one experience with another.

At that moment I met Gregorio, a young man who, although he claimed to be of Swiss nationality, actually came from Russia, somewhere near the Black Sea, although I was not quite clear about this as at another point in our conversation he said he was Ukrainian, and had been born in Kiev. But that was not important at the time; he was a foreigner, like me, and had lived and travelled in various places.

He was young, dark, and quite good-looking: the type that makes you think he could be doing fine if he wasn't a little bit crazy, something that emanates very quickly from someone's facial features and gestures. Anyway, having sat down together, both of us a bit drunk, we talked of various matters, ranging from how we found life in Buenos Aires to the achievements or otherwise of Gorbachev, about which we disagreed. After some while he began to recount to me the following story. The reader must understand that I had never met Gregorio before, and when, about three hours after we met, we parted, rather more drunk than when we had met - for we were drinking Lancia the whole time, which I paid for, he being apparently very short of cash - we said goodbyes in deeply affectionate terms but never met again.

This however was his story:

“When I first came to Buenos Aires five years ago, I stayed at the same hotel as you, the King's Hotel in *Avenida Corrientes*. It was, and is, as you know, a tall building, about twenty stories high, a typical nineteen-thirties building, rather like those made in Russia at the same time under Stalin (here I had to wince a little). In the night-times, a man called Rosagio was always on duty, a useless fool who was always asleep or away from the Reception whenever I came back late at night, which was quite often. And why shouldn't I return late? I was paying for my room, without any discount being allowed for the number of nights I was staying, and the night-life in Buenos Aires is late: especially when you first arrive here. But one night when I came back, the hotel doors were padlocked so I rang the bell; then a demented young man rushed up to me in the

street and pleaded for some money.

“He had lost all his valuables, he claimed. He had only the clothes on his body, and lamented that a girl whom he had believed he loved, had betrayed him earlier that evening, and helped some thieves to steal even his documents.

“I said I had no change on me, repeating a mantra I always use - in fact, like you my friend, I only occasionally give money, and then only to children or old women - but at that moment a police car drew up, and three or four policemen jumped out of it and forced the youth to stretch out against a wall, while they searched him and asked him many questions. I must say, they were not extremely oppressive - less so than in Russia, or even in London, where I stayed once for some months, working in an Armenian restaurant. But the whole episode worried me, as I did not want the police to start asking me who I was; so I rang the bell and banged the door repeatedly until the police had taken away their quarry.

“When the concierge - Rosagio - finally came to the door, I was furious. “Why has it taken you so long to come?” I roared. “Don’t you work here at all?”

“Rosagio became even angrier than I. “Why do you ask me if I work?” he yelled. “Of course I do, I have worked here for thirty years!” In fact, I later found out this was more or less true, as he was about fifty-five, and had come to Buenos Aires as a young man, though he never confided from where he had come. He was a very irritable, bad-tempered, unattractive man on the surface, not to say ugly and unpleasant, but if you knew him a bit better, he could display some finer features, as when he sang some very tender love songs from different parts of Argentina, which once I heard him issuing forth.

“Once inside the hotel, he gave me my key, and I pressed the black button to bring down the lift, so that I could slowly and solemnly rise up to my fourteenth floor (and at this I nodded sympathetically, having many times by then made such an ascent). But before the lift arrived, he grabbed my arm, and said, “Do you want to understand what I am talking about?” “Not really,” I replied, wishing heartily to get to my bed and sleep. But he would not let me go; he dragged me into a side room, more like a cupboard, that led off from the Reception, in which there was a table and a chair covered with dust. The corners of the little room were filled with spiders’ webs, as if nobody ever went in there, or at least, no one ever cleaned it. “Sit down,” he shouted, so I sat on the chair, and he dragged out a kind of small sofa from behind a dirty curtain that I had not noticed before. After some while he sat down upon it, and I felt again like going up to my room and forgetting the whole episode. But at my impatience he raised his right forefinger, a thick, dark thing that made me momentarily sorry for him, so I stayed. “Look” he said, and brought out a leather case from behind the curtain, which he opened to reveal a long, curved knife. “This knife my mother used to kill chickens when I was a child,” he said. Now I was really determined to leave, but he implored me to stay. “Don’t be afraid! It’s blunt and harmless now,” he cried, and gently put it before me, so that I could touch it and tell that it was indeed harmless.

“What about it?” I asked, now no longer worried, but curious more than anything else.

“You remember that boy outside, that the police wanted?” he said. “Well one day, many years

ago, his father, then a boy just like him, wanted to use this knife on his grandmother.”

“Why,” I asked, “and where?”

“I never knew why,” said Rosagio, “but I do know where. It was here in this room, when the boy’s grandmother worked as a concierge as I do now. Her grandson, a boy who had always lived on a farm in remotest Patagonia, came to Buenos Aires to visit her, and decided to kill her.

“At that moment, before I was able to respond further to these extraordinary assertions, two men burst into the cupboard-room in which we were sitting. One rushed behind the sofa on which Rosagio was seated, the other grasped the knife and pulled it far away from us both. Then an old woman came in, and shouted in a loud, obviously drunken voice, “I’ve told you never to bring people in here! Get out, get out!”

“I got up to go away, making vague apologies to the two men and the woman who completely ignored me. I went to the lift area, and pressed the black buttons many times; when the first lift came and I started to get into it, I saw the three of them drag Rosagio to the hotel door, unlock it with their keys, and force him into the street. By then it was four or five o’clock in the morning, and I went up to my fourteenth floor as fast as I could, not understanding at all what had happened, and finding myself unable to sleep when I lay down on my bed.

“The next day there was a different man and a different woman at the Reception - neither Rosagio nor the two men nor the woman from the night before were to be seen. I asked no questions about what had happened the night before. A few days later I moved out anyway, as a woman I met who came from Russia offered me a cheap room to rent in her house. So that was the last I had to do with the King’s Hotel, where you are staying now.”

After parting from Gregorio, I went to another bar and drank some more before returning to the King’s Hotel. No one I then met at the Reception remotely resembled the people he had spoken of, but I also moved out a few days later, as I, like him, found it extremely frustrating to return late at night and have to wait for ages before someone would appear to open the hotel doors.

SISOHPROMATEM

One morning Rogerg woke up to find he had turned into a tiny octopus. At least he thought that's what had happened, but soon he realized it had been a dream when he really woke up and found reality was even stranger than his dream. For he found himself in bed, exactly the same as he had been the night before. During all those hours of sleep, nothing had happened to metamorphose him in the slightest way. Though his mind had made stranger voyages than James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake*, or Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*, nevertheless he was still Rogerg, exactly the same as before.

It was amazing, but facts were facts. Just as one can dive twenty metres below the ocean surface, touch a most extraordinarily coloured piece of coral, and return to the surface totally unchanged, so one can dream of the Big Bang, the outbreak of Nuclear War, or of falling in love with an entirely imaginary girl, yet wake up minutes later completely the same as before having fallen asleep and entering dreams at all.

Rogerg was astonished by these realisations, but was also rather disappointed; yet paradoxically, he was at the same time quite excited, even thrilled. As no one came to his room to disturb him, he thought about these things for a long time without moving and without thinking about getting up or anything like that. After a while he began to feel tired again, so he turned to his side and fell asleep, and soon began to dream again.

ON THE RIVER PARAGUAY

Once, in Asunción, Paraguay, there was a man who decided to live near the river. The River Paraguay, as everyone knows, divides the country into two parts: to the east, the more rainfed, agricultural half, with good soils; to the west the Chaco, much of which is dry, harsh, with very poor soils. The distinction, indeed antagonism between these two worlds, underlies a great deal of Paraguay's extraordinary history.

The man in question was a taxi-driver called Jorge, and he became a very keen enthusiast of Paraguayan history in 1987, when a new edition of Efraím Cardozo's magisterial *Breve Historia del Paraguay* appeared.

Jorge felt that just by living close to the River Paraguay, which Helio Vera described as the "liquid spinal cord of my country", he could experience the tension between the two sides of his nation, and that he might imagine Asunción, his capital city, to be a kind of spiritual reconciliation between the two.

It was a noble thought, and a very brave move that he made; an exemplary effort of an ordinary man to do something in his personal life that merged with his broader human and philosophical hopes and beliefs.

But it did not work very well. His wife welcomed the move to the new house, and was totally committed to the project, which she felt and experienced as intensely as Jorge himself. But their daughter, Gisela, who was thirteen at the time of their move in 1989, did not like the new situation at all. She complained of more mosquitoes, a longer walk to and from school, and the fact that their television aerial in the new location worked very badly. Dissension within the family grew to terrible proportions, especially when the younger girls, twins some six years younger than Gisela, began to take sides over the dispute: one with Gisela, the other with Jorge and her mother.

But something happened in 1994 that changed everything within the family. They had not moved from their new house, although at times Jorge had wondered if they should. But when Gisela reached the age of eighteen, and was at the point of leaving school, she suddenly became very keen on a new fashion in dancing, which was supposedly based on the traditional Guaraní dances of Paraguay. She joined a troupe, that went from *plaza* to *plaza*, and from bar to bar, with a group of young men bashing out the rhythms on loud drums, while she with two or three other girls danced in the style of this craze.

They would take a collection after their performances, and sometimes were hired by an advertising company to promote a new brand of cigarettes, or a new discotheque that had opened in Asunción. She became so happy in her new mode of expression that she ceased to complain about where she and her family lived, and very shortly her parents were amazed to find everything was peaceful in the house. The younger twins so admired their older sister that they would certainly not argue any more over whether the family house was well-situated, and all the family's relatives and close friends were delighted and extremely surprised to find that there was no more dissension in the household over this issue.

CATULLUS

It was always difficult to know how honest Catullus was being when he described his childhood, especially as his stories always seemed to accompany justifications for one or another of his foibles or idiosyncratic turns of behaviour. One of the incidents he recounted at least three times in my presence, was an event he experienced as a child in French West Africa, where his father was briefly on the staff of the British Cultural Attaché in Fort Lamy. His family lived in a large wooden house, and had a Chadian servant called Idris, who was a very good friend to Catullus, and indeed to his parents too, who were enlightened people, loving Africa and respecting its peoples.

One day Idris invited Catullus to the house of one of his cousins, in whose large family there were several boys aged about eight, like Catullus. At the house, one of the boys, named Sedahmed, immediately took in a friendly way to Catullus, and drew him to a window-pane where flies settled and crawled around. He showed Catullus a marvellous little bow and arrow that he had made out of two twigs and a length of cotton, which really could shoot, and sometimes impale a fly on the window, which fell to the ground in solemn defeat. Sedahmed would pull the arrow out of the dead fly, and let Catullus have a try, which he did, and after a while he was succeeding in shooting flies too.

This all took place in the late 1960s, but when Catullus' family left Africa in 1971, to live in Reading, England, Catullus never saw Idris or Sedahmed again, though he often thought of them.

Years, eons later, Catullus became a writer. Not a very successful one in the sense of having his work published readily, and certainly not in terms of earning any significant income from it, but a writer with a degree of reputation, recognized in some quarters as a creative figure whose unusual poetry and fantastical short stories grabbed the attention of those readers who were in some sense in tune with his particular soul. For although Catullus became as an adult something of a misfit, rather cynical about the world, especially in regard to careers, governments, and most supposedly worthy institutions, his writing conveyed a romantic love of the exotic and the unusual, and he always embraced the side of the oppressed, whether he wrote about Apartheid South Africa, about poor people in Inverness where he lived for a while, or about Latin America, to which he became strongly attached during the 1980s, in the course of numerous visits he made and periods of time spent in Colombia, Peru, and Brazil, and later on, in Paraguay.

Catullus went to stay in Asunción in 1993. I don't say 'went to live', because there was no

greater sense in this case that he would stay for any particular length of time, than there had been when he went to any other country. No, he just decided to live in Asunción, from where he felt he could take trips into the Chaco, and visit surviving groups of the Lengua and Nivaclé Indians.

I never saw him again after this, having said goodbye to him one drunken night in Antwerp, shortly before he left for South America. He was with a beautiful Flemish girl, that he seemed genuinely sad to be leaving behind, and she seemed to feel the same towards him. This was in June 1993. In August 1995 I heard that he had completely disappeared, whatever that was supposed to mean. No one - neither his friends nor any authorities - could account for where he was or what had happened to him. There was simply no record of him from after July 1994, when he had left a small apartment he was renting in Asunción. Either he was dead, or had changed identity, or had decided to slip into anonymity.

I only heard one story concerning his time in Paraguay. An Argentinian anthropologist called Ravita Sanoja, who worked with the Nivaclé Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco, said she had got to know Catullus during a few weeks when they were both in Filadelfia, which is the centre of a Mennonite community. Ravita and Catullus were staying at the same hotel in that small town.

I met Ravita at the International Congress of Americanists in New Orleans in 1996, roughly a year after hearing about the disappearance of Catullus. I am not an academic myself, but I went to the Congress because a friend of mine was presenting a paper to a panel on the Pano peoples of eastern Peru. One evening, after one of the sessions, Ravita recounted to me the following extraordinary story. I was only with her for about five minutes, during which time she imparted it; she had to go to organize the slide-show for her own talk the next morning. This, as I can best remember it, was her story:

“I really liked Catullus, we got on very well. I was planning my next expedition to do field work, and he had just come back from a Nivaclé community near Filadelfia. He had lots of interesting ideas about these Indians, and about South American Indians generally. We talked a lot, and went drinking (as much as you were able to in Mennonite Filadelfia!), then made love in the hotel, which was a very strange place in a very strange town.

“One evening we went for a walk among some trees and bushes at the edge of the town, under a brilliant, almost full moon, and we kissed each other most romantically under the stars. Afterwards we were joking and laughing, and we made a joint of marihuana to smoke. Then Catullus simply walked a few metres away, still talking to me, and disappeared into the trees. He did not reappear, and after hours of searching for him, I returned to the town centre, and told the town police. They looked for him that night, the next day, and for many days after that, but they could not find him, and I cannot say any more than that.”

So that was that. My friend had simply disappeared. Thinking back, I'm not at all sure how well I really knew him. We met at boarding school when we were both fifteen, but I saw him only infrequently after we left that dreadful prison. But I liked him, and I wish I knew what had happened to him.

LUIS SPANGLER

The trouble with Luis Spangler was that he was always trying to write a short story. It had to be a *perfect* short story, rather like the character in one of Sartre's novels, who is determined to write a *great work*, and so can never get beyond the first sentence, which he keeps on and on changing and improving.

And so, his little room was always messed up with sheets of paper everywhere, some hand-written, some half-typed, but never anything completed. If you visited him, and picked up one of these fluttering leaves, he would snatch it from you, insisting that it was still *unfinished*, and therefore not yet ready to be read.

But his failure ever to complete anything did not seem to depress Spangler. Once when I talked to him about this, he said he was not ambitious, and did not care if he never completed any of his stories. He just liked to write, he said. But on other occasions he expressed severe frustration with his predicament, talking incessantly about how unfair and arbitrary the publishing business was, and how a new, original writer never had the chance to get going unless he was rich or had friends in the right places.

One of the stories he was writing when I visited him once in his room, was about a man who was staying in a hotel in Geneva. The idea of the story was a dual theme: on the one hand the man, whom Luis called Eusebio, was writing a novel in his hotel room where he had been staying for several weeks, while on the other hand something was happening to him in real life that was equally as interesting as his novel. Eusebio's novel was about an exile from the Paraguayan dictatorship of the 1950s, called Ramirez, who went to live in Lima. This exile was a writer of historical novels that explored the mind-sets of Paraguay's nineteenth-century dictators, and the mentality of individuals from different social classes in Paraguay who lived under them. Eusebio had chosen to stay in a hotel in Geneva to write this novel, because he thought nothing much would happen to him there, since he knew no one in the city and he thought life would be quiet and calm, allowing him to write it.

But after some weeks, by which time he had completed the first chapter or two, taking the narrative up to the point where Ramirez had arrived at the house of some Paraguayan friends living in Lima, Eusebio became preoccupied with happenings within his Geneva hotel. One

evening, he heard a terrible quarrel going on between a man and a girl in the room next to him. He recognized the girl's voice as that of his neighbour. He had noticed for some days that an extremely attractive girl was staying in the room next to his, but was not sure where in the world she came from. Now, in the heat of this quarrel, he could hear that she was Latin American, shouting in French with a Spanish accent; but, he realized from her general deportment and appearance that she was not from Spain, but from Colombia perhaps, or Mexico.

The argument in the next room eventually drew to a close. The man slammed out, shouting, leaving the girl sobbing and crying for a long while after he left.

Eusebio felt drawn to acting as a gentleman. He genuinely felt he should find out if his neighbour needed some help or support, without any ulterior motive in his mind. So he went out of his room, and knocked on her door, which was only three or four metres away. The girl became silent, and opened the door. Eusebio, half in French and half in Spanish, asked the beautiful girl, with long black tousled hair and wide brown eyes filled with tears, whether he could help her in any way.

Probably because Eusebio must have looked absolutely distracted, as he was, having been interrupted in the middle of his imagining the arrival of Ramirez at the house of his dear friends, also exiles, in Lima, the girl asked him into her room, and calmed down. She invited him to a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. Eusebio chose the latter, much to the girl's obvious delight, and the two sat down to drink wine.

After a while the girl, whose name was Liliana, now much cheerier, told Eusebio of the dreadful sadness she felt about the man she had been arguing with, an Indonesian she had met in Istanbul, some months before arriving in Geneva. She said they had been very happily in love while in Turkey, but that since meeting again in Geneva things had not been going well. This Indonesian man, whose name Luis had not yet decided upon, had become very jealous and difficult with Liliana because, she felt, in Europe women are freer than in Turkey, and he had become very insecure and possessive.

All this was beginning to sound interesting to me, so I asked Spangler what was going to happen: would Eusebio and Liliana fall in love, and would Eusebio finish his novel about Ramirez? But at this point Luis ceased to talk freely. He became sullen, picked up some sheets of paper, shuffled around with them, then put them down elsewhere. After a while I started to feel tired, and as Eusebio had nothing to drink in his room, which was also really rather pokey, I felt it was time to go. If he had continued with the idea for his story I would have stayed, but the conversation was becoming moribund, so I said goodbye to him and left.

When I met him again a few weeks later, this time in the street, I asked him how his writing was going, and he was very positive in his reply. So I probed him about the story of Eusebio in Geneva, and of Liliana, and of Ramirez's exile in Lima.

But Spangler, in his usual infuriating way, acted as if he could not even remember the projected story, and changed the subject of our conversation to a new idea of his, about a Dutchman who had gone to live in Ecuador, and had met a Shuar Indian woman, with whom he was living in the

Ecuadorian jungle. I promised him I would come to visit him before long, and would bring a bottle of something, so that he could tell me about his latest brain-child. But some days later, when I went to drop in on him, I was told by his neighbours that he had moved from his room, though the landlord did not know where he now was.

I later found out he had gone to stay in a Buddhist retreat in Scotland. Years later, I met him by accident in Notting Hill, London, but by then he had stopped writing short stories, and was no longer interested in literature. He had become very involved in Buddhism, Sufism, and Theosophy, and had much to say of interest about these topics, but of his earlier obsession with literature there remained not a trace.

So I never found out what would have happened to Eusebio, Liliana, or Ramirez.

A VICTIM OF ‘OPERATION CONDOR’

A few years ago I visited a friend of mine called Marcio Lafoucrière in his flat in Edinburgh. Marcio was one of those people with marvellously mixed origins, a real ‘rootless cosmopolitan’ as Stalin would have called him. His mother was English, his father Swiss, but he had uncles and aunts who were Brazilian, Lebanese, and Australian, whilst among his grandparents one had been Turkish and another Malayan. Marcio was a journalist and an international political activist, well known in certain circles for his exposés of human rights abuses, and his defiant condemnations of bloody dictatorships and political injustices generally.

I had called on him while I was in Edinburgh for a few days, to see some photographs he had of the Nahua Indians from the eastern Peruvian rainforest, which he had taken at about the same time that I had been with them in the 1980s. Marcio, like me, had worked on behalf of Survival International and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs at that time, in connection with the problems and injustices that the Nahua were confronting, due to the encroachments of explorers searching for oil in their territory, which had hitherto been little disturbed by outsiders.

I had not seen Marcio Lafoucrière for at least ten years, but had heard from someone I knew at Survival International that he had these photographs, so I phoned him and arranged to visit him, bringing some of my own photos from the same period.

During the evening Marcio gave an account of tragic events he had experienced in Argentina in 1977. With us in his cosy living room was a middle-aged Paraguayan lady with attractive features, who greeted me with the usual South American easy-going friendliness, and manifested great interest in the photos Marcio and I showed each other, joining in wholeheartedly with our conversation about the Nahua. I did not catch her name when Marcio first introduced her to me, but I decided to leave it till later to ask what it was.

In due course the conversation moved on to other topics, and it was then that Marcio told me the following story that had me rivetted to my chair. His visitor and I said scarcely a word for about two hours.

In 1976, Marcio went to live in Asunción, Paraguay, and while there became very knowledgeable about the dictatorial regime of Alfredo Stroessner. If he had not been a journalist, I doubt whether he would have been able to settle there for as long a time as he did, for Stroessner's spies must surely have known the people he made friends with, who included dissidents and opponents of the regime. But, strangely, he was not in Paraguay as a political reporter, but rather as a writer on ecological matters and issues surrounding the construction of hydro-electric dams and things like that.

One of the people he had got to know was Agustín Manchuelo, a lawyer who had come face to face in the course of his work with murderous injustices perpetrated by the regime. When one client came to him because his brother had disappeared, Agustín identified the brother as a man who had turned up dead in the River Paraguay, tied up with wire. Shortly afterwards, a woman who reported to him that her husband was missing, met the same fate, whilst Agustín identified her husband as one of a number of corpses belonging to men thrown out of aeroplanes.

With incredible, straightforward courage Agustín Manchuelo tried to expose these crimes, but found no one was prepared to risk publishing his evidence. After a few months in this situation, he came to believe that his own life was in danger, so he decided, with the full agreement of his wife, to leave Paraguay with their two children, and escape to Argentina.

Marcio was very moved that Agustín had confided to him his decision to leave the country. He decided to go with the family, if they would agree to it: which they did, Agustín's wife Elba in particular believing it would be safer to have a foreign journalist with them.

So they left one night, very simply in the family car, and drove to Encarnación, a Paraguayan town on the border with Argentina. They had not decided whether to attempt to cross the border legitimately with documents, or whether to sneak across clandestinely. Agustín, Elba, and Marcio discussed this *ad infinitum* during the journey. In favour of the first option was that they would be legally in Argentina, and thus subject to whatever security the authorities of that country would offer. Agustín felt as well that his dignity would be greater if he left Paraguay in that fashion, rather than fleeing into exile.

But, if the border guards were expecting him, or if he was already on a list of people to be detained if they tried to cross the border, it would be all over.

Agustín's intuition told him that he had not yet become one of the blacklisted opponents of the regime. His naive attempts to get his evidence of state murders published were not without precedent; others had usually given up such efforts after a few scares to themselves or their families. And after all, he was not a member of any political party or organization.

Marcio was very worried for his friend. Why then, if these points were true, had Agustín felt his life was in danger in Asunción? Agustín answered to this by asserting that there were different

levels of the military and police intelligence agencies, and that the lower-level death squads might easily snuff out an individual before he or she entered the bumbling bureaucrats' nationwide black lists.

And so, with hearts secretly pounding, but not those of the children, the five of them went straight to the border post at Encarnación, early in the morning of December 19th 1976, and showed their passports. After giving replies to a few gruff but innocuous questions, they left the Paraguayan side, and reported at the Argentinian border post. Here too, they were let through with stamped passports without much equivocation, and the five of them drove into the Argentinian town of Posadas, and stopped at a bar to drink toasts to their success.

They quickly found an apartment to rent, and had settled in by Christmas Day. Marcio believed the family was safe, and was already beginning to plan either his return to Asunción or a trip to Switzerland to visit relatives. He talked a great deal to Agustín about what he and his family would do in Argentina, and how he and Agustín could best work together to publicize the abuses of the Stroessner regime.

But before Marcio had organized his departure from Posadas, an ominous and absurd event occurred. One very hot afternoon towards the end of January 1977, the whole family together with Marcio were sitting in their apartment, which was on the third floor of a six-floor building. They were talking about which school the Manchuelos' children should go to: Rolando was seven years old, Jazmín six.

Suddenly there was a great bashing at the door, and they all jumped up, but could see nothing because the shutters on all the windows in the wall where the front door was, were down. There were no voices, only a deliberate pounding to break the door down, which of course, was always kept locked with several bolts and padlocks. Immediately on moving into the apartment they had replaced the front door with a reinforced one, and all the windows were protected with tough iron bars.

Elba and the children bolted into the parents' bedroom, but Agustín and Marcio stayed in the living-room, with their backs to the opening into the other rooms, facing the crashing-in front door in terror. Splinters of broken wood flew, blades of axes or knives scythed through the green crumbling door, until the locked bolts and padlocks hung like useless broken tools from what remained of it. Four men lurched into the room, rushed towards Agustín and Marcio brandishing revolvers and knives; two of them smashed past them and finding Elba and the children in the bedroom, dragged them, everyone in silence, into the living room.

The thugs began to tie up all five of them, after gagging them first. Then something extraordinary happened. A huge and noisy clamour erupted from outside the apartment, with clearly a large number of men and women shouting extremely loudly: "Police! Police! This is a burglary! Get the police!"

As the Manchuelos and Marcio only learned later, their neighbours in the apartment building had heard and seen the violent break-in, and assumed it was an ordinary burglary. Sometimes neighbours might be trusted to ignore such an event, but one man, living on the same floor as the

Manchuelos, happened to be a policeman. Because of this, the neighbours in this particular block did not take kindly to burglaries in anyone's apartment, so the policeman's wife rushed out quickly to a public phone to call her husband at the nearby police station, whilst the other neighbours shouted angrily at the presumed burglars.

Evidently the intruders, of whatever agency they were, did not want to confront the ordinary police of Posadas. They dropped everything immediately, bounded out of the apartment and down the stairs into the street, then jumped into a car and drove off. But only three of them made it to the car! Just as the fourth was leaping through the broken green door of the apartment, seven-year old Rolando, with inconceivable adroitness, more than worthy of MacDuff's children defending their mother against MacBeth's gang of murderers, picked up his fishing rod that was leaning on the wall right beside the door, and threw it somehow like a javelin between the fleet legs of the fourth escaping man. This caused the man to trip and fall in a dreadfully hard encounter with the concrete floor outside the apartment, such that he groaned pitifully as he got up, then stumbled and hobbled down the stairs, and limped into the street to see his three colleagues make off in the car.

He had obviously hurt his legs quite badly, and probably his head, for he collapsed in the road rather than run away. Still lying face down on the stony, dusty street, the police arrived and bundled him into a police car which roared off immediately. Other policemen, including the Manchuelos' neighbour, came into the building to inspect the damage to the door and calm everyone down. These police were clearly very angry at the vehemence of the break-in, which they also took to be an ordinary burglary, in spite of the rope lying around which the attempted kidnappers had wanted to use on the Manchuelos and Marcio.

After this, the Manchuelos and Marcio did not know whether to feel safe or not in Posadas. Clearly, Stroessner's men knew where they were, but it was also clear that they did not want to confront the local police in Posadas, no matter what arrangements might exist between the dictatorships of Paraguay and Argentina on the clandestine level of secret intelligence agencies. The Manchuelos should have left Argentina altogether, because, as we now know, Operation Condor had been created in 1975 to coordinate, with CIA help and training, the repression of all opposition to the dictatorships in Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. Agustín had guessed these regimes were in cahoots, but he did not know the extent of the systematic repression now available to the regimes through Operation Condor.

Instead, they went to live in Córdoba, deeper into Argentina, away from the Paraguayan border, thinking they would be safer there. Marcio was not going to leave them now. On arrival in Córdoba they rented a suburban house, and life proceeded quite peacefully for several months. Agustín even began practising law again from his house, using one room as an office. The children started going to school in Córdoba, and all seemed well. Marcio turned his journalistic focus onto Argentinian affairs.

But the Big Thing was not long in coming. On September 23rd 1977, the children were at school, Elba was visiting friends, Marcio was reading in his room, and Agustín was in his office, alone, looking over some papers. Suddenly there was an enormous crash outside, and Agustín ran to the window, to see a huge rock plonked on the bonnet of his car, while a large group of

young teenagers were running off down the street. He rushed outside to look at the damage, but was immediately coshed over the head by a man hiding behind a tree. Five other men appeared from a van and the six of them easily dragged Agustín over to it, in full sight of passers-by. Unfortunately Marcio's room was at the back of the house, so although he rushed straight to the front door and out into the street the moment he heard the crash, he arrived a few seconds after Agustín, by which time the latter was in the van and the abductors were racing him off.

Agustín Manchuelo was one of many victims of Operation Condor in the Southern Cone of South America during those years. He was never seen again, all authorities denying any knowledge of him. Only in 1992, when the so-called "Archives of Horror" were released in Asunción, could it be shown that he had been kidnapped and later murdered by agents of Paraguayan Intelligence working in partnership with Argentinian Intelligence.

And so now, as Marcio came to the conclusion of this awful story, I somehow remembered that he had introduced me to the lady in his flat as Elba Manchuelo. So, she was poor Agustín's widow, and I could now see in her face, though still attractive, lines that expressed a seething pain and grief that only the widow of a man done to death in such a way can know.

After her husband's disappearance, Elba Manchuelo had come to live first in Holland, then Britain. Now she was settled in Edinburgh, where her children had gone through the largest part of their education. Rolando, now thirty, lived in London and worked with various NGOs, but at that moment he was with Survival International. Jazmín was married to a Belgian and lived in Antwerp.

Was it an accident that Elba and Marcio had both ended up living in Edinburgh, I asked? Yes, it was more or less an accident they agreed, but a very pleasant one.

JOANNA

When a beautiful girl knocks at the door of your hotel, and you open it, not knowing who it will be, and there she is standing with a lovely smile, what else could a man do but invite her in? Especially if this is in South America, and the hotel is quite a reasonable one; this is what happened one evening to Marcus Kitson, who was staying in just such a hotel in Asunción, Paraguay, and was resting on his bed, wondering whether to go out for a drink, at about eleven thirty one Tuesday evening in April.

He had been in Asunción one week so far, to study the history and present circumstances of popular art in Paraguay, having a particular interest in pottery, but also in textiles and woodwork. As anyone who has spent any time in Paraguay knows, he was in the ideal place, for artisanal work of the highest quality is produced here, with a rich history of development from the original indigenous peoples of the country and from the Jesuits, among other fascinating influences.

The girl who stood at his door had very bright brown eyes and dark black hair, and when she moved a fraction, her face revealed a wonderfully Indian profile, her nose and mouth strongly reminding Marcus of portraits and drawings of Guaraní Indian women done during the period of the Conquest and in Colonial times.

The girl came in, and she and Marcus sat down at his table. Was she a *chica de programa*, or had she come to his door by mistake he wondered, as he offered her a drink, which she accepted? Marcus also took a stiff drink of *caña*, neat with ice, and within a very short time they were

getting on like house on fire; soon he was tempted to kiss her beautiful lips, and as she smiled so deliciously at this, he suggested they go to bed.

Many hours later, after making sweet, paradisaical love, and falling asleep into luscious dreams in between, the girl got up and started to put her clothes on. She had to go, she said. Still half asleep, Marcus asked her if she would come back, and she said perhaps, but then with tears in her eyes, explained that she had some problems to sort out.

“What kind of problems?” asked Marcus. “My sister has trouble with her young son, my nephew,” the girl explained. Before continuing further, Marcus asked her to tell him her name again, realizing that he had asked her what it was before, but had forgotten it.

Her name was Joanna, and the problem regarding her nephew was that his mother, Joanna’s sister, had discovered something very bad that the boy had done the afternoon before. “What did he do?” asked Marcus, and Joanna told him all about how the boy had found a wounded bird, with a broken wing, and had thrown it into the street to get run over by a bus.

Had his mother seen this happen? Marcus asked. No, replied Joanna, a neighbour had seen it, and had told her sister. So what can you do about it now? Marcus asked Joanna. “I don’t know,” she answered, still in tears. “But I must go to see what I can do to help.”

So she finished putting on her clothes, gave Marcus a lovely kiss, and left the hotel room. Dawn was now streaking its pink and red colours outside the window, so Marcus poured himself another stiff drink, and enjoyed the dawn. Then he lay down on his bed again, and fell asleep. He dreamt of superb birds in the jungle and of flowers bursting into colour on the banks of a river. It was afternoon when he awoke, and he wondered whether what had happened was real, or just a dream.

LUDES

There was a girl who worked in a bar in Concepción, Paraguay, called Ludes, which is a Guaraní name, though she spoke both Guaraní and Spanish. She lived in a village about seven kilometres outside Concepción, with her family of four brothers and two sisters, as well of course, as her mother and father. Really they were a *campesino* family, her father working as a hired hand on an *hacienda*, though Ludes had worked for seven years in this bar, called La Victoria, since she was sixteen.

The bar was a very pleasant one, open till two or three in the morning, serving beer, caña, even wine, as well as *empanadas*, hamburgers, various grilled meats, and also olives and fried chipped potatoes. Ludes was one of those very mixed Paraguayans, partly Spanish, partly Indian, and partly African, who seem to concentrate, with complete lack of self-consciousness, the most beautiful characteristics of these three types into their being, making her an essentially beautiful girl, with apparently no pretensions nor competitive sophistications, such as one can only meet in places like Concepción, or elsewhere in semi-rural South America.

There came to La Victoria one night a man from Sandwich, England, who was making his way up the River Paraguay from Asunción to Corumbá, in order to study the Pantanal, that expanse of extraordinary and beautiful flooded land that lies to the north of Concepción. His name was Tristan, for his parents had been very romantic, unusual people, and he, though not as flamboyant as his mother had been, was a man with a grand imagination, and although he was

not arrogant enough to think he could single-handedly stop the environmental deterioration of the Pantanal, he was young and idealistic enough to hope that he might somehow join in with those forces that were concerned about the Pantanal's future, and hoped that this trip would bring him into contact with just such people.

Tristan was staying at a hotel near to La Victoria, called Hotel del Sol, and had come to La Victoria to get drunk on wine, as he had noticed that this bar, unusually, served wine, and he was most definitely in the mood to 'drink from the divine grape'.

After quaffing two bottles of red Mendoza wine, Tristan lent back in his white plastic chair, but began to feel it was crumpling beneath him. Indeed, one leg was stretching amiss, sliding badly outwards, and he would assuredly have crunched to the ground had not Ludes noticed the problem, and come to prevent the collapse. She recommended Tristan change seat, and pulled out a different kind of white plastic chair, upon which Tristan started once again to relax vigorously. She asked him where he was from, what he was doing in Concepción, how long he had been in Paraguay, and whether he was married. When Tristan replied "No" to the last question, she asked him if he had a sweetheart, and once again Tristan replied "No", but this time added, due perhaps to the wine he had consumed, "Would you like to be my sweetheart?"

Ludes smiled lovelily. The bar would close shortly she said, and where would Tristan sleep? Tristan explained that he had a room in a hotel that was very near. "Would you like to come back with me?" he asked as politely as he could. "Yes," said Ludes, and after she had sorted out her affairs with the bar owner, they left quietly, and walked some yards along the quiet, dusty, hot, dark street, towards the Hotel del Sol.

The receptionist at the hotel was most friendly, and with key in hand they went into Tristan's room. After a little talking, they went to bed and made love, very softly and deliciously. Afterwards, while resting, they heard some talking rise from the street below the room, so Tristan went to the window to see what it was, and Ludes explained that it was the hotel receptionist, with some other people, reading from the Bible in Guaraní.

"In the middle of the night?" wondered Tristan aloud. "Oh yes, they can read the Bible for hours and hours, at any time," replied Ludes. So Tristan came back to the bed, and they made love again.

A MAN FELL IN CORUMBÁ

A man fell into the water supply system in Corumbá. He was alone, working on some equipment, so no one saw him when he fell. He could not be pulled out when he was found, as he was crunched into the machinery. Some of his remains were withdrawn many weeks later in a state of advanced putrefaction.

DARK CITY

A few weeks ago I was walking, with no particular purpose in mind, around the dark area of the city. The buildings here were all large; grim warehouses and factories formed grey silhouettes against a smoky cold sky. I stumbled upon one building which held my interest especially, so that I stood facing it in silence for some time. It was a large Victorian building, which I somehow knew was a school or an institution of some sort. It is difficult to say why it engaged me so, but its sombre appearance cast an unpleasant spell over me.

I could not see inside the building, for those windows which had a light burning within had curtains drawn across them. But then I caught a glimpse of two faces which appeared in one of the dark windows; a small girl and boy were looking at me with pallid faces. In some way I knew instantaneously that something strange and horrible was being done to them in this building. Yet they stared at me hopelessly, as if I, an outsider to their world, could not help them at all.

The faces disappeared. When I turned to move on, I felt it was already decided that I must do something about the children in the building. Before long I was in another house with Marlene

and a group of men I did not know, discussing the children in what now had clearly become a boarding-school in my mind. The men, four or five of them, were all thick-set with rough unsmiling faces. They behaved brusquely and might have made me uneasy had not the gravity of the situation been so pressing on my mind. Yet they all showed a sincere, solid concern for the children, for which I was most thankful.

A plan had developed in my mind, which I explained to my companions. My idea was to go to the school one night and rescue some of the children; I hoped especially to find the two I had seen in the window. We would then take them somewhere safe where we could soothe them and relieve them of their fear and unhappiness. Once our actions had come to the attention of the authorities and the public, we would demand that conditions in the school be exposed and then improved before we would reveal the whereabouts of the children. At first the men were dubious about my plan, saying it was too risky. But I persuaded them of its necessity, and preparations were made.

On the night of the rescue operation, we made our way with a heavy ladder through unlit streets to the place where I had seen the building. At times I thought I had forgotten the way, but soon we would come across a landmark that let me know we were going in the right direction. It was just as I was having such doubts, that we turned a corner and stood facing the building, as I had the first time. I pointed to it in silence, and we crept past an open gate, over an unkempt lawn, to stand under the window where I had seen the two children before, though I did not bother to check if they were there now.

We opened out the ladder, and it just reached the window sill, as I had correctly judged. In well-controlled trepidation, I started to ascend the ladder. One step after another, almost no noise - the house did not stir. When I was half-way up I glanced down; my companions were looking up concernedly and one of them was holding the ladder secure. I continued up - past the first floor windows with drawn curtains, on to the second floor. My head topped the window sill; I looked into the black window. Two pairs of eyes flashed at me calm and unmoving. The children were where they had been the time before.

I signalled to them to open the window for me. For a second they did not move, and in that second strange ideas whipped through my mind. Perhaps they would run away and tell the authorities I was there? Or perhaps they were mentally retarded or for some reason unable to respond to me. It even occurred to me that they might push my ladder backwards before I had had a chance to get over the window sill.

But my fears were unnecessary. After a motionless second, they quickly and efficiently opened the window and helped me inside. I found myself in a musty room; the floor was of uncovered planks, coarse and dusty. Big pipes crossed the room high up, on which towels hung. Otherwise there was no furniture. I could not see what colour the walls were, but the paint was peeling off in places.

I leant outside and signalled to one of my companions to come up, which he did. I handed him first one child, then the other, and he passed them down to someone who had followed him up the ladder. The children seemed quite unafraid.

Then I went across the room to the door. I opened it. I went into a dark corridor much like the room I had left. Quietly and slowly I walked along it, warily looking around me and ready to run back to the ladder if need be.

I came across a door on the same side of the corridor as the first room. I opened it cautiously; there seemed to be no response from within, so when the door was open about a foot I put my head inside the room. It was dark, and all I saw was a bed under the window, on which four children were seated. There seemed to be no one else there, so I quickly went over to the children, and whispered:

“Don’t be frightened, I’ve come to take you somewhere nice.”

I took the hands of two of them and tugged them in the direction of the door. After a little hesitation all four of them came. I took them straight back to the first room, and decided to leave the operation with six rescued.

Back by the escape window, I handed three of the children out to the man on the ladder, but then found the fourth had disappeared. I rushed back to the door and looked into the corridor; I saw nothing but imagined I heard a sound. Without waiting to identify it I bounded back to the window and slithered down the ladder. By the speed of my descent the others guessed there was no time to lose; by the time I got to the bottom they were already in the street. I ran after them, leaving the ladder behind. We sped away as fast as we could, each of us holding and almost dragging a child, until we got to where we had a van parked. We heard no sound nor took sight of anyone following us, but once in the van, drove off in all possible haste.

We took the children to a mill in the country that we had rented in preparation for the escapade. It was a small isolated building, hidden among trees and served only by a narrow track. The children were quiet and uncommunicative, but quite compliant. We fed them and tried to make them feel comfortable, telling them about the happy things they would be able to do during their stay with us. I felt sure that, subdued though they now were, a glimmer of warmth had entered the looks in their eyes.

The following day, about ten days ago now, we arranged to have anonymous letters sent to various authorities and the press, explaining the kidnapping and making certain demands which would have to be fulfilled before we would bring the children forward. The next few days were spent caring for and getting to know the children while we waited for a reply to our letter, which was to be left posted on a public notice-board in the city where many people passed by every minute.

Three days ago, about a week after we had taken the children to the mill, I went to the notice-board, but no reply had yet appeared. When I returned to the mill, I entered to find my companions in the kitchen altogether. They looked at me with strange, stern expressions.

“The boy - what’s his name? Ronnie!” said one of them.

“Well?” I asked, standing still by the door, feeling something was very wrong.

“He’s dead. We killed him.”

I looked in horror from one face to the other, but there were no changes of expression, and none of them said a thing. I rushed out of the room and went up the stairs. Half-way up I met Marlene, whose face was fearful and white.

“They’ve killed Ronnie?” I barely managed to utter. She nodded.

“It must have been an accident!” I said, but she shook her head slowly and said quietly:

“No, no.”

The ghastliness of the situation hit me at last. I thought very quickly and rationally. If these men were brutal murderers, they would have no qualms about killing Marlene and me if they thought we were against them. If I was to stay alive and inform the outside world, the only way was to let them believe I did not object to their action. I went back to the kitchen, trying to seem composed. All eyes were on me while I tried to give the impression that I was still with them, but I tried not to seem overly friendly. They asked me lots of questions about what I thought should be done, obviously testing me out. I tried to guess what they had in mind, in order to answer them in ways that might convince them of my harmlessness. I gathered they thought everyone should stay indoors in the mill, so I eagerly declared how necessary it was that no one leave it.

After a day or so, I felt my position was fairly secure, and that they trusted I was with them. I looked for an opportunity to leave the mill. I had to have a reason, as it had been agreed that we should always stay two or more in the same room, lest anyone should try to go. At last my excuse came when we needed some food, and it was realized that we had very little cash left. I have a cheque-book, so I casually suggested I go to buy food and pay for it by cheque.

For a second it seemed that my idea had aroused no suspicion, but then the children, who had sat pale and quiet in the corner ever since Ronnie’s death, quickly said:

“If you’re going out, please let our parents know we are here!”

In that instant the murderers looked at me, with terrifying suspicion and madness suddenly in their eyes. I tried to allay their suspicion by shouting at the children:

“No, I will not tell them. I don’t care a damn about you!”

But this had no effect; the murderers’ doubts about me had been prodded into being.

I pressed no further the idea of my excursion to the food shop, and they have not mentioned it, even though we have run short of certain supplies. During the last two days their suspicion of me has not decreased, and I have not been out of their sight for an instant.

I must get to the outside world before my companions kill another child. The keys to our van are on the wardrobe in a room upstairs; I do not dare touch them unless I have a real opportunity to run to the van and escape. But if I do manage to escape I will not be able to take Marlene or the children with me, because they are always in different rooms due to our companions' suspicions. And if I get away alone, won't they have hurt Marlene or the children by the time I get in contact with the authorities?

JOHN MCQUEEN

One summer's evening, John McQueen was walking through a park, a nice space of green with a dark blue sky above, gently twinkling with half-blinking stars, when someone came up to him. He jerked, very surprised, to see an old woman stand before him, with a haggard but strangely smiling face, and eyes that had a look as if he was obliged to answer her, before she had even spoken.

"Well, what do you want?" he said.

"Oh sir, I'm sorry to trouble you, but can you spare me a moment, to show me out of this park?" she asked.

"Well, I think the way out is straight along this path, where I am going myself," he replied.

The woman turned around and shuffled off, a black shawl wriggling around her unpleasant shoulders, her squawking voice still rasping through his ears. He started to step on, less happily than before, to reach the exit of the park; he turned left, then right, to arrive at his first floor flat, at 39 Hampton Close, where his wife and nine year-old daughter would be waiting for him.

He got home, and his wife Julia gave him a lovely kiss; then after kissing his daughter Giola in her sleep, he went to bed with his wife and seemed to sleep quite well, until, at some hour in the middle of the night, when all was still dark, he woke up abruptly. It seemed to him that a sound had startled him, but he was not sure what it was; he got up, put on his dressing-gown, and went into the living-room. Crouched by the sofa, still and quiet, was someone; and he shuddered without knowing why.

“Who’s that?” he shouted in a whisper. There was no reply, nor movement, but he was rivetted to his spot, even though the rational side of his mind told him it must be merely a shadow, an illusion, which would disappear in a moment.

And it did disappear. The movement of one involuntary inch of his head, showed him there was no one there, so he began to walk back to the bedroom. But the moment he passed the threshold of that room he heard strange sounds in his mind, of twinkling bells parodying Christmas, of horses and carts and greedy bulls, of angry fathers shouting at children.

He stopped for a moment again, but then went to bed and fell sound asleep.

A few weeks passed, perfectly uneventful and happy, until one night John McQueen again felt he had awoken in a sweating trance, but he had not; he was this time dreaming. In his dream he entered a cave, up to whose edge the turquoise sea bashed its waves; in there he encountered several figures, how many he could not count, dancing feverishly all around, their silhouettes wavering against the walls, a fire burning and sending its dangerous sparks into the air, the sunlight from outside streaming through the crackling, smoking space.

John could not speak, though it would not have helped him if he could, as these dancing forms would not have cared what he said, nor understood, even if they had heard him. Suddenly one turned around and confronted his face very close up, terrifyingly, with an ugly howl and a maniacal expression, his or her mouth opening to reveal foul pointed teeth, like those of a vampire.

“Give us your daughter!” the ghastly thing declared.

“No,” yelled John McQueen, for a moment firm, but then trembling like the hovering leaves and dust caught in the sunlight in the crackling cave.

Two or three more faces approached him, some sticking out their tongues, and when so near one of them seemed about to lick his nose, they all repeated: “Give us your daughter!”

“What would you take instead?” he asked.

“All your gold, your possessions, your life, and all your soul.”

“But I have no gold,” he quaked, wondering at his own remark.

“Then give your wife, Julia!” replied the hellish forms, all approaching even nearer to his quivering face.

“I will give neither Giola nor Julia!” he screamed.

“Then we will boil your heart, and roast your corpse upon this fire, after we have extracted it. Do you see this?” asked one, holding up a black fork with five prongs, and moving it towards John McQueen’s nose as if it would be jabbed into his nostrils.

“Why do you want my heart?” asked John McQueen.

“Because we wish to eat it, as you have never given it to anybody before, you are so selfish and greedy.”

“Then take my heart, and boil it to eat, but leave my wife and daughter alone!” he screeched, knowing that these vile beings would not listen nor care about anything he said.

So they did take it, in front of his own eyes: he was thrust down, and held against some rocks. With the black fork one of them pierced his chest, dragged out his irregularly palpitating heart, and flung it into a pot. He saw it fall, and was completely amazed that it took him several seconds to die.

Now that might have been an end to it, but it was not. When John McQueen woke up, this time without his irregularly beating heart, but seemingly fully alive, he found the bed next to him was empty. He jumped up, rushed around the flat, but nobody was there. He made himself a cup of coffee, and after taking one tasteless sip, he dialled 1571 on his telephone.

“This is BT call-minder. Thank you for calling. You have one new message.”

John McQueen pressed button One.

“We don’t want to live with you anymore,” spoke the voice of his wife. “You can contact us at Gerusala’s house.” Bang, click.

Who was Gerusala? Ah, yes, Julia’s distant cousin, just returned from Spitzbergen, living in a new house thirteen blocks away.

“Fine,” thought John, “but where will Giola go to school?”

He pulled out an unopened two-litre bottle of Spanish brandy, and began to drink it.

It was after this that strange things really began to happen. Many weeks later, still in something of a hang-over, John McQueen decided to sell his hi-fi, his suit, his silver spoons and his 'cello, from whose sale he gained £147.

With this he bought a one-way air ticket to Gdansk, the Polish city on the Baltic Sea, and visited a friend of his called Gisela. Gisela was a magnificent artist, and a marvellous woman, very intelligent, though not beautiful in any conventional sense. John stayed in her flat on the nineteenth floor of a Stalinist tower block, overlooking a car park on one side and lines of washing on the other. Dawn broke beautifully on the one side, dusk smashed its ecstasies from the other. And the sea was not far away!

Here he drank a great deal of vodka, Pan Tadeusz *wódka* to be precise, much better than any vodka you can buy in the West. Gisela's painting woke him up to such a beautiful perception, such glorious colourful happiness, that John really wondered if he ever wanted to leave Gdansk. Gisela took him to the church where Lech Walesa had developed his heroic thoughts of struggle through *Solidarnosc*, in conversations with a radical priest; and he went with her to superb art museums, bars where artists met, and wonderful villages in the countryside where people were so friendly.

After some time however, he started to think about, and miss with something like an illness in his colon, his absent heart, his lungs, and his stomach, Giola, his nine year-old daughter, who by now must have become ten. He thought of jumping from the veranda of Gisela's nineteenth-floor flat smash to the ground; of rushing into the freezing sea and sinking under the green water and marvellously grey-clouded sky; of lingering as he crossed a road to allow a juggernaut to crush his body and skull into the asphalt; or best of all, to get a German pistol - a Luger - with which to shoot his useless brains out of his tired skull.

But he realized that such a course of action would be cowardly; how could he do anything for his beloved daughter if he was dead, no matter where he ended up? And how ungrateful that would be to Gisela, after all the kindness she had shown him! So instead he went to a music bar one night, got very drunk, and most surprisingly met a gorgeous Polish girl called Magdalena. He went with her to stay in a hotel room, and realized why mad Parisians, and Napoleon Bonaparte, had thought Polish women were especially wonderful.

However, he was running out of money, if not luck yet. So he decided to see if he could find a boat that he could work on in some capacity, which would leave from Gdynia, the port near Gdansk.

He was extraordinarily lucky to be taken on as an English tutor on a cruise ship that was bound for Gibraltar, the Canary Islands, and Senegal. At the second destination, remembering his history of Christopher Columbus, he jumped ship, and slept on a beach for three months. After this, he took a job as a barman, and after working for a year, had saved enough money to leave the islands.

This was when some even stranger events began to unfold for John McQueen. One day he saw a rather old motor boat, with a placard on it saying FOR SALE. He bought the boat, impulsively, and made plans to sail in it to the coast of Portugal or Africa, whichever one he happened to arrive at first. A few days later, without telling any of the people he had got to know on the Canary Islands, he set off in an easterly direction, with plenty of food and fresh water.

He chugged along quite well for many days, under a glorious blue sky, feeling like Díaz de Solís, or Magellan, or Cabral, until he entered an ungodly squall, which caused his boat to capsize. Flailing about in the water, he saw the face of a hag that reminded him of those beings he had met in the cave in his nightmare a long time before, and of the old woman who had accosted him in the park some weeks before that; and she said, rather as those others had done eons before:

“Give me your brain, as I already have your heart, your wife, and your daughter!”

“Okay, have it!” said John. And she took it, with a scoop of her magical hand, instantly and remorselessly, and this time he had not even one second in which to observe his own death.

CHANGING ONE’S IDENTITY

It was not clear, one December morning, why exactly Douglas Crabbe decided to change his name to Johannes Schulter, yet that is what he did. He immediately proceeded to make this change official and legal, so that when he arrived at his office, on December 17th at nine o’clock in the morning, he calmly but jubilantly announced that from now on his name was none other than Johannes Schulter.

“But why?” asked one secretary, already seated at her desk, in front of her computer.

Douglas, now Johannes, did not answer, but rather made his way to his own desk in the open-plan office.

A friend of Johannes' (and out of respect for him we must now call him by his desired name), was fast asleep far away in Colombia, as there it was six hours earlier. This friend's name was Ricardo, and though Johannes had e-mailed him to inform him of the name-change, he (Ricardo) could not know that his friend had at this moment declared his new identity.

When Ricardo woke up, at about eleven o'clock local time, he did not get up and rush off to work, as he had no job to go to. He lay where he had slept, in a small house in the town of Ibague, and wondered what he should do that day. Ricardo had been born on the north coast of Colombia, in a village near Santa Marta, but had come to Ibague five years earlier because he thought he could find a job there, as a chef. He was a good chef, but he had not been able to find a permanent job in a reasonable restaurant or hotel in Ibague, and he felt ashamed to return to his village empty-handed and with no success to report. And so, he was sleeping on the floor of a cousin's flat, unsure what at all to do.

Ricardo gazed out of the window, and enjoyed the sight of a beautiful bird settling on a tree, until at last he was inspired to grasp a sheet of paper and a biro, and he started to write a poem:

O colourful bird
How happy you seem
Do you see me, weird,
Dreaming in a stream?

Ricardo started to think of his friend Johannes, so far away, and decided to go to an internet café to send him an e-mail. But as he got up, his cousin's dog rushed at him and bit his right ankle, so he sank back upon the ground and nursed the minor wound. Once it had stopped hurting, he found another verse of the poem coming to his mind, so he wrote that down too:

O my friendly bird,
Is your life difficult?
Do you find it absurd,
Or is it just insult?

Ricardo lay back, wondering whether these two verses constituted an entire poem, or whether they were merely the first two stanzas of what should develop into a longer one.

Now Ricardo was not someone regarded by the world as a poet, but he often penned poems, and felt, because he came from a part of Colombia where great literature had been produced, that he should persist in his poetic vocation, whether anyone took any notice of his efforts or not.

Ricardo's mother was a nurse who worked in a hospital in the outskirts of Santa Marta; his father had been a fisherman, but was now retired, because he suffered from a number of physical ailments. Ricardo had never had any money worth talking about, but he was not one of the very

poor of Colombia. Rather, he was bored; bored with nothing happening, though he did not want to go to another country as many of his acquaintances did: to Spain, or England, or the U.S.A. He was quite patriotic in his way, and felt these countries would not provide the answers to his soul's yearnings.

Ricardo had met Douglas, now Johannes, in a night-club near Santa Marta. Johannes had very much enjoyed the music being played by the band there, which Ricardo knew, as some of the musicians were his friends. He and Johannes kept in touch when the latter returned to his own country, and Ricardo hoped Johannes would return to Colombia one day.

Suddenly Ricardo had a brave thought! He pulled on his clothes, ran out of the house down to the river, and dived headlong into it. He swam under the water, and after some time he surfaced, but no longer as a man, but as a dolphin! He had turned into a dolphin, and now he knew he could stay in the river for as long as chance or destiny allowed him to stay alive; and although thereafter he occasionally felt sorrowful that he had never again communicated with Johannes, he felt much happier, though he often thought with affection about his former friend.

LET'S BOMB IRAQ

Once there was a boy called Juniper, who had grown up in Tasmania, but his parents moved to live in Singapore when he was eleven, and then they all went to Bristol, in England. His father was an engineer, who was very conscious that a great-great-aunt of his had been one of the last aborigines to survive in Tasmania. He hoped that by taking a job in England he might be able to help in the effort to persuade British museums that held relics from traditional indigenous

Tasmanian communities to yield them up, and allow their return to Tasmania.

When the family arrived in Bristol, they went to live in a modern house on the outskirts of town. Within three years the father had died of stomach cancer, so Juniper's mother moved with her only child to Gosling, a village a few miles away. Juniper attended a local school, and afterwards went to Birmingham University.

During his period of study of political science, Juniper met a Palestinian girl called Amal, who was also a student, but of agronomy, with whom he fell deeply in love; and he wanted to marry her. The couple decided to wait until they had graduated before getting married, but at the very moment they were taking their Finals the Prime Minister declared it was necessary to go to war against Iraq.

Neither Juniper nor Amal agreed with this idea of making war with Iraq. They felt that wars had solved little in the past, and were justified only in cases of resistance to invasions by huge and wicked powers like Nazi Germany, and had only given the world acres of cemeteries criss-crossed with white gravestones, graves of young men of twenty or twenty-two or twenty-four, who might otherwise have married, had children, and lived normal lives. Instead they had been machine-gunned and crumpled down as pieces of meat, thus to demonstrate the Second Law of Thermodynamics: that once the miracle of life has left them, bodies, minds, and souls merely decay into the greater entropy of nature. Besides they thought, this problem with the government of Iraq: was there no better way to resolve it?

One day they went to a demonstration against the threatened war. They marched along with the banners of their University's "Campaign Against War" contingent, but as they came to its conclusion Amal fainted, probably because she had been up all night swatting for a viva on crop management. The police swooped in, thinking trouble was afoot, and rushed her into a police van. Juniper ran after her, and a policeman smacked him over the head with a truncheon.

Juniper entered a coma, and when Amal recovered from her faint, she found him in a hospital. He might not recover, the doctors said. Just as Amal left the hospital, praying that he would recover, she heard a hospital janitor's radio-set announce:

"American and British warplanes have today begun to bomb Iraq."

A STUNTSMAN

Daniel was a stuntman, who was naturally drawn to danger, although before taking a leap into dangerous circumstances, he required to work up a huge volume of energy, rather as the 'miracle of life' requires enormous quantities of energy to persist, and only operates because even huger amounts of entropy, disorganization, and chaos are rendered by its every advance.

But people did not realize this, thinking that he was a mere dare-devil, when with disarming smile he dived from a high tower into an aquarium, or drove a racing car into a brick wall.

“You love danger!” a girlfriend once said to him.

“You obviously enjoy your dangerous antics,” another one proclaimed. But they had not quite understood him.

Actually, Dariel felt intense fear and anxiety before he did his tricks; he loved everything afterwards, but only for a short while.

The reason he had assumed his profession was that he felt he was given to do little else. He could not bear routine; he could not work in a regular kind of job. And he believed that as his stunts entertained a public, this made his vocation worthwhile; he felt it was his destiny to do what he did.

He liked to imagine that Shakespeare had also worked himself up into a frenzy before he wrote his plays: his power coming not from the clear blue sky, but from some internal mad strength that overcame his inhibitions and reservations, blasting all constraints from his path as liberated streams of fantastical words poured from his teeming brain. Or Einstein he thought, must have accumulated some psychic force like a nuclear explosion, in order to imagine the mind-bending realities his mathematics seemed to push him towards. And as for Mozart! What kind of slowly releasing ‘Big Bang’ or ‘Spontaneous Generation Of Life’ must have been hidden beneath *his* surface, Dariel could hardly begin to grasp.

But one day his capacity to build up within himself the necessary charge of focused courage and dementia failed him, just before he was due to parachute out of a helicopter over a bush-fire in Australia, dressed in a fire-proof suit. He made the jump anyway, but felt as blood-bleached as a child at his first day of school; afterwards while resting in a hotel room he sank into a reverie and began to imagine various events in his childhood, with a clarity as sharp as if he were watching a film, or even as if he were right there again, experiencing everything in hallucinogenic clarity.

One of these memories, or re-experiences, was of a time when he was nine years old.

“Don’t!” his grandfather had hissed, as Dariel moved his hand toward a red coal in the fire-place. His family had been very much a male-dominated one, with four brothers besides him; all five sons and their father had constantly argued and shouted at one another, though periodically they would calm down and be quite friendly.

His mother ultimately had the last word in the household; when she raised her voice just slightly all the brothers and their father would fall into silence, and halt their hideous aggressions. Once the sons had reached their teens, the mother was shorter, smaller, and more frail than them all, yet *her* word always prevailed.

On the occasion when Dariel had tried to touch the red-hot coal, his grandfather had told his

brothers about it, and they informed their father. There was an unholy row when the family met for their evening meal, until Mother picked up an egg cup and threw it into the fire-place, and all became instantly silent.

“I’ll have no more of this,” she yelled.

Dariel remembered a searing pain ripping through his stomach and chest, a heaviness and hopeless weariness that from time to time had invaded his being from then on throughout his life. Although the quarrel ended, and soon the whole family was playing an amusing word game that everyone enjoyed, something of these moments stuck within him. It was a flavour, or smell of this, that embroiled and impaled him now as he lay on the bed in that hotel room in Australia. He used a certain technique of self-persuasion to emancipate himself from his condition of dread, and shortly got up to join others at the hotel bar.

No one there realized that he had gone through any particular crisis that day, and he said nothing about it. After a few gins and tonic he relaxed and nearly forgot about it; at least, for a while.

JIFFNEY’S BLEEDING

Jiffney was not supposed to upset his parents. If he was rejected from a sport’s team at his school, he was not to talk about it, not to complain, and not to display unhappiness. If he did, his father would tell him to grow up, be a bit braver, and not be so selfish.

One day Jiffney arrived a few minutes late for an arithmetic test at his school. Partly because he did not have the full time permitted to do the test, and partly because he was worked up into a stew by making such a mistake, he did less well in it than he might have done. When the results were given out, he felt like bursting into tears, but he held them back, until he got home where he sobbed and sobbed.

“Well, it was your own fault,” shouted his father. “What were you doing, why did you arrive late?” he asked.

“I was day-dreaming,” answered Jiffney. “I was in the playground and I just didn’t hear the bell.”

“You have only yourself to blame,” said his mother.

Life dribbled along in this kind of way for an apparent eternity. Then one day, on the way back from school, Jiffney had a scuffle with another schoolboy in a building site, where he fell on some sharp, broken bricks that cut his leg and arm. When he got home, there was quite a lot of blood on him, but his mother was kind, and tried to soothe him. She was hanging from the ceiling, as she sometimes did, her feet attached to it so that her face was further from the ground than when she stood upright in the ordinary way. Like this her face was higher up than Jiffney’s father’s, who was standing normally in the kitchen next to her. When the father started to scold Jiffney, for the first time ever his mother took Jiffney’s side.

“Can’t you see he’s bleeding?” Jiffney’s mother asked her husband crossly.

“It’s his fault,” bawled the father, then turned to Jiffney and yelled:

“Don’t upset your mother! How dare you come back covered in blood!”

“I’m sorry,” whimpered Jiffney. “I didn’t mean to do it.”

“Didn’t mean to do what? Bleed, or upset your mother?” the father persisted.

“Neither,” replied Jiffney, dripping tears from his face.

“Stop it now,” shouted Jiffney’s mother at the father, raising her face higher up as she bent from her upside down position.

The father stormed out of the room, and Jiffney’s mother scuttled across the ceiling, grabbed a cloth, soaked it in cold water, then reached down to wash the blood off Jiffney’s leg and arm.

Jiffney felt happier than he could ever remember feeling. But the sensation did not last long, as he realized very soon that far greater miseries with his father lay in waiting for him now.

ANDREW DICK

As soon as I was there, I wondered why I'd come. I was in a corridor of my old school,

watching the door of my fourth form classroom loom up closer and closer. In fact, I did not remember having planned, or rather having agreed to come, but I had the feeling that I was obliged to go through the door - that the people with me would never accept that I had changed my mind. Then it suddenly occurred to me that there wasn't anyone with me, so I turned and began to walk back with a slow confident stride that I had often used to leave a situation I was terrified with.

But then one of them said:

“Oh no, you can't get out of it like that. Normally it would work very well - a very convincing appearance of certainty and confidence, the sort of act that could get you past a patrol if you were dressed as one of their soldiers. But don't forget, this time we can read your mind.”

I turned round again as if I was unconcerned, and tried to say something to the effect that I had no intention of leaving, but had suddenly thought that the door we should have been entering was at the other end of the corridor. But it came out as an absurd babble. For a second I was comforted by the thought that if they could read my mind they would have understood what I wanted to say even though I had said it incomprehensibly. But then I realized that of course they also knew everything else that I was thinking and knew therefore that my excuse was a lie. Then I thought, can they follow my unconscious thought processes too or just the conscious ones? Because if they could only understand conscious thoughts, I could make all the undesirable ones unconscious. But then I realized I was getting confused.

I could feel I was going cold. My hands were trembling so badly that I put them in my pockets. I avoided their faces, but tried to see if I could steal a side-glance. When I looked forwards again, I found I was staring straight into the face of one of them. I immediately recognized Andrew Dick, but there was something I could not make out about him.

“Oh yes,” he said, “I've become more like an ostrich since you last saw me.” Then it was suddenly clear that he was an ostrich, and I remembered that he had begun to look like one at school. But it was strange; before I had had no recollection of this.

“Be careful with your pockets, don't forget the material is weak.” He gave a knowing ghoulis look and nodded his head repeatedly. So he realized my hands were trembling in my pockets. I wasn't sure whether to act aggressively or submissively. Never before had the conflict been so strong.

We went into the room. I had a sudden feeling of relief - it wasn't the classroom after all! It was the waiting-room of a railway station in southern Germany.

“I recognize this,” I said aloud.

“It's changed a great deal,” said Andrew Dick very formally. “Whether for the better or for the worse, is a question of opinion.” He smiled, and I laughed in a way that I meant to sound friendly, but it became very, very loud and echoed and resounded all over the room, which now seemed very high. I looked up, and saw that the roof was a dome of stained glass, and that black

things were fluttering between wooden beams.

“Bats or vultures?” I asked, as if it were commonplace.

“Ah ha!” said Dick, with a single shake of his head, the sort that he would always give at school when he didn’t want to divulge a secret. I made a disappointed grimace, intended to make him feel important, desperate to placate him.

“You see, we now teach physically and mentally retarded children,” he said. I looked around. Prostrate over the floor were boys of all ages. They were moving and writhing about, all in the same way. Their arms were bent and supported their bodies like lizards. Each had one leg dangling behind him, bending the other one forward and using it as a lever to squirm along. Their heads were strained forward, joining onto twisted necks, as if impatient of the slow progress of their bodies.

“This is called the ‘salamander class,’ but the R.S.P.C.A. have demanded that the name be changed. The children must be morally encouraged,” Dick added.

“Of course! When will they understand that?” I cried, suddenly very concerned with the plight of the children.

“Things take time to change, especially peoples’ ideas,” said another of my companion guides, wearily and frettedly shaking his head.

“Surely with a concerted effort from the younger members of the staff, conditions could be improved,” I said, very anxious to change the subject though from what I wasn’t sure. The man who had just spoken kept shaking his head. He looked as if he might be a night watchman in a warehouse. He wore a cloth cap, was small and shrivelled, with a dour but not unfriendly face. He was the sort that has lived through and seen a lot, though always staying on a steady course himself. He seemed my only hope.

“You must have devoted a great deal to these children,” I said, immediately thinking it sounded contrived. I was looking right down into his face. I was so much taller than him, it was impossible to strike a friendly note. I was aware that he could only think me condescending. But his face began to show anything but a sign of inferiority. One eye looked straight into mine, the other facing in a completely different direction. The eye looking at me was glazy, but seemed to twinkle at the same time. It was haughty, seemed to sneer, and had no fear of a prolonged gaze. I tried to smile, but the eye penetrated further and further into my being; seemed to eat into my soul, to see all the weakness in it, and to see through all my attempts to escape, to act confidently, and to placate him. I thought I had better be the one to move my gaze, to seem respectful. He was no longer an old man to whom my friendliness might be a pleasure. But I could not move it, and all the time he was entering me, and poking around in the softest, most defenceless and most undesirable part of my person.

After a long time, he swivelled round, keeping his eye inside me until the last moment. I could feel waves of tingles starting at my stomach and spreading all over my body, consistent surges of

chill and heat moving up to my head and throbbing, and spreading to my thighs like a paralysing orgasm. He beckoned me to follow. He moved in big slow strides, and at each one his body sank very low and bounced up again, comic but sinister. His dipping strides seemed to work in phase with the strength-sapping waves of tingling which spread over me.

I think we left by the same door we had come in by but we entered a black annular tunnel. We walked against a continual blast of cold air. Shortly we came to a fellow who was playing a guitar under a lamp, with a hat to collect money. My two companions took no notice, but I stopped and fumbled in my pocket. I thought it would assert my independence, and the guitarist might help me. I found in my pocket first a paper clip, then a buckle for an American cowboy belt with a horned bull on it. I felt over the smooth raised horns and put it in the cap. The fellow grinned, and carried on playing. He was playing fast cheerful chords, smiled broadly and moved his head from side to side in a rather clownish way, as if the happiest man on earth. He smiled at me again, then winked, and smiled yet again. Tears came to my eyes I was so overjoyed at finding him. I wished he would stop playing so we could talk. Then I suddenly thought that this might be a tube station, and that there would be lots of people if we got on a train. So I left and followed Andrew Dick and the old man along the tunnel.

Then it was that I decided to be strong, even aggressive. I clenched my teeth to emphasize my resolution. After several minutes of walking in silence the tunnel opened out into a chamber. But there were no ticket-machines, no trains, no ticket collectors. I found myself standing between my two companions, looking at an open book with a musical score on it. It was placed on a wooden lectern.

“This is our musical class”, said Dick, “Look carefully. It’s a new method.”

Behind the lectern dark figures danced about, and shrill sounds came from all directions.

“You see, these pupils are the notes themselves. Have you had any contact with the concept of transmigration since I knew you?” asked Dick.

“Ah, I see!” I said, “No, not very much but I think enough to understand what this is about.”

“Hum”, he replied, not impressed. “If you look at the score carefully, and then at the pupils, you will see that they are one and the same.”

I did so. The figures of the pupils were flitting and prancing about so fast that I had difficulty in focusing on their bodies; they seemed to be no more than dark shadows. I could see the heads, which were black circles, like the filled-in parts of notes. They seemed to be attached now to bodies looking like strips of a black velvety material, the bottom ends of which slithered and brushed against the ground.

“Now, look at the score, the pupils, the score, the pupils.....” I flicked from one to the other, back and forth, over and over again. Things began to get hazy. I could hear Dick’s voice come from different directions, as if he were moving around behind my back as he spoke. Soon I was not sure which I was looking at, the figures or the score. They seemed to merge, yet I knew I was

looking at one when he called: “score”, and the other when he called: “pupils”. The notes on the score began to move on the paper, and the figures seemed like written notes. I tried to nod to show I understood the principle at the same time as flashing from one to the other.

“Ha ha ha!” the old man gave a bronchial laugh. “He still hasn’t caught on that he’s looking at Hell.” I turned to Dick. He gave a twisted smile, “We give our most promising pupils an introduction to all musical forms, including demonic ones. You remember the end of “Don Giovanni”, when the demons drag the Don into Hell?”

“Oh, yes, how interesting,” I said. “But we ourselves aren’t in Hell are we?”

“Oh, I thought you meant before that you knew enough about transmigration to understand the point of this”, he said.

“Oh, I probably do, but just tell me a little to put it into perspective. I haven’t had personal contact with anything of this sort.”

My companions glanced at one another. I wasn’t quite sure of the content of the glance.

“Look, don’t try to be clever. Why can’t you just say if you know about a thing or not?” said the old man.

“Well, things are never so simple or clear-cut as that. “I was trying to be honest.” I felt on trial, having my flaws picked at.

“It’ll take time to give an introduction,” said Dick. “Come over here.”

I found myself walking over grass and heather. It was like being on a moor at night-time, but there was no moon. Dick was no longer an ostrich. He was wearing a kilt. I looked at it.

“What are you staring at?” he asked aggressively, in the school-boy tone I used to know. I shook my head obsequiously to imply “nothing”. “We must have an appearance which fits the location, especially with the younger classes,” he said. I remembered how he had changed from being a rebellious nuisance at school to being very officious when he was made a prefect. “Exactly the same thing again now,” I thought.

We were on the edge of a precipice. We faced a black gaping space which stretched to eternity, the black sky presenting no demarcation line against it.

“This is Hell”, Dick said, making an affected, all-knowing gesture with his outstretched palm. “Or the Day of Judgment, or Eternity, or the Universe, or” and here he gave an insipid, gentle smile, “or even Heaven”. How he infuriated me with his pedantic cleverness. “He didn’t fancy himself as an orator before, the illiterate ignoramus,” I thought to myself. His smile disappeared, and he looked at me with a bland expression, just as he had done the time he punished me as his first show of authority and responsibility after being appointed a prefect. Of course he knew what I had just thought of him!

Very near to us, on the edge of the cliff, was a building. A group of men in American police uniforms were outside it.

“To the police station”, said Dick, in a matter-of-fact tone. Some policemen came over, with purposeful steps. I had a very small hope that they might be coming for one of the other two, but they made straight for me.

I knew I was guilty, but of what I couldn't remember.

“We'll need a statement,” said one of the policemen.

“Of course,” I thought. “The buckle! The horns of the bull were gold! Obviously it's illegal to have gold in that tunnel!” I cursed myself for not leaving it in my pocket.

“Trying to be a little bit clever with your generosity,” said Dick.

The policeman talked to me again.

“You probably haven't had much experience with these police stations. We are so near to er....this”, and he waved to the blackness over the edge of the cliff, “that we use it instead of gaol or execution”.

“I see, I wouldn't like to be one of the offenders!” I said, pretending to assume nothing would happen to me. I received no answer. He walked me to the building, which turned out to be a wooden shack.

“Which State are you from?” I tried to be pleasant.

“In Canada we call them Provinces.”

“Oh, are the police uniforms the same in Canada as in the United States?”

I asked actually with interest, my fear seeming to have reached its maximum so that now I was taking everything just as it came. The policeman gave me an unfriendly sidelong glance.

They took me into a room in the shack. All of them looked at me with strong resentment. I was aware that I had said something wrong. “I'm a fool,” I thought, “one has to remember to be especially tactful when with people from another culture. It's really my fault. If I hadn't said that they might have helped me.” But I could no longer remember what it was I had said.

I was alone in the room. I took my left hand out of my pocket, but my wrist began to stretch out very long and thin, rather like a piece of putty being pulled at from both ends. In one part it became so thin I tried to hold it with my other hand to prevent it snapping. But too late! The hand broke off and hopped away. I chased after it around the room, behind old pieces of furniture, as if it were a mouse.

Just when I had the hand cornered, and was about to grab it, the Commentator of my Life spoke. It was no surprise to hear him, though I could not see him, and had never heard him or even known of his existence before. He said, "Why don't you escape? Where's your strength of will?" I felt full of energy and courage and jumped straight out of a window, without looking to see where I would land or how high it was. It turned out to be several stories to fall.

It was pitch dark so I couldn't see when I would reach the bottom. I felt an awful pain in my stomach as if the insides were being pulled out. So I held my stomach and waited to land.

I was very surprised to land without being hurt. I found myself on a strip of ground about two feet wide which surrounded the wooden shack. The black emptiness beyond it was all around the police station now. I looked through a window of the building. Several policemen were sitting around a boiler in a room lit by a bare light-bulb. One of them noticed me and pointed, then they all looked at me. Some of them were grinning.

"Jump into the crater to escape!" said one.

"But it's Hell!" I cried back. But they could not hear me through the window-pane, and did not move.

"If you go voluntarily into it, it's escape - freedom. If you're forced to go, then of course, it's punishment or Hell."

"That's quite true," I thought to myself. "It's the great paradox of life; Freedom and Bondage, Heaven and Hell are the same things. It just depends on your frame of mind." I was almost amused. I felt like congratulating the policemen on their intelligence, and making a remark to the effect that anyone who regarded them as stupid was very misled. "One would do better to come to them than to the academic philosophers," I felt very certainly to myself.

I turned around. The blackness was silent, damp, hollow. It seemed to draw me into it; the ground under me reeled around. I jumped.

THE DREAMS OF JULIAN GRIB

One night Julian Grib dreamt that his left foot had been cut off at the ankle, but though remembering a grotesque muddle and much emotional anxiety, he woke up too quickly to find out why this had happened, or who had done it to him. It was still dark, and so, in a copious sweat, he turned over and went back to sleep.

After some time he heard a tap at the door, and peering at his alarm clock, realized it was eight-thirty in the morning, and that a hotel maid was bringing him his breakfast. So he called out:

“Please, come in!” At which response there entered his room a most attractive Paraguayan girl, dressed in a maid’s uniform, who politely and smilingly laid down a tray on his bedside cupboard.

Julian put out an arm to pour a cup of coffee without raising himself up. He managed to grip the cup and bring it over to his lips, but poured it wrongly; so that coffee flowed down over his chest and arm, scalding them somewhat, before he was able to catch any of the coffee in his mouth. He snuffled down a cup or two of coffee in considerable irritation, then scooped with a fork some scrambled egg from a plate rapidly into his now awakened mouth, after which he shuffled over to the other side of the bed, vacating the coffee-soaked side that he had previously been dreaming in, and fell asleep again.

Now he began to dream of events that really had occurred, although some years before. He met his ex-wife at a party, just as really had happened, and began to find they got on very well again, much to their mutual surprise. They were dancing and smiling at each other, without talking much because the music was so loud, until suddenly a huge crash disrupted theirs and everyone else’s pleasurable reveries. Exactly as had happened in reality three years before, the noise had frightened the party-goers to yell and rush to the door of the flat in which the party was being held, but Julian and his ex-wife, called Mariola, continued to dance, apparently unperturbed by the kerfuffle. But then something occurred in Julian’s dream that had not happened in actuality: Mariola jumped onto a table and grabbed a huge fork used to serve some delicious pork. She bent down with a demonic but also extremely erotic expression on her face, and gestured as if to stab Julian in the face.

In his dream, Julian moved to one side; then he awoke, once again in his hotel bed, with the still-wet but now-cold coffee stain next to him. He sprang up, ripped open some curtains, and with a great degree of distressed relief, opened up the refrigerator in his room, and pulled out a bottle of champagne. It was necessary to celebrate, he felt, the fact that neither had his foot really been cut off, nor had his ex-wife really attacked him with a pork-fork; both had been nightmares. So he drank the bottle of champagne, and that made him extremely drunk at this peculiar time of day; so he fell asleep once again.

He slept now in dreamless sleep for several hours, but woke up feeling very exhausted and depressed. When he saw his travelling clock, covered in the spilt coffee from before, he saw it was now after two o'clock in the afternoon, and that he had missed his appointment with a Brazilian anthropologist in a restaurant, with whom he wanted to discuss the idea of an 'anthropology of modernity', as applied to South America: a sociological approach to 'modern', 'commodified', capitalist society, with its myths of 'economic growth' and 'development', and the supposed 'end of tradition' that went with them.

He got up in his hang-over, and left the hotel. Where to go? He had intended to visit a 17th century Jesuit church after meeting the anthropologist, but what was the point now? He went to a bar, ordered a beer, and got drunk all over again. He began to think of what had really happened at that party where he had met his ex-wife three years before; there *had* been a dreadful crash, people *had* rushed to the door, and he and Mariola *had* continued to dance together. But she had not jumped onto a table and grabbed a fork. In fact, she had tripped on a plate of food on the floor, and had fallen over him, rather drunk. He had held her up, and asked if she needed a cup of coffee, to which she had answered, "Yes."

Julian had then gone to find some coffee in the kitchen, leaving Mariola on a sofa amidst the chaos, but when he returned, she was no longer there. Staring now into space in the bar, Julian Grib remembered the peculiar combination of pain, relief, confusion, and annoyance that he had felt when he returned with the coffee for Mariola; but he was suddenly jolted from his day-dream by a group of middle-aged ladies that came to sit at his table.

Julian smiled politely at the three ladies, two of them dark-haired and one blonde, who very warmly asked if he minded them joining him.

"Of course not," he replied, and was about to drift off into his memories again; but the ladies would not let him.

"Where are you from?"

"Do you like Brazil?"

"How do you find Brazilian women?"

"I have a sister living in Italy, do you know Rome?" were among the friendly enquiries directed at him.

So he entered into a delightful conversation with them. Soon, one of the dark ones among them started to tell him a remarkable story. It went like this:

"My nephew was from Yugoslavia, and he came here about fifteen years ago, to marry a local girl that he had met during a short visit some months before. They were very much in love, and so happy, that all the girl's friends were very jealous of her, but after some years the marriage did not work out well at all."

“Why was that?” Julian queried, and the lady continued:

“Because at first the man found the girl very sweet, but after a while he was disappointed in her - not because she was undomesticated, on the contrary, she loved to wash and iron; but because she had certain ideas about things that he could not agree with or understand.”

“And what were these ideas?” asked Julian, curious in his unfolding alcoholic mood, and very lucid in his attention.

The dark middle-aged lady lent forward, and speaking very closely into Julian’s face she explained, extremely confidentially:

“She believed that all sorts of people were not *real* people, but were aliens from other galaxies, and she believed that all politicians were really *reptiles*, who only pretended to be normal people in public! For example, she thought that President Bush of the United States was actually a crocodile, who only erupted from caves beneath the sea when it was time for war, or for re-elections, and she thought that the Queen Mother of England was a giant lizard, who deceived all the people of England into believing she was a Queen, but was not.”

“But crocodiles don’t live in the sea!” exclaimed Julian Grib, immediately realizing his objection was absurd.

“No, of course not,” the lady went on, whose name she now gave as Elisangela, and continued with her account:

“The point was that this girl, who was very pretty, could not stop talking about these ideas! But the man from Yugoslavia, called Mladen, could not stand it: even though they made love nearly every night,” she averred.

“How do you know that?” asked Julian.

“Oh, everyone knew that,” replied Elisangela, and the certainty of the expression on her face seemed to confirm the validity of her statement.

“So her strange thoughts were more important to Mladen than her feminine attractions?” asked Julian humorously.

“Unfortunately, yes,” replied Elisangela. “After some months he went back to Europe and left the girl - whose name was Elizete - here in Brazil. After that she became involved in black magic, where people kill chickens and shout and take over your soul,” she explained.

“But that’s not real, is it?” asked Julian.

“Oh yes it is, when your soul has been broken into as a child,” said Elisangela.

At this point Julian Grib felt he needed a break from the conversation, so he said goodbye very

politely to the three ladies, and went back to his hotel room. There, he lay down on his bed, and tried to read a book called "Modernity In South America," but he soon fell asleep, and started to dream that he was MacBeth in Brazil, and that he was meeting a group of witches who spoke to him thus:

"When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

After this, Julian slept for many hours, but when he eventually woke up, he could not remember what he had dreamt, nor indeed, where he actually was!

However, in due course Julian did partially remember what he had dreamt, and then he saw that now it was about nine o'clock in the evening. He began to feel guilty that he had achieved almost nothing the day before. Even though he had missed his appointment with the anthropologist, he could at least have read a bit more of his book "Modernity In South America". For he had read really very little of it.

And so he got up again, and decided to do something constructive. There was a folk concert he could go to, very near his hotel, but he no longer felt in the mood for that. Maybe he would get a girl to make love to! So he snatched up the phone - still stained with coffee - to ask the receptionist to call him a lovely girl, thus to forget his foolishness, and his confusion!

"Certainly sir," said the hotel receptionist. "White or brown, tall or short?" she asked.

"Oh anything, so long as she's young, sexy, friendly, and kind," answered Julian.

He waited for a little more than an hour, but just as he was beginning to become impatient, there was a tap at the door. He rushed over and opened it, to espy a quite ordinary girl, yet very pleasant to behold. He invited her in, and they talked, as Julian took another bottle of champagne from his refrigerator. They drank together, and Julian felt an overwhelming sense of relief in the company of this girl, whose name was Ariani. She was so normal, and friendly, and easy to talk to; Julian was at first not even sure if he needed to go to bed with her! But after some time the urge did come over him, so they went to bed, the sheets of which had now fortunately been changed, so that all was clean and nice.

After they had made love, Julian gave Ariani about twice as much money as she had expected, so she was very happy, and so was he. By this time it was about three o'clock in the morning, so Julian was feeling tired, but he could not go to sleep. Ariani kissed him, touched him, and made him feel so much better than before: so that Julian asked her if she sometimes had vivid dreams. She said she did, and told him several that she had had recently, including one which went as follows:

"A few nights ago," said Ariani, "I dreamt about my mother, whom I love, at a time shortly after she had met the man who is now my step-father. I was very angry in the dream, as I was in reality, because this man put a tattoo on her shoulder, which I have never liked."

Julian suddenly felt he rather loved this girl Ariani, though he realized his emotions were crazy.

“Why didn’t you like it?” he asked.

“Because she’s my mother!” replied Ariani, and that made it perfectly clear to Julian Grib.

Ariani was a tall girl, extremely healthy, and very jubilant about life. She made Julian feel happy, and when they went to sleep, he dreamt of gentle, indefinable things, like soft purple shapes drooping all over him, and pleasant sounds of bells or imaginary toucans squawking in the wind; when he woke up, many hours later, it was daylight, and Ariani said she would have to go.

“Shall we meet this evening?” Julian asked her.

“Sure,” said Ariani, “I’ll come back here at seven o’clock.” And in immense relief and gratitude, Julian Grib said goodbye to her, and finally fell asleep into a very deep dream.

Now Julian dreamt he was deeply in love with a girl, but this girl was not Ariani, nor anyone he knew in real life. He was actually inventing her in his dream, but he was surely not responsible for this, nor at fault for it. He dreamt her exactly: her physical form, her face, her personality, her voice; she was absolutely adorable and her name, though it did not emerge clearly, sounded like honey. He really *was* in love with her, and now he felt, if he could find this girl, who absolutely definitely must exist, he really would be happy in *reality* at last.

Some months later, Julian Grib went to Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. One evening, after visiting a strip-club and experiencing the most exciting erotic satisfactions imaginable, he went to a normal bar, where he started to talk to a young man from Surinam, called Petros.

After a while, a group of people entered the bar, and among them was a very beautiful girl, with a perfectly wonderful manner. Her curly dark hair tousled around her shoulders and down her back, roaming gorgeously when she moved her face. Her lips were sweetly sensuous and lovely, her eyes soft in the dim bar light, her eyelids delicious as they moved gently with a divine and erotic motion, wavering her black eye-lashes in a magical flicker, as they curled down and upwards from the loveliness of her eyes. Her figure was exactly of the femininity that Julian loved, gently rounded and soft to his imagined touch. Her bosom and bottom were juicily firm, her legs in their shapely deliciousness dementedly distracting to his mind. In her soft furriness she seemed to purr like a soft cat, her movements perfect as a dreaming sphinx. Her arms, bare like her legs beyond her skirt, moved sweetly; she was utterly sexy and beautiful to behold.

Julian began to talk to the group of people; one of the men among them inexplicably asked him:

“Which of these girls do you like?”

Julian gestured towards the beautiful girl, saying:

“Her!”

After a few moments the friends made room for him to sit closer to her. Julian Grib stopped dreaming now, at least in his former, foolish way. This girl was lovely, and her name was Nidia. O final paradise at last!

ELGIN STIP

When Stip McCoch arrived in Scotland, he felt he was a pretty universal kind of a fellow. But as he soon learnt, *he was not a Scot*. He had been born in Brighton, had spent his childhood in Singapore and Barcelona, and when he returned to Britain, the only place he could get a job, as a dish-washer, was in Elgin.

But although he found the girls there very jolly, generally people thought he was *terribly English*.

“Why so?” he asked.

“Because of your accent,” they answered.

“O dear,” he thought, and in private he tried to change it. He realized there had been a great mistake: but he was not sure whether this was due to the fact that he had not been born ‘north of the border’, or whether it was merely that his accent seemed wrong to people.

Stip tried to remember details of his own hard upbringing whenever people told him their lives had always been so difficult, but his accounts never seemed to convince them at all, and many people referred to him as ‘Lord Stip’.

One day he met a girl in a pub who said she had always believed she was a princess.

“Right,” said Stip, “let’s go to a place suited to a princess with her prince.”

But when they arrived there, she didn’t like it at all, and one day when they were asleep in an enormous double bed, she ran away before Stip McCoch had woken up.

So Stip decided to go to Ecuador, where he could forget his failed past, especially in Scotland. He was quite happy for a while, but one day he received an e-mail informing him that he had children!

“What!” he thought. “How?”

Apparently the princess he had met in Elgin had born him twin boys. In a more lengthy e-mail she explained things she had not spoken of before: how she had been born in a pram in Ireland,

but that some people thought it was really a rubbish bin, and so she had been handed over to a priest, who later turned out to be a pedophile; though now this dastardly man was dead. However, there were still many court suits pending.

“O my God,” thought Stip. “I must do the honourable thing.”

And so, even though it was very difficult in rural Ecuador, he joined the Scottish National Party.

“If I had done that before,” he mused, “none of this trouble would have occurred.”

Lying in a bed in a cheap hotel in Ecuador, he thought of all the conflicts of identity he had experienced in his life, and of how sad it was that in the British Archipelago so many people were unhappy, although nearly everyone he met in South America assumed it must be marvellous to live in *Inglaterra*, which they thought was synonymous with Britain.

Stip wondered whether to swim out into the deep blue sea, open his mouth, and sink off the coast of Ecuador. But then he remembered that his father had been a tank commander in the Second World War, and that his aunt had had a nervous breakdown without giving up hope in life. So he decided to forget his Scottish connections, and get very drunk indeed. The drunker he got however, the more he thought he had missed the point: perhaps all the people who did not seem to understand him had lived *much more emotionally deprived lives than he*, and that was why he was out on a limb, as it were.

He wondered if it was time to write a bitter-sweet novel about his upbringing with his parents, but he could not quite catch the silver thread on his theme; it would always change before his eyes. Was it good, bad, indifferent, or merely stupid? Was the duck pond important; were the songs and jokes his father sang in the morning of greater significance, whilst he stirred the porridge? Where was the grand drama, the conflict of meaning, the existential twist, if he could not even locate a single occasion on which a black African toad had jumped on his toe or a huge crooked jackdaw had snipped his ear? The real things were far too complicated for a simple narration, so he decided to e-mail *everyone in Scotland* about how complicated everyone’s life really was!

But they would not publish it there, as he was *not* Scottish, nor Irish, nor Welsh, nor anything at all Celtic.

So he decided to stay in Ecuador.

Some years later, when he had a fever lying in a bed in a different hotel, this time in Peru, he remembered how once his mother had left him with strangers in Egypt. He was nine years old at that time, and the friends he had been left with were Coptic Christian Egyptians who lived in a suburb of Cairo. Suddenly Stip remembered how he had been lying down on an *angareeb*, not feeling well, though he could not quite recall why. The daughter of the family, called Sida, came into his room, and he had felt very embarrassed because she was so attractive. Stip had grabbed an orange from a bowl on a table near his bed, without noticing a huge wasp sitting on the side of it hidden from his view. Ow! he was stung on one of his fingers, and jumped up in his bed. The

poor girl Sida rushed to the door, but could not open it; she screamed until her mother came to let her out.

Sida's mother did not really think all this was Stip's fault, but somehow the event made her suspicious of him, and Stip felt from then on that she was dying for his mother to come back to Cairo to retrieve him.

Those weeks were an eternity; he dragged his eyes around the barred window, with its view over a brick wall, the sun occasionally shining over the colours for a short time, before dusk came and everything seemed solemn; before the midges gathered in the dusk, and the sounds of people hurrying along the road outside the house were somehow so saddening. He did not really know where he was: it was Cairo, Egypt, but it might have been anywhere, as his mother was not there.

But who was his mother? He had almost forgotten, in the sense of whom it was he yearned for, although of course he remembered her long dark hair, her sparkling eyes, and her soft kisses upon his mouth and cheeks. For a moment or two he sometimes imagined Sida was his mother, but soon he realized how absurd that was! Sida was only fourteen, not a grown-up, though not a child either. Stip tried to sleep as much as he could, thinking he would not be a nuisance nor be noticed like that, but of course at times his eyes were wide open, especially when Sida's mother entered the room, with a slightly annoyed expression on her face.

Sida's mother was rather attractive. Her figure was slightly heavy, but very sensual, and the ageing lines in her face were rather nice to Stip. When she tucked him into his *angareeb* he liked it, but always felt sorry that she evidently wished he wasn't really there.

Eventually Stip was picked up by his mother, but it wasn't a very wonderful affair, such as in his dreams he would have liked it to be. She bustled in, Stip got up and dressed himself, and with much talk in Arabic, he piled into a taxi with her. At this point his memory of events fizzled out. Stip recalled arriving in the taxi at someone's house, but unclearly.

In his hotel in Peru, when he had recuperated from the fever which only lasted about 36 hours, he felt better, and now it was time to get on with things! For God's sake, do some work! Write that essay on indigenous cultures and the Peruvian state! But he could not do anything; he felt paralysed, and could only drink a lot of rum with orange juice. When he had become completely drunk, he started to think he could finally write a novel, either about his family or about his experiences in Scotland, or perhaps about his adventures in South America.

He began to think of the Elgin princess. That was lovely for a moment, until he suddenly remembered the children he was supposed to have had with her! He grabbed the telephone in his room, and tried to phone her in East Kilbride in the West of Scotland.

"Hello", came an answer, amazingly.

"Oh, hi! I just wanted to ask about the children", he said.

“What children? Go to hell, I was only joking!” said the voice.

“Oh, thank God,” thought Stip, at the same time as feeling utterly empty and miserable. So that was that. Nothing was real. He resolved never to go back to Scotland. He would stay there in Peru, in Pucallpa, a rag-taggle tropical crazy place, where no one made him feel hopeless. Yes. Just stay in Pucallpa. There he could write a masterpiece.

A NAMELESS STORY

I was sure that this time I was going to confront tremendous things; the revelations to come were being anticipated by the feelings in my stomach - fearful and profound, of the sort that once experienced, affect every future understanding or feeling. I was being led down stone stairs covered with white dust which gritted under my feet - I say led, but I do not mean by a person. I was urged rather by an inquiring force, as much within me as without.

The staircase seemed to be a spiral, but at no point could I see more than a few steps backwards or forwards. On both sides the edges were without railings or banisters, and cut sharp over abysmal black space. I had my arms out in front, like one newly-blind. White mist wisped through everywhere.

The staircase ceased to descend. It gave onto a flat, wide courtyard, still stone. White dust crunched silently underfoot and rose in puffs with each step, as if to join the mist. In a corner of this courtyard sat an old man in black, bending toward an easel, straining to see through the mist to the picture he was painting.

I came up behind him. He disregarded me; it was not necessary to exchange recognition of each other's presence. I had to bend right over his shoulder to make out the painting, and I found I was beholding a cruel, cruel beauty. A girl was in a cornfield that was yellow and bright with sun like laughter. In one hand, she held a wicker-basket, in which played splays of wheat ears. The other hand was drawing her auburn, wind-blown hair off her brow. Her head was thrown back, and her face revealed a perfect, harmonious melancholy. The serene beauty of that face was indescribable; it was that of someone who has suffered terribly, but yet basks beautifully in the sun.

“That's my daughter,” said the artist. It was as if the sound of a thousand violoncellos set my body into resonance as I heard him.

“Where is she in reality?” I whispered desperately into his ear.

“She's dead,” was the reply. “I've never stopped painting her since her death. And in all my

paintings of her she is the same age as when she died. You know Shelley's lines:

“That garden sweet, that lady fair,
And all sweet shapes and odours there,
In truth have never passed away:
'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed; not they”?

or Keats:

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing”?”

I wanted to talk more, to ask the black old man more about his deceased daughter, and to ask him why he sat in this dank courtyard to paint her in sun-drenched cornfields. But during the last two lines he was reciting, I found I was drawing away from him, the painting, and the corner of the courtyard, involuntarily; I was descending the stone staircase once again.

At each slow, downward step my heart fell weightily with the black, misty sorrow of the scene I had passed. But in the darkness a pin-point of light glowed, from the face of the girl indelibly stamped on my memory. The staircase spiralled as before through black space. Gritty sounds from the white dust underfoot lost themselves in the quiet stillness; there was no echo, no echo.

I was first able to feel that the staircase had become enclosed when my footsteps began making muffled sounds. I was entering a dungeon. Rusty iron clanked dully against thick moist stone walls, drops of water pittered, the air was musty, wet, cold. Wretched groans rose and lingered; I was sick in my stomach.

The indistinct forms of men shuffled around a huge wheel which they pushed to make turn; each dragged an iron chain fastened around one leg.

To keep the motion steady and unending, was a whip which lashed from an invisible source, spurring the wheel on to drag the shuffling iron-chained forms around with it.

Then I saw a boy. Green eyes flashed under a mop of fair hair, his face was innocent but uncowered. He was trying to saw with a tiny file through the iron bar to which were attached all the chains. He braced himself each time the whip succeeded in striking him. Soon a group of tall dark figures appeared, and dragged him away. He struggled fearsomely, and before he was out of sight, his green eyes flashed into mine for an instant. In that instant it was as if I had been electrified; my spirit bolted from all stables; I tasted the boy's defiant freedom.

I tried to tear after the boy to help him, but found myself instead flying down the same spiral staircase, kicking up the same white dust.

As I slowed down my pace, I was surprised to be coming to a forest clearing. I left the white stone steps to have spongy brown leaves and fir-cones under the soles of my feet. Soon I came upon two old men sitting cross-legged, thin and bald-headed. The first man was looking down a microscope which stood on a pile of leather-bound books.

“How fascinating”! he said, as if my arrival were of no consequence or had not been noticed. “What an unusual compound eye this insect has.”

“May I see”? I asked, suddenly interested in seeing this unusual insect’s eye. The man made some minor adjustments with the microscope’s focusing knob, then moved his head to let me see. I looked at the amazing number of corneal lenses, each one an azure-coloured point, circumferenced by a red outline.

“How beautiful”, I said. “Why is it unusual”? He replied: “Because of the ratio of about three to one between the length and breadth of each lens”. He went on: “The search for Truth takes you along infinite paths; examining insect’s eyes, the molecular composition of crystals, the geological strata of the Cretaceous Period, and so on, endlessly. The reward is always immeasurable, but it costs so much in sacrifice, especially of human friendship. My companion here is the only human being who can stay with me, and I am the only one who could stay with him.”

I looked at the other old man. He was in deep meditation. His chest rose in slow deep breaths, in phase with the movements of the trees that were swayed by the wind. If a bird twittered or an insect hummed, his eyes answered in sublime twinkles.

While watching this man, my mind was transported. When I came to my more usual senses, I was again descending the white, dust-encrusted spiral staircase. I came presently to a stone bridge over a green stream, into which blades of grass and yellow flowers fell and were taken downstream.

I stood in the middle of the bridge, and saw a young man with curly blonde hair on the bank of the brook, standing in front of a seated lady. She seemed to grow out of the cowslip flowers she sat amongst; her dress was long and white, her cheeks full, her hair dark. The man gently offered her both his hands. As the lady gave him hers, and just as she seemed about to rise, the man turned to me and said:

“To love a woman means reconciling two principles. The first is that quest of Love to find on earth the human manifestation of its vision; to find its ideal in which all the most perfect aspects that it can imagine, emotional, intellectual and sensual, are united. The second is the actual activity of Love; the process in which a person comes to fuse with and conflict with, not an ideal, but another human being.”

His last words were mysteriously transposed into the sound of my footsteps, descending yet again the stone staircase. I tip-toed now, as if not wanting to upset the heavenly melancholy of love aroused in my soul.

The stairs led me now to a place on a rocky shore. I was among barren brown rocks, looking over a green-blue sea, glinting and sparkling in moving points of light. Above the horizon, delicate strands of pink cloud licked a sky that was a blue of incomprehensible depth. In every other direction, there was flat sand or dark rocks. I felt a shudder of fear and excitement at the realization that I was in a lifeless world - no birds, no flowers, not even a leaf or a scrap of wood broke the total company of the bare elements. This was the inorganic world, as it had been long before the advent of life and as it would be long after life's end.

I watched the choppy sea surrounding the rocks, and studied the complexity of even this fraction of the Universe, ever in motion against itself and changing its contours. When the waves splashed against the rocks I saw how Nature follows her own laws blindly and regularly; the force of the waves brought water high up into the rocks, replenishing the water in the rock pools. In the lull between the waves, the excess water immediately returned to its source, the sea, through any channel or crack in the rock. The movement was infinitely variable, different every time; yet it always followed the line of least resistance, obeyed a law.

Naked, I stood and stared at rock, sky, sand and sea. I wanted to make a sound, but I realized that nothing would receive it, so that it would be a hollow howl. I kept silent. I watched. I naked. I was.

TRUTH OR LIES?

Before the reader starts to wonder whether the story I am about to relate is true, I must admit that I *am* normally inclined to exaggerate, or embellish, when I speak to an audience about something, but not when I write; and so now, I do assure him or her that the following tale is indeed true. The reason I insist on this is that the hero of my story, Jim Cloop, is an absolutely honest person, and all his family, whom I know well, are souls of impeccable integrity; they all come from an island off the West Coast of Scotland, whose name I have presently forgotten.

When I explained recently to Jim that I was determined to narrate his story, he begged me not to, saying it would offend his family; when I questioned him as to why that might be, he explained that he did not actually come from that family biologically speaking, since he had in fact been adopted by his 'parents' at the age of two. But there is another reason why Jim Cloop did not want me to narrate his tale, and this unfortunately I only came to understand some time *after* I started to do so, quite innocently; and this was that he himself intended to write his own story!

And so I am writing this tale in a mood of extreme humility and restraint, since I do not want to offend Jim, nor those whom I have always taken to be his family; nor the reader, who obviously does not wish to read lies or fabrications of any kind at all.

My story begins when Jim boarded, or nearly boarded, or rather *tried* to board, a ferry boat from Jura to Islay. Sadly he slipped as he attempted to do this, and crunched painfully between the pier and the boat. However, I must report that when I discussed this point with him afterwards, he was emphatic that he had *not* slipped at all, but had been *shoved* by a certain member of the boat's crew called Rory Docherty, and that this was why he had fallen into the cold sea water that day, at 4.55 p.m., ten minutes before the ferry was due to leave.

When I tried to ascertain why Rory Docherty should have pushed him in this way, on such a normally peaceful island, on a rather beautiful October afternoon under a beautiful blue sky with

white gulls whirling around, he opened up to me a very sorry tale which represents however a complete digression from the main story I am trying to tell. He claimed that Rory Docherty was angrily jealous of him, because the night before Rory believed that he, Jim, had been cavorting with Rory's wife in the Blue Gull, a pub near the harbour on the isle of Jura. But, Jim Cloop insisted, nothing of the kind was true; it was merely that he, Jim, had drunk a good deal of malt whisky with Rory's wife in the Blue Gull, but nothing untoward had occurred at all.

All has reminded me painfully, if the reader will excuse another digression, of an unfortunate incident that had occurred to me around that time, at a party not far away, but this time on the mainland when I in joking, larking mood, raised a girl's skirt whilst I was dancing near her - but not with her - in order to show the remarkable boots she was wearing, which reminded me very much of some leather Stone Age boots I had seen on a television programme about a man who had been perfectly preserved in ice, in the Swiss Alps, for more than ten thousand years.

The girl with the boots was not offended by my actions, only her boyfriend, along with his friend, and the host of the party who, misunderstanding my action completely, and thinking it represented a rather sleazy, erotic move, instantly and aggressively expelled me unceremoniously from the party.

Thus I could believe it when Jim Cloop said his friend Rory Docherty had completely misunderstood his behaviour the night before he fell into the sea; but this of course would not affect the truth or otherwise concerning whether he was pushed or simply slipped.

The important point from Jim Cloop's point of view is whether it was an accident or not when he clomped into the sea that afternoon. Let us accept his version of the event: that is, that he was pushed. So far as my tale is concerned it matters not: he went down there in the freezing sea, though he was quickly hoicked up by some other crewmen. The only trouble that remains now, is that in the version of the story Jim Cloop is determined to give to the world, he was then taken into the office of the ferry service, to warm up, dry out and change his clothes. Whereas in the version I would give, because it is what I honestly saw, he *had* no clothes on after he was dragged from the water; by whom, it really matters not at all to me!

But these differences also matter little; I only include them for the sake of exactitude. After his extraction from the cold sea, according to my memory and observations as honestly as I can recall them, Jim Cloop grabbed a boomerang that was lying on the ground, and threw it into the sky. It hit a large blackbird, which was deflected from its flight, but not grounded. The boomerang landed on a Hot Dog Stall, owned by one Stizziperiati, who complained only little, as it did not seriously threaten his business.

"The world is a complete fucking pain", yelled Jim Cloop. It is precisely because I was inclined to agree with him at that moment, that I continued to follow his story from then on: this I *must* now narrate even though Jim disagrees with me about so many details of what happened.

For the sake of justice, I must inform the reader that Jim Cloop's account will shortly appear serialized in the *Times Literary Supplement*, so that the reader can compare his account with mine, and make up his or her own mind as to which, if either, is true.

A few days after these events Jim Cloop went to a dentist. He received several anaesthetising injections and after his treatment took a taxi home. Once at home he slouched into a couch and went to sleep. He dreamt that on most of his body great worm-like warts had grown, in groups like bushes of horrible soft corals, falling in ghastly formations especially from his thighs and backside. These foul growths itched and crawled until he felt he had gone mad. He could not wake up, for all that he tried, until in time he forgot that what he was experiencing was merely a nightmare.

He could never ever wake up again. Any solution or clarification of his predicament could only be *within* this dream, never outside of it. He would have to make his peace, kiss a crucifix, and accept that he would die while still in this condition; there was no longer any alternative. He looked at a photograph of himself taken only a few years before, and he imagined a battleship crashing him up against an ice-berg off the coast of Greenland. He imagined he was the explorer James Bruce, telling lies about his journeys in Abyssinia, so uncertain was he of his experiences.

He remembered driving into the entrance of Robert Graves' house in Deya, Majorca, the tyres throwing up gravel in the drive; the taxi driver had known where Graves' house was, though the poet had been dead some years by then. Jim had got out of the taxi, shaken hands with Robert Graves' widow Beryl, and talked to her for some while about poetry. Beryl told him how Graves had been off his rocker at the end of his life, constantly imagining himself back in the trenches in the First World War. She showed him Graves' study, in which over many years he had written his poetry and prose. He drank a beer with her, and eventually left.

Then he found himself in Stalingrad, as a Russian in a special sniper squad. He climbed up a tall tower of tumbling bricks amidst the ruins, with several bottles of vodka and some loaves of bread. He was perfectly suited to waiting quietly, drinking and occasionally eating, up there in cold silence, waiting for some Germans to appear, then to snipe off just one, waiting for a day or two before doing it again. He could never have managed it as an ordinary soldier taking orders within a normal troop.

At the top of another pillar stood Simeon Stylites, in very holy manner on one foot, whilst nearby Jack climbed up his Beanstalk to find the Giant, who fell clumbering down to the ground, where Jack cut off his head.

Jim felt very sad, as if he was in love with someone who was far away, and could hear Schubert's last String Quintet being played over and over again.

I hope I have told this story of Jim Cloop properly, and that I have not falsified it nor exaggerated the truth. I realise now that he cannot correct any errors of mine, because he can never wake up from his dream; but I feel confident that I have at least told part of the truth honestly.

JULES IN BOGOTA

He was in bed with her now, the two all alone. All was so soft, and she so moist and warm, all the world was at last ending. The sweet smell in her lovely hair, and her gentle kisses all around his neck; he realized at last what it was a man yearned for always, and only once could ever find like this. It was not a farce, nor artificial after all, her beautiful thighs around his, kissing him with infinite intensity, this was absolutely real, and he could kiss her soft sweet lips again and again. All that had been now made sense, in a gentle loving halo around this girl with whom he now could merge, once and forever, in an ultimate thrill of truth, love of soul and desire, her female beauty like a physical eternity. The welcoming joy of his being in her was pure, absolute ecstasy.

Jules had left Britain only days before, wondering whether new light might dawn upon his life, on a flight to Bogotá, where he hoped once again to study the art of the pre-Conquest Indians of Colombia, in order to understand something of that golden shamanistic flight, that strange dream over an enchanted lake, where a man could change into a lizard or a jaguar. Shortly before leaving he had met, at a New Year's Day party, an elderly Jewish lady who had recounted to him her escape from Berlin in 1938 with her family, in a train to London where they had lived for two years before moving to Glasgow. This lady's father had worked as a laboratory technician and her mother as a house-cleaner for many years; in 1940 she fell in love, at seventeen years old, with an upper-class English RAF pilot, an authentic 'Handle-bar Hanks', who fell equally and totally in love with her. But they had not been allowed to marry; not due to anti-Semitism she explained, but because the man's mother expected her son to marry a 'suitable' woman: not a foreigner, but rather one whose family was better 'established' than hers, even though in fact

this lady had come from a very wealthy business family in Berlin, though before they had rushed off to London, all their wealth had of course been stolen from them by the Nazis.

This old lady was so warm, so lacking in resentment, so 'philosophical' about the whole insanity that had befallen her and her family, that the impression she made on Jules had persisted, and had left him with an even deeper wish than before to impress his own vision upon life, that of loving through the chaos so to speak, of feeling the glints and sparks of divinity through all agony and pain, and of standing shoulder to shoulder as best one could with those who most suffer under the oppressive regimes of existence, whomsoever they may be imposed by, if by anyone in particular at all.

On the aeroplane to New York Jules had sat next to an American lady, a crazy dame, who was irritated even before take-off to find the flight was to last seven hours rather than five, as she had apparently been informed.

"Oh well," said Jules, "so long as there's some food and drink on the flight."

"Drink!" replied the girl, with a wonderfully assertive tone in her voice, as if to say, - and with this Jules whole-heartily agreed - "to hell with the food!"

During the flight Maria, as this dame was called, told Jules with tears occasionally in her eyes, that she no longer lived with her 'ex', that is her husband from whom she was not yet divorced, and now hoped she would never become so. She *had* wanted to end the marriage before - it was she who had initiated the whole break-up, because her husband had seemed so cold and unfeeling about things that mattered deeply to her; *he* had *not* wanted to split up at first, but in time had come to accept the idea; immediately then *she* changed her mind, and hoped desperately that they might get together again. Too late it now seemed; but at first Jules was inclined to suggest that if she was as calm and patient as possible, things might blow over and the marriage take off again; but as the conversation ensued he changed his mind, thinking the husband must be a rather cold stick, whilst this lady was on fire with emotions and dreams, and had obviously been completely suppressed in her marriage.

Maria explained to Jules for example, how her daughter had been raped in Los Angeles when she was seventeen, but had not told her mother. She had however told her cousin who told *her* father, the crazy dame's brother. But this brother had not told Maria, yet did tell her husband; only three years later Maria found out about it, by which time she felt she could no longer communicate properly with her daughter, and felt desperately angry with both her brother and her husband for not informing her that her daughter had been raped.

When Jules and Maria landed at Newark Airport, they became separated but after going through various immigration, customs, and security checks, they bumped into each other in yet another queue for something, by which time Maria was dropping all her boxes and bags, so that Jules had to help her take a purple velvet hat out of a broken hat-box, kick the box away, and place it on her head, on top of another, red hat; thus adorned, Maria declared:

"No one has any sense of humour here!"

Jules and Maria had to say goodbye, and Jules went on to catch his connection to Bogotá.

Jules arrived in Bogotá. That evening a huge bomb exploded in the very neighbourhood where he was staying, killing thirty-eight people in a golf-club.

“Why did they do that?” asked Jules, and a pretty Colombian girl explained that the guerrillas, or terrorists, depending on how one viewed them, imagined they were trying to liberate their country from oppression. Jules remembered Maria, the American lady on the plane, telling him that she had been in Scotland on September 11th 2001, and had been utterly broken up by the news about the attack on New York, as several of her relatives lived or worked in the area of the Twin Towers, and one of her brothers (not the one who had failed to inform her of her daughter’s rape) was in the New York Police Department. Jules also then recalled Maria saying one of the things she found frustrating about her estranged, yet still much-loved husband, was his hopelessly reactionary views about politics. She always believed she should support him, she had said to Jules on the plane, when he expressed his opinions to other people; but she had to explain to him afterwards, she added, that it was very difficult to do this when he took a pro-Bush stance concerning the latter’s trying to make wars all over the world against terrorism. She did not think a war against Iraq would help matters at all, and though not very clear about the USA’s global activities, she thought that some of all this Terrorism might in part have a little to do with the U.S.A’s bad policies around the world.

After a few days in Bogotá, Jules telephoned a girl called Sandra, that he had met a couple of years before in Bogotá. He had only realized after leaving South America the last time that he was totally in love with her.

“*Hola, mi vida!*” She exclaimed, “You are here in Bogotá? It is WONDERFUL!”

So Jules went to visit her, and found he was even more in love with her than he had imagined, and she was absolutely in love with him, desperate for him to come back, ever fearful that he had far too many girlfriends all over the world to bother about her again.

But that was not so. Jules now realized he had another chance; he realized how lucky he was in the deepest sense that such a beautiful, sexy, intelligent girl as she should really seem to be in love with him, really eager to throw in her lot with him if he were open to it, and who was prepared to trust him implicitly if he expressed his absolute, unflinching love and wish to be with her forever.

And so, that was how Jules met up with Sandra again. In complete ecstasy they spent some days in her little flat, overlooking the *Cordillera Occidental*, loving, looking into each others’ eyes, drinking, talking, planning everything possible and impossible under the moon and the sun.

One day however, Jules woke up to find Sandra was gone. It was not a work day for her, so he was perplexed. He hung around the flat for some hours, telephoned a friend of Sandra’s whose telephone number he knew, but nothing transpired to explain her absence. Late that evening, Jules was pacing about outside the apartment and on the street nearby, asking everyone if they knew where his lovely girlfriend was, when the concierge of their block of flats rushed up to

him, and said she had heard that Sandra had been kidnapped.

“What? Who by?” yelled Jules. But the concierge did not know, she said merely that a neighbour had told a friend, who told another friend of hers, that a girl looking exactly like Sandra had been bundled into a truck about a block away, whilst walking from a nearby shop. She had dropped a bag of fruit, some cans of beer, cigarettes, and some bread in the street. Nothing more was known about the event; some policemen came later so speak to Jules, but after satisfying their suspicions towards him, they had nothing new to tell him at all.

CONFLICT RESOLVED

It was most extraordinary that whenever Aloysio arrived back in Bogotá, to return to the loving womb of his beautiful girlfriend, he always heard frightening news about a man called Jackinory, a person who claimed originally to have come from the Isle of Man. Once he returned just thus, but then when inside his little apartment with his beloved Cecilia, he heard ominous news that Jackinory had moved into a house only one street away.

Whether this was coincidence or planned was difficult for Aloysio to ascertain; it was hard to believe that Jackinory could have known Aloysio was due to return on this precise date, though he might have heard he was due to return soon; and so the coincidence may have been partially accidental.

But this news only spoilt Aloysio’s happiness a very small amount, so happy was he to be back in what he now felt to be his real home, having moved from Croydon, in England, to live with Cecilia about eight months earlier.

The reason Aloysio felt so bad about Jackinory’s presence was that, about seven years before, the two of them had had a very nasty clash at an exhibition opening in Paris, where both of them, as poets, were due to read out publicly some of their poetry.

Luckily, or so it seemed to Aloysio, Jackinory was having some kind of problem with his visa, so that he needed to travel to the Ecuadorian border in order to renew it on his re-entry into Colombia. Aloysio knew exactly the procedures Jackinory would have to go through on his return to Bogotá, so he hatched a plot that would hopefully stop Jackinory from staying long in the country, and his plan was this. He knew that Jackinory would get his visa and a stamp in his passport at the border, but in Bogotá he would be obliged to visit the Immigration Police Office to have it confirmed. Aloysio found out through a friend of Cecilia's that Jackinory was planning to go to this office on a particular Thursday afternoon, and so he arranged for a very beautiful and sexy girl called Angela to intercept Jackinory after he had left the office.

And so it happened that Jackinory walked out of the office after relatively little trouble, waltzed down the street, and decided to enter a bar on a lovely sunny Thursday afternoon. Once esconced in the bar, with a beer happily in his hands, the gorgeous Angela approached him and they drank a good deal together before leaving the bar and making their way to Jackinory's room.

There, after making love according to plan, Angela managed to steal Jackinory's passport while he was in the bathroom. Only hours later did the unfortunate man notice it had disappeared!

At this point it is necessary to explain why Aloysio had resorted to such a foul deed. Jackinory was one of those people who can appear perfectly friendly, but at times turns utterly hostile and aggressive, for no particular reason, and not necessarily after drinking. On one occasion he had attacked Aloysio in a restaurant in Bogotá, without Aloysio even knowing he was there, and had ripped his shirt and broken a replica sculpture of a San Agustin protective spirit that Aloysio had with him. And years earlier, he had attacked Aloysio at the poetry reading in Paris as already mentioned, upsetting a tray of sherry glasses all over people at the event, for reasons that Aloysio understood, but which he considered quite unacceptable as an excuse.

Jackinory thought Aloysio had manipulated events to allow him to go on a trip to Bucharest to read his poetry, at the expense of Jackinory, but this had not been so. Actually, Aloysio had been invited by the Secretary of a Poetry Society in Norwich to go to Bucharest, and had known nothing of Jackinory's desperate wish to be among the visiting group. Only afterwards, on the occasion that Jackinory attacked him, had Aloysio learned of the latter's grievance.

Years later, when Aloysio found himself in Colombia, he was amazed to find that this unpleasant man Jackinory was also living in Bogotá. Aloysio would have ignored the matter, but for Jackinory's attack upon him here and his constantly speaking badly about him to people Aloysio also knew.

And so Aloysio decided not to turn the other cheek any more, and plotted with Angela to have Jackinory's passport stolen. When Angela had given Aloysio the passport he waited until news percolated through that Jackinory was at his wit's end about the loss.

Now was Aloysio's chance. He asked a man called Andrés to find an unsuspecting moment to let the distraught Jackinory know that people he knew had the passport, and to pretend they wanted to sell it back to him.

Jackinory agreed to pay Andrés twenty dollars to get his passport back. The plan was for Jackinory to come to a certain house where the crooked people would be, and these would give him his passport back for the agreed sum.

Jackinory arrived at the house at the arranged hour. But instead of a group of crooks, he found, in a dank, unlit room, no one at all. He waited for an hour, until suddenly there appeared, as if from nowhere, some devilish figures who looked exactly like the demons that fly about in Fernando Botero's painting *La Noche*. Jackinory was terrified and confused, and rushed in all directions, eventually banging his head on a bookshelf and knocking himself out.

Aloysio heard about all this the next day. Cecilia then decided the episode represented no way at all to resolve the whole problem between Aloysio and Jackinory. She insisted that when the latter had properly regained consciousness, he should be invited to a weekend retreat near Bogotá where cockfights were held, and all should be resolved once and for all in an amicable way.

Aloysio agreed, and so a week or so later he and Cecilia, Angela, Andrés and Jackinory met up in the village, where they all got drunk together, and after that Aloysio and Jackinory accepted the unfortunate facts of each others' existence, and were in conflict with each other no more.

JOSEPH BLEIMER'S ARRIVAL

Joseph Bleimer was hesitant about the whole idea of coming to South America to study pre-Hispanic gold work, but he was the ideal person to do this, as he was an archaeologist, an expert in metallurgy, and he had a Ph.D in philosophy, for which he had produced a notable, though extremely abstract thesis on the place of the visual arts in ancient, traditional societies.

Joseph was a British citizen, born in Plymouth and educated at Exeter and Oxford Universities, but his grandparents had been Jewish émigrés from Nazi Germany, who arrived in England in 1937. His mother and father, who had known each other as children in Berlin before their parents escaped to England, married in 1953, and Joseph was born in Plymouth in 1958. He was the second son of the Bleimers, and grew up very much as an English child, though extremely aware of his German Jewish origins.

Joseph, from his infancy, had always been a balanced boy, very successful at school and University, and always able to make friends, apparently in any context. Perhaps the only facet of his personality that struck others as unusual, and which worried his parents to a certain extent, was a degree of nervousness that entered his demeanour whenever he was faced with difficult choices. If, for example, he was torn between going out to meet friends somewhere on the one

hand, or staying at home and finishing a chapter of the book he was reading on the other, he could become extremely anxious, in ways that manifested themselves oddly. Once for example, when he was eighteen, Joseph had found himself in exactly such a dilemma. It was a Saturday night, and he had settled into a comfortable armchair in the family home to read Spinoza, when a friend from his school telephoned to invite him to a party, at which his friend promised he would meet a lovely girl called Sophia. The difficulty he found in deciding what to do, caused his left eye to twitch, and though in the end he did not go out, he could not read another word of Spinoza that night.

His mother had been rather worried about him on that occasion and urged him to go to the party, since staying away did not seem to settle him down. But he did not go; rather he merely paced around the living-room, until finally he went to bed and slept badly.

But Joseph was extremely clever in the intellectual sense and obtained a very good degree in Archaeology at Exeter University, some years after which he went to Oxford to do a Ph.D. In between, a strong practical bent in his personality had led him to learn, and practice, a great deal about metal-working, which knowledge he was able to apply to what was otherwise a rather theoretical education. This made his mother and father particularly proud of him; the fact that he had both a Ph.D in philosophy *and* could make beautiful gold jewellery, seemed to them to represent a wonderful convergence of artistic and practical abilities, of the masculine and the feminine spirit, in a noble, sensitive synthesis of character.

And so, after spending a good number of years as a Fellow of Corpus Christi, Cambridge, tutoring in the Philosophy of History and Archaeology, tongues among influential people wagged, so that the Catholic University in Bogotá, Colombia, invited him to come and join an international team of researchers working on the pre-Hispanic arts of Colombia.

Joseph Bleimer, as already stated, hesitated for some weeks. But the encouragement he experienced from his colleagues and superiors at Cambridge, not to mention his parents, caused him to say: "Yes." And so, one afternoon in March 2003, he stepped off a plane and was met most politely and friendlily by a group of archaeologists, philosophers, ethnographers, and linguists from the Catholic University in Bogotá.

He was immediately taken to some very comfortable lodgings in the University; before even unpacking his bags he clicked on the television that offered a very wide range of channels. Quickly he found himself tuned into BBC World, on which the latest news about war plans against Iraq were being announced. What Joseph heard shocked him profoundly. Of course he knew there was talk about War, and had been cat-and-mouse diplomacy for months; but suddenly he was hearing that War was really beginning, now. He found this incomprehensibly horrible: why, how, for what could this be necessary?

Joseph was not a 'political' kind of person; rather he looked at things more in philosophical and ethical terms. But now, here on this television screen, it was being announced that the two most powerful military states in the world were starting to attack Iraq, a Third World, Arab nation, that was unfortunate enough to labour under a clapped-out, hateful dictator.

Something gave within Joseph: perhaps he was very tired from his journey, perhaps he was suffering from jet-lag, or perhaps such news seemed particularly surreal, hearing it as he was, here in Bogotá, so soon after arriving, before even having had time to get to know anything about the place. But it was deep and horrible what happened within him; and so, after saying goodbye to the friendly hosts who had brought him to his rooms, he quickly phoned his mother in Plymouth, once he had found out the code for calling the U.K. from Colombia.

His mother was as shocked and horrified at the news as Joseph was, but had little to say either in explanation, defence, or criticism of it. This was an aspect of her kind, equable, and placid nature: she was no opinionated iconoclast, nor even was she inclined to support any particular political party with any consistency or strength of conviction. She was a gentle soul, but strong indeed in her own way, and very determined to live a good, happy life with her husband and children, each of whom she loved passionately.

So that after speaking to his mother, Joseph was not calmed at all, but all the more agitated and unhappy. But what could he do? He found to his amazement in the next few days that most people around him in Bogotá knew or cared little about the whole issue of War with Iraq. Some of the University people were knowledgeable and concerned about it, but generally their fatalistic, indeed despairing psychological orientation toward it, and their feelings of impotence in the face of it, were far greater even than his own.

AN UMBRELLA IN GUATAVITA

There was a chief of the Muisca, known later as a *cacique*, who stumbled upon his beautiful wife in bed with one of his warriors. In his fury he killed the warrior, and then at a banquet he ordered the lover's genitals to be served to his wife on a silver plate. His beautiful wife, the *cacica*, in her terror, pain, and sadness jumped up, and grabbing her son, ran very fast to the Lake of Guatavita, where she plunged with her boy deep into the waters, never to appear again. According to legend, she lived thereafter at the bottom of the lake, which because of her became sacred, forever.

But her husband, the angry *cacique*, was struck with dreadful regret when he heard what had happened, and consulted with his religious men to ask them what he should do to retrieve his beloved wife from the bottom of Lake Guatavita. They told him he must sail out to the centre of the lake in a raft covered with gold, and throw offerings of gold pieces, superb carvings, and statues of gold into the water to bring her back.

But this did not bring the *cacica*, nor his son back; in his grief and remorse, he was advised by

his religious men to repeat the ritual of throwing gold offerings into the lake every year, on the date of his wife's disappearance. And so he and his successors repeated this act for many centuries in deep penitence and endless search for a pardon from the beautiful *cacica*.

Many centuries later, there was an Englishman called Robert Glib, born in a suburb of London to lower middle-class parents, who went to a Polytechnic to study anthropology and archaeology. After graduating he was accepted into the Sociology Department of a London University to do a Ph.D. His research topic concerned the survival strategies of the poorest strata of people living on the outskirts of Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. He was determined to live with and understand the very poorest people there, those at the very bottom; the most extremely marginalised, miserable, and forgotten sections of society.

So he went to investigate a place where the people scratched their living from a huge rubbish tip, a mountain of stinking, rotting waste, from which they could pick out bottles, cans, and bits and pieces which they sold for recycling; also at times they might find an armchair, a stove, or a broken lamp, which they could restore in order to sell, renewed, somewhere or other.

The first, immediate conclusion that Robert arrived at, was that if at least these people - children, women, and men - had some kind of protective clothing, and very simple masks over their noses and mouths, then at least they would be less exposed to the unhealthy germs and infections emanating from the rubbish within which they toiled day after day. He found that many of them, especially young children, suffered from terrible rashes, spots, and skin infections, which might have been less prevalent if at least they had some minimal protection. He suggested, in a preliminary account of his research findings, that only a modest grant from an international agency dedicated to combating poverty could provide such clothing and masks, and would make an enormous difference to the lives of these people, whom he had come to love and respect more with every day he spent with them. He found they were extremely cheerful people and remarkably friendly; in particular he became very good friends with one family, the father of which was called Guillermo and the mother Maria. Two of their sons were called Bibo and Hernan. Hernan in particular he found very congenial company, for when Robert went to visit the family from time to time in their very crowded but friendly wooden shack, Hernan was sure to challenge him to a game of chess, or talk to him about poetry, for he had read poems printed in newspapers from time to time, and wrote poems of his own on scraps of paper, always extremely romantic, about the moon and the stars, and about ideal love in all its forms. He could not read or write well, but he had spent two years at school when his family had lived in a small town near Bogotá, before the father, Guillermo, had lost his job as a furniture repairer for the hotel in this town. Both Guillermo and Maria were strong enthusiasts of education, though they had had none themselves, at least in any formal sense at all; Maria in particular being a great lover of local myths and legends, one of her favourites being that concerning the *cacica* of Guatavita. This story she had told her children many times, always in slightly different ways, but always with great passion and sensitive drama, and Hernan had grown up to love it, almost to breathe it, so that as an adolescent, when he met Robert Glib, he could convey its essence with marvellous intensity. Robert had heard the legend before, but only when Hernan narrated it to him with his

youthful fervour did he feel the full strength of its tragic poetry.

Robert was not surprised at this family's grandness in survival, its intense honesty and spiritual strength in the face of deep poverty and material hopelessness, for he was an imaginative young man, deeply engaged in political philosophies of justice and emancipation; and in any case his own life had not been that easy, though certainly it did not compare in difficulty with the family of Guillermo and Maria. But he was impressed, even overawed by them, in a way that affected his being and his feelings so that he knew he would never forget them.

One day Bibo and Hernan invited him to go with them to another home in the *barrio*, where two babies seemed to be dying of indistinct illnesses. Their little bodies were covered in spots, and they were screaming all the time. The brothers had brought Robert there to meet the uncle of these babies. He was called Pedro, and he was a fantastic musician. He played the *quattro* and sang *llanera* songs with such intensity that a listener could turn crazy. He wore an exhausted, huge black hat, was dirty and unshaven, but when his voice burst out with passion, and his eyes flashed in inspired intensity, you might think he was some kind of god of music, a shaman of the *primaeval* soul, an artist of the deepest emotional vocation.

Robert Glib had spent ten months in this *barrio* to the south of Bogotá. One day he received an e-mail that he picked up in an internet café, from a Colombian girl that he had met in the few weeks he had stayed at the *Universidad Nacional* in central Bogotá, before starting his 'fieldwork.' Her name was Norma, and in her e-mail she asked him to please give her a ring, or drop in on her at the Department of Tourism at the University.

Robert was dying for a break from his existence in the *barrio* where he was conducting his research; and he had found this girl Norma most attractive; so indeed he telephoned her. She suggested they go to the village of Nueva Guatavita, near the sacred *Laguna de Guatavita* the following weekend, which was a national holiday.

Robert jumped at the idea, and so he met Norma and they left the next Friday, to stay the weekend at a hotel in Nueva Guatavita.

Already in the bus on the way there, Robert started to fall in love with this girl, whom he had felt very warm towards before, but had not yet felt in love with. Once in Nueva Guatavita, the two relaxed in their hotel in a state of blissful, honeyed love. On the Sunday of the weekend there was a torrential downpour with crashing thunder, forking lightning, and harsh pounding hailstones. As they were planning to leave the hotel for a walk, the kind Señora at the hotel offered to lend them an umbrella, and off they went into the rain.

After walking around the town, they sat down in a café from where they could see a stupendous sunset, with a dark, imposing heaviness of clouds in the blue-black sky, with streaks of soft, terrifying, intense pink and orange colours, such as anyone could understand might cause 'pre-scientific' people, living virtually unprotected from the elements, to believe in wild, capricious, angry, bizarre, ferocious gods and spirits.

After drinking a few bottles of beer, they left the café and walked back to the hotel. Norma rang

the bell, and started to kiss Robert in a typically delicious Latin way while they waited for the Señora to open up. When the Señora came to the door she immediately asked how bad it had been in the rain. Robert started to answer that it had not been bad at all, as the constant change of colours had made everything a miraculous experience. But before he could finish speaking, Norma suddenly remembered that she had left the umbrella behind in the café, and cried out, “Oh dear, I’m sorry, I forgot the umbrella, Señora!”

A CASE OF SOME MISPLACED UNDERPANTS

Jook absolutely could not understand what had happened to his pen when he arrived in Libano; he knew that he had had it in his shoulder bag, but as soon as he tried to snatch it out to catch an ‘inspiration’, it was gone. He had wanted to write a short story called *Drunk Chicken, Or, Whatever Happened To The Underpants*, but he equivocated about that title and wondered whether the story would not be better called *How Everything Went Pear-Shaped In Libano*. In the end however, he settled for the title *A Case Of Some Misplaced Underpants*, as the reader can see for him or herself.

Jook’s name needs to be explained. As an adolescent, he had had a deep infatuation, if not an obsession, with 1950s juke-boxes. When he reached the age of twenty-one, he decided to change his name, by Deed Poll, to Juke, but he changed his mind and came to feel his relationship to a juke-box was too simplistically expressed by that name, whereas Jook still held a reverberation

with juke-boxes, but was looser, more casual, even crazier he thought, so he chose Jook as his name when he came to change it legally. He had thought he would name himself Jook Charia, but ended up dropping Charia; for why should he have a separate first name and surname? Thus he came to know himself, and became known by others as Jook, and felt very happy with this name whatever vicissitudes overtook him in his life thereafter.

Jook was often overtaken by a sense of purposelessness in life; he was not an existential nihilist by any means, and rather despised those kinds of philosophy as metaphysical exaggerations, and as egotistical self-pitying displays of inverted self-importance.

It was merely that, when he stayed in a small town or village in South America, where people simply lived and survived, without any of those delusions of ‘progress’ and ‘advance’ that overtake the much drearier cultures of the North, he was so struck by the thought that life really leads nowhere. But why should it, he also thought? Lead where? It was not a question of whether all people should attain some sense of profound self-fulfilment; that was clearly impossible, and in any case even people like prophets, Julius Caesar, Tony Blair, or the Archbishop of Canterbury, Director Generals and assorted Great Men and Women; what had even they ever really achieved, either for themselves or for the people they loved or who loved them, or for their countries, or for Truth, Justice, Equality, or Freedom?

Life was just something to live, like a chicken in the back-yard of a friendly house in Libano; laying eggs and squawking far too early in the morning, just as the streaking dawn begins to play its magic among the sky’s miracles. There was nothing depressing about this directionlessness; on the contrary it was wonderful, and if people could only accept it, wars would be less likely to occur, with all their attendant absurd ideological justifications. Jook had been reading about the ‘War Of One Thousand Days’ that engulfed Colombia between 1899 and 1902 in barbaric and unholy violence, in which many participants scarcely knew for what they were fighting. Priests preached from pulpits that to kill Liberals was a great service to God, and Jook remembered his father parading in the family kitchen with a lavatory brush when he was a child, shouting both orders from officers and responses from the men in an imaginary army, because he had suffered and experienced such deep emotions and intense sensations in War.

Before coming to Libano, Jook had stayed many months in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, studying pre-Hispanic Colombian history, learning how the extreme geographical and climatic diversity of the country had prevented the many wonderful cultures - Quimbaya, Tolima, Muisca, Tairona, San Agustin, etc. etc. - from uniting or being conquered into a unitary state as had occurred in Peru, especially under the Incas. One night, he had been drinking rum in a bar with his girlfriend Claudia, who had previously gone shopping and had filled her bag with tomatoes and a lettuce. When they left the bar, Jook and Claudia took a taxi back home, and presumably in the back of that taxi Claudia’s mobile phone and wallet had fallen out of her bag. The two of them got home safely, but after the tomatoes and lettuce had been safely deposited in the refrigerator, Claudia realized she did not have the phone or her wallet, with all her important documents, identification cards, and addresses scribbled onto torn pieces of paper.

However Claudia, with great wherewithal, knew the number of her mobile phone and called it from their ordinary phone in the apartment; the taxi-driver answered, and admitted he had both

the phone and the wallet. He said he would give them back for an agreed sum, so Jook went to meet the man at a crossroads at six o'clock in the morning.

Unfortunately Jook thought the man would be waiting for him on foot, but in fact he turned up in the back of his taxi with someone else driving it, and did not open the window widely enough for Jook to snatch the wallet. Jook offered the agreed sum, but now the taxi-driver wanted more; his appetite had obviously been whetted by the sight of a man willing to pay an extortion fee for Claudia's possessions. The encounter ended unsuccessfully; the taxi thrust forward and a bemused Jook was left waving sixty thousand pesos into the polluted dawn air.

Shortly after this experience, Claudia and Jook took a bus to Libano. It was a fantastic journey, through the most grandiose mountain scenery, the road plunging down into valleys and grinding up to massive heights where the views were breath-taking and awe-inspiring; rivers flowed their silvery or brown ways along valley bottoms, mists encircled and bewitched the mountain-tops, the greenness was beyond imagination's grasp, as the bus growled its way through the wild mountains, along the twisting roads sometimes paved and sometimes earth-tracked, until they entered dusk and early night, in which a huge full moon revolved and burned in a dark-blue, cloud-scattered sky, the sound of the engine warming the heart as this small group of human beings groaned along into the growing night.

How strange when they arrived in Libano! It was night-time, and Don Martin kindly accompanied them to the house of Claudia's mother. Jook was introduced to the very friendly mother, shown where the lavatory in the courtyard was, and then they sat down to drink *aguardiente*. Jook had often wondered why it was that people who lived in quiet towns and villages so often drank more heavily than people who lived in exhausting, chaotic cities; and here he found another example of this enigma. Two of Claudia's brothers joined the throng, and within a few hours everyone was extremely drunk and jolly. One of the brothers challenged Jook to stand on his head, and the other was taken by a great desire to balance Jook's Spanish-English dictionary on his shoulder while he danced extremely competently.

At length the conversation turned to theological matters; Claudia's mother believed fervently in satanic bats that frequently flew about at night. At a certain point, one of Claudia's brothers told Jook jovially that he would cut his balls off if he treated his sister badly, to which Jook retorted in a pleasant way that he would do the same to the brother if he treated his own wife badly.

Finally, everyone retired to bed; a few hours later Claudia woke up and was told by one of her brothers' wives that Jook's underpants had been found on the floor of the mother's bedroom. Furious, Claudia woke up Jook, flicked his ear hard, and demanded an explanation for this extraordinary, untoward eventuality. But Jook, in all honesty, could only remember collapsing into bed when the night of drinking had come to an end.

Jook was therefore greatly offended at what he took to be Claudia's suggestion that he had behaved improperly. He jumped from the bed, still drunk, pulled on his clothes, and staggered out from the house. He intended to find a bar where he could relax and collect his confused thoughts, but Claudia would not allow him to roam around alone in Libano in the bright, sunny dawn, so she followed him and eventually persuaded him to go with her to visit another of her

brothers who ran a shop near the centre of the town. There they went; and amid the horseshoes, ropes, saddles and baskets, they were seated warmly at a small table, and served glasses of pure rum or *aguardiente*. Everyone spoke of poetry, music, and the beauty of nature in the Andes; Claudia's brother declared that love was the most important thing in life, all else signifying nothing. Jook stared out from the shop at the horses, the old colonial-style houses in the sun, and the mountains that gloriously ringed the town. He was inclined to agree with this third brother of Claudia's, and turned to kiss his girlfriend.

"Do you love her?" asked the brother.

"Oh yes," replied Jook, and once again felt wonderfully happy.

SPLIM TOCHTER

The thing Splim Tochter simply could not understand when he asked Silviana if she wanted to go back to their room, was that instead of answering yes or no, she jumped into the middle of the road and began to dance. They were in Honda, one of the oldest towns in Colombia, which had been a major port and centre of communication in the *Nuevo Reino de Granada*, full of winding cobbled streets and white houses, bridges and storehouses, with an atmosphere steeped in history and fascination, surrounded by mountains where Indian tribes had once lived, until they were crushed, murdered, and suppressed by the Spanish, not without fighting until the bitter end, so resolute that their women aborted or killed their babies so that none should become slaves to the cruel conquerors.

Their heroism some historians say, ensured that for many decades Spanish colonists did not dare to enter the wild mountainous terrain even after the Indians had been exterminated, as if for generations the Spaniards continued to fight with the shadows of the Pijaos and Panches, who had not accepted conquest or enslavement, preferring death to such humiliation and living misery.

But a few moments later Silviana jumped back from the middle of the road, and in a gesture of exaltation and awe opened her arms to the Andean stars; then, grabbing Splim Tochter's hand, she dragged him forthwith to another bar, run by one Anaximander whom she had known years before; where they sat down to drink another bottle of rum.

Silviana came from a village near Honda, where she had learnt to ride a horse from an early age. She knew all the herbs and fruits of the region, and danced magnificently. She and Splim Tochter drank rum in Anaximander's bar till dawn, when the bright sun filled the green mountains around Honda with glorious light. A small boy asked Splim Tochter for money, but Splim preferred to buy him a packet of biscuits, so he asked Anaximander to give him one. A teenager came over to snatch some of Splim Tochter's rum, while another tried to lean over Silviana and make erotic suggestions towards her.

The *Vallenata* music started up again loudly and triumphantly, until Slim Tochter and Silviana were moved to stumble back to their room, in which the fan was mercifully still turning, as without it the room would have been sweltering. Before leaving the bar, Anaximander shook hands with Splim Tochter, and invited him to go fishing in the Rio Magdalena a little later that morning: a slightly unrealistic prospect given the drunken state of all concerned.

A dog, and then a chicken, stood in the way of their entry into the house where Silviana and Splim Tochter stayed. In the room at the bottom of the broken-up house an old man was watching a television, and Splim Tochter could tell it was an American film about the Vietnam War, with soldiers talking in short blurts about their girlfriends back home, arguing about a rough dog one of them kept, with a sergeant to remind them of the real reasons they were all there, heroically fighting something bad in Vietnam. He stumbled up the few stone steps with Silviana to their room, where they collapsed on a broken bed and fell asleep, half staring out of a cracked window at the Río Gualí, on the banks of which fluttered and croaked some gorgeous ugly vultures, presumably looking for dead fish, or perhaps even a dead rat, or cat.

VANESSA

Vanessa invited Joaquin to her flat one Sunday afternoon, ostensibly to discuss with him some wall-painting she wanted him to do for her, but really her intentions were quite different. Joaquin was a Colombian asylum seeker, a political exile residing in Glasgow and earning his living doing various kinds of work, and had been introduced to Vanessa by Nadia and Orestes, who lived in the flat below her. Orestes and Vanessa had been neighbours for several years, and as far as Orestes had been concerned, they were quite good friends. But Vanessa was now sixty-two

years old, had been abandoned by her husband, and had only a highly unsatisfactory and irregular, fluctuating relationship with another, alcoholic man.

Nadia was also Colombian, and had come to Glasgow with Orestes only a few months before. The two had met in Colombia, and were very much in love.

On that cold, dark, wet December late afternoon in her flat, Vanessa solemnly announced to Joaquin that she was worried for Nadia's future. Orestes was much too old for her, she stated imperiously, standing in the middle of her living-room, and was a mad, bad, eccentric man, who was moreover not in good health, as he had confessed to her that he needed to take various kinds of medication, ranging from heart tablets to anti-depressant pills. Joaquin should come to Nadia's rescue, as an innocent young girl and a fellow Colombian, and open her eyes to the fact that she was with a man wholly unsuitable for her. Joaquin found it all most uncomfortable, especially as Vanessa's ex-husband and her occasional new partner were sitting on a sofa across from his armchair while Vanessa was delivering this verdict on Orestes. But he repeated to Nadia what Vanessa had told him, and the effect of this on Nadia was seismic.

She rushed out of Orestes' flat and went to stay with a girlfriend called Dana, a young Czech lady whom she had come to know in Glasgow. Dana suggested Nadia travel with her the very next day to the Czech Republic, as she was anyway going there to stay a couple of weeks with her parents who lived in a small town near Prague.

So Nadia went with Dana, but something terrible happened in Prague, before they had even arrived at Dana's home town. Dana introduced Nadia to a very handsome man called Stepan. Because Nadia was somewhat 'up in the air', she accepted an invitation to go to a nightclub with Stepan in Prague. But she never arrived at the nightclub; Stepan locked her in a van with two other women, all gagged and bound, and started to drive the van out of and away from Prague, where to, Nadia could have no idea.

Meanwhile, Orestes had come back to his flat in Glasgow to find Nadia had disappeared. Joaquin explained to him what had occurred, and in desperation Orestes made immediate plans to fly to Colombia and go to Libano, Nadia's home town, where at least he could be with her anxious relatives and would be able to garner any news that might arrive about Nadia's whereabouts.

Orestes felt that Vanessa had wholly misjudged and misunderstood Nadia and himself, as well as the relationship between them. Nadia was not a child at thirty years of age, even if she was considerably younger than he. And there were many different ways of viewing madness and craziness in human beings; and anyway what constitutes 'normality' in a crazy, mad world? Her interference and deliberate attempt to wreck the relationship between him and Nadia was wicked, malevolent, and malicious.

Soon after Orestes arrived in Libano, he received a distraught letter from Dana in Prague, explaining that Nadia had disappeared, full of guilt and remorse and begging that she might come to meet him in Libano, where together they might track down Nadia. Orestes wrote back, accepting Dana's suggestion. When Dana arrived in Libano she brought further news: before leaving Prague she had heard that Nadia was probably on her way, gagged and bound in Stepan's

van, to somewhere in Tajikistan, from where Stepan controlled a trade in women to various parts of the world.

Orestes resolved now to search for Nadia in Tajikistan, though he had no idea where to start in that huge country, about which he knew scarcely anything. So he and Dana set out on their new journey, not knowing that by now Nadia had been shipped to a villa near Rome, where a gang of rich mafia crooks hid out, immersed in and surrounded by a bevy of captive women available for their pleasure.

Orestes heard in due course, in a sorrowful letter from Vanessa, that Nadia had died in Rome from an unknown cause. He and Dana had got as far as the Azores, on their way to Tajikistan, when they received this letter from Vanessa, which Orestes regarded as a hypocritical pretence at remorse. He was utterly devastated, and Dana feared he might kill himself.

But the news of Nadia's death turned out to be untrue. Nadia had not died, but had rather escaped from the rich gangsters' villa, and found her way to Rome. Apparently she believed Orestes was looking for her there, and hoped he would find her. She had come to believe that Vanessa's warnings were spiteful and false, motivated only by jealousy and resentment.

Orestes hoped he might at least be able to trace the place of Nadia's death in Rome, and perhaps her grave. Dana returned to Glasgow, broken-hearted at having to accept that Orestes did not love her as she hoped he might. Orestes went to Rome alone, and miraculously he met Nadia there, in the oldest part of the city. Standing outside a small jewellery shop, on a thin cobbled street, they embraced and kissed each other, without speaking at all for quite a long time.

JILRON AND THE FOUR CHICKENS

For good reasons, Jilron could not get up that day. He had looked at a Victorian picture, part diagram and part photograph, the day before, and this had led him into a most strange experience. As he focused on one of the second-floor windows of the building in this picture, the shutters seemed to open, and he saw into the interior life of a family who were in some disarray. The father, a young man called Samper, had enrolled in a mercenary brigade that was due to set

sail the next day for Labrador; the wife, called Ginebvre, was a French-born lass who was pummelling her husband on the chest to persuade him not to go. One of their children, Charles, was playing dangerously inside an empty barrel of cider; another, Slippy, was a very tall girl of thirteen years who was chucking some fish-bones into a dirty sink, refusing to obey her mother who was telling her to throw the bones out onto the rubbish heap outside the house.

It was not clear to Jilron *why* he had been invited, so to speak, into the hearth of this poor family's life and problems. But he had not shrunk away from the experience; he had watched it through, until something abominable in his own life had broken his concentration and dragged him irrevocably from his voyeuristic involvement.

His mother, who did not normally live in the same house as him, marched into the room where he was looking at the picture-photograph and snatched it away from him; shouting angrily, she then threw it into a burning fire, so that Jilron could never follow up on the strange adventure he had begun. Instead, he had to cope with his mother's wrath, make her some cocoa, and put her to bed in her preferred bedroom; which was just one of several in his house, which he was obliged to maintain for his mother, though she only rarely came to stay there.

And so, the day after these peculiar events, Jilron decided to stay in his bed, and think about things in a philosophical sort of way. He came to the conclusion, by about two o'clock in the afternoon, that it really made no difference what one did in life at all, in terms of how people thought about you; that is, whether they liked you or not. If you tried to be kind, people were bound to dislike you; if you were bad-tempered and horrible, they would probably think you were a fine person. If you tried to do 'good things', you would undoubtedly be distrusted and despised, while if you were foul, you might well become well-thought of!

However, Jilron found absolutely no satisfaction in these thoughts. It was as if he would have preferred to arrive at different conclusions, but could not, and so he constantly bounced from one rock of thought to another without finding any resting-place for his mind, which just rolled on and on exhaustingly.

At length, as he finally fell into a deep sleep, Jilron began to feel there were four poles to existence: north, south, east, and west; intuition, intellect, sensation, emotion; fire, water, earth, and air. And so, although obviously nobody outside could record this very subjective experience, Jilron dreamed himself into some tranquillity. But a most extraordinary aspect of this partial peace that Jilron found himself participating in was that the four poles in his mind came to take on the form of four *chickens*; and these four fowl squawked very loudly, making a noise that could have raised the dead in the village where his mother normally lived!

And so at last it was with great relief that Jilron faded away from everything here narrated, into a very different, relaxing dream of water-lilies, peacocks, and giant lizards.

PETER CLEVES MOVES HOUSE

Peter Cleves was a tall, rather gangling man, who had arrived at what might be termed a mini-crisis in his life. He was twenty-nine years old, with his thirtieth birthday only days away. He had graduated from College some six years earlier in Accountancy, and after about a year during

which time he could not find a suitable job, he eventually got one with a small firm of Chartered Accountants. He had stuck at this post for the next five years, until a moment came when he felt he should leave it.

It was not that he was taken over by some new inclination toward a different career or vocation, and certainly not because he had found, or even coveted the idea of, any other particular job. It was just that he felt it was time to leave the firm of Chartered Accountants he was presently with. He had no great alternative plans at all; he had come to realize he was not the marrying type, and so he felt no sense of irresponsibility about dropping his present career. What he needed, he felt, was time to consider in what direction he wanted to go.

Now, Peter Cleves had an auntie who lived in a very fine suburban house all alone. She had often asked Peter, whose parents were no longer alive, whether he wouldn't like to come and live with her. Peter had not been tempted to do so hitherto, as his job was in the centre of town, and he had a bed-sit conveniently near to his office. But now he thought, why not accept his auntie's repeated invitation! Why not jack in his dreary room, stop wasting money on the rent, and go to live in his auntie's fine house? As he had decided to give up his job, what did it matter if he was stuck in the suburbs?

So Peter made the move. He spent two or three days getting his things into place in the very decent, slightly dark, but well-furnished bedroom he was to occupy in his auntie's house. Once comfortably and firmly entrenched with his things in his new bedroom, he felt he would relax a little, so he went down on the fourth night to his auntie's very grand living-room, and to her delight he accepted her invitation to take a glass of sherry with her.

The elderly lady poured out into an excellent cut-glass, crystal sherry-glass, a handsome glass of finest dry sherry. Peter Cleves went over to her to take the glass. He put it to his lips, and just as he started to taste the very high quality, driest kind of sherry you can possibly imagine, his auntie spoke to him:

“Well then, Peter, what do you intend to do with the rest of your life?”

Peter mumbled a reply, pointing out that he was precisely planning to think about that in the coming period. So his auntie changed the subject, and started to talk about Peter's dead parents.

“Your mother certainly had a very determined character,” she said.

At this moment Peter Cleves saw the head of a huge snake poke out from under the table next to which his auntie was standing. The fine lace tablecloth covering the table almost touched the ground, so that the snake's mouth could reach Peter's auntie's foot and ankle without much else of its body becoming visible. But as it emerged, Peter Cleves was horrified to realize this snake was enormous. It was not a member of any species he could recognize; it was a hideous kind of serpent, green, brown and mauve, and it grabbed his auntie's ankle and foot in its teeth, though she seemed to feel nothing. She simply slipped under the table, where first the snake's head, then her leg, then the rest of her body, disappeared without a sound. As her head also receded under the lace table-cloth, Peter's auntie was still speaking, her face indicating no concern, no pain.

Peter was utterly horrified, but found himself in a sort of paralysis, his mouth wide open, but as silent as the snake. Once his auntie had completely disappeared from sight, he began to relax slightly, and quickly came to the opinion that there was no point in moving the table-cloth or searching for his auntie under the table. He felt that this extraordinary happening was something better left alone, not pried into or probed. So after a few minutes, during which time he finished drinking his fine dry sherry, he decided to climb the wonderfully hand-carved walnut staircase at the centre of the house, walk to his room, and go to sleep.

He had no trouble falling asleep quickly, as he was quite tired after all the effort of moving into his new home. And he slipped very soon into a dream: blue skies with fluffy white wisps of cloud, a mild, pleasant wind, a sort of extreme, trance-like silence. He was on the top of a huge mountain peak; all around him were other equally huge, immensely high mountain heights. He was in the company of three Sixteenth Century Spanish *Conquistadores*, so he realized he must be in the Andes of Peru, Bolivia, or Colombia; or perhaps Ecuador. It was very exhilarating there, up so high; he came in time to understand that one of the Spaniards was called Fernando Vásquez de Arce, the other was José Gómez de Morillo, but the third one's name he did not find out. The three were engaged in an almighty struggle to cross these mountains, and kept falling down the peaks. Monstrously huge eagles – he counted seven of them – were constantly swooping down upon the *Conquistadores*, sometimes hitting them. Among the seven eagles there were three condors also swooping down on and in between the men, and were also sometimes bashing them on their heads, or arms, or legs, or bodies, with their wings.

Peter Cleves awoke in the morning to the sound of his auntie calling up the walnut staircase. Once he had focused his concentration on the waking world, he realized she was asking him if he would like a cup of tea. Peter got up, put on his dressing-gown that was hanging on a hook on the inside of his bedroom door, then went out of his room and onto the landing. He leant over the bannisters towards his smiling auntie; she seemed to remember nothing of what had happened the night before, so Peter decided not to mention it. Instead, he thanked his auntie, said “yes” to her kind offer, and then went back into his bedroom in his new home, to relax and wait for her to bring him his cup of tea.

THEY AND THEIR SILLY GAMES

In his imagination, Vikrig conceived of an enormous conflagration. He was a Jew, and knew that as he sat by a sacred scroll, that would make him especially guilty, in spite of the fact that his father and all the other squat-flies had converted to Christianity or Buddhism many eons ago.

There was an especially nasty dog called Crock, who tried to defend Vikrig against prejudice, but he was the first to perish, as he wore on one right toe a flag of Estonia, and on the other, a flag of Paraguay.

Vikrig also disappeared, but his dream remained, with all the worm-like creatures that peopled it: the blue-flied arse-lickers, the kings of cockroach soup, the cooks of flea-cream. Also, there were some angry memo-recorders who had stood very close to a Lithuanian grave when in 1942 Nazis had shot Jews into it, one of whom was called Szchlapp, who was with his twelve-year old son, named Hosta. Szchlapp had had the wherewithal to push Hosta into the grave before the Nazi bullets fired and killed him, so that he fell flat onto his son who was still alive, and thus he saved him.

The thing was that Szchlapp was a poet, so he had well realized it was soon to be time for him to die, as NOBODY ever understands poetry, and that is very dangerous. But he saved his son Hosta, who after the War became a leading advocate of the Palestinian people's rights in their struggle against Israeli Conquest and Occupation. Hosta found himself very much at home among Palestinians, who were, not surprisingly, particularly susceptible to bursting into tears when Hosta spoke of how his father Szchlapp had saved him as a boy. Together they enjoyed listening to the music of Mahler, especially the Ninth Symphony. The power, pain, bleeding, strength and honesty of this music took hold especially in the mind of one young Palestinian girl called Amal, who was only twelve, but felt that the music reverberated right into her very soul. Amal had grown up in a Palestinian refugee camp in the Lebanon, but she hated politics. Not only did she come to love Mahler's music, but she discovered one day *The Diary of Anne Franck*, and on another day Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, at the same time as she came to realize that the greatest Islamic mosaic art was utterly and mystically divine, perfect, and wonderful, and found that she could feel Salvation when she beheld it openly, and with a beautiful eye.

ALEJANDRO CAME TO VISIT

He always remembered the curtains, with their embroidered patterns, that let in the light to varying degrees depending on the strength of the sun, silver-white and strange in some inexplicable way. It was as if he could imagine anything at all in them, and as if it did not matter what was outside of them: men in blue uniforms hurrying along the road, people drinking beer at oak tables, cartloads of pears or melons being pulled along the streets, or lorries full of dusty bricks breaking down.

He started when he was older, to think about his grandmother on his father's side, how she had had a really rather cynical, humorous view of life, quite down-to-earth, sparing no one she spoke about with her sharp, critical tongue. It had not seemed that way when he was young of course: his grandmother had in those days represented the ultimate in respectable, reasonable behaviour and speech to him, her varnished cocktail cabinet holding within it a peaceful decorum that he had never encountered again in his life in such a form.

Once, years later, he talked to a girl at a bar in a strip-club, just after she had done a most sexy strip-dance, about his grandmother, because the girl had spoken to him about her grandfather, a farmer who had died some ten years earlier, but whom this girl held in very firm affection in her heart.

He lived however, with a deep pain in his being that no rational analysis could erase, concerning his children from the first of his three marriages; whom he rarely saw now, and whom he suspected had a low opinion of him, after years of hearing only their mother's point of view about the past.

He was living in a bed-sit in Notting Hill Gate when an old acquaintance rang his bell one day. The latter was a Colombian man, who had been a companion of his many years before in Bogotá, by the name of Alejandro. Alejandro had been a student of Agricultural Sciences, and was the son of a proud *campesino* family from Tolima. His father had died at fifty, but his mother had sturdily continued to live on in their tiny *finca*, although Alejandro's brothers and sisters (seven in all) had, like him, all left the farm. Alejandro had gone to Bogotá and after graduating had drifted somewhat, writing poetry, listening to Pink Floyd, daydreaming, entertaining radical revolutionary thoughts, and learning more and more about the music of Richard Strauss.

It was in this phase of his life that Alejandro met the protagonist of our story, and they had a great deal in common. They had got drunk together, discussed and listened to all kinds of music, and sometimes had met nice girls. After some years in Colombia however, our hero had drifted back to Great Britain, and was living in the above-mentioned bed-sit in London, when Alejandro turned up out of the blue.

Alejandro was invited in; the two of them drank a good deal of rum, until at length Alejandro was offered a sofa to sleep on. The two men slept for about fourteen hours, and woke up at almost the same moment. There was then a sudden, almighty explosion, and both of their consciousnesses faded very sharply into oblivion, although the process seemed to each of them subjectively quite slow and gradual. Of course, neither of them could know that their lives were

being ended by the explosion of a bomb, thrown into the hall of the Notting Hill Gate house in which they were residing!

GREEN DREAM, BROKEN SKY

O how ridiculous to feel in a dream such wonderful beauty as to jump into the air on a summer's lawn, and drink a deep draught of Somerset cider! Yet that is exactly what Jooper dreamt, at the same moment as his girlfriend Akartica dreamt of butterflies, one of which danced upon her dead father's head, while another pulled at her mother's Spanish-style blue-green dress. At the very same moment, strangely, Akartica dived into frozen, beautiful water, following a penguin, and saw under the water some brilliantly-coloured leaves, like coral or ostrich feathers, like kisses in a psychedelic trip, like the smell of a woman's juices in the right part of a deep night, when all should shut their mouths, but if they don't, they should at least have the dignity to encourage astral auras to appear that befit New World revelations!

The point was, unfortunately, that the dreamer of the first fantasy thus narrated was unsure whether he was sleeping, or indeed was in a dream. His existential and metaphysical uncertainty was in no way resolved when a woman of the most remarkable beauty entered his vision, smiling at him with her most beautiful lips, twinkling at him with the most glorious, flaming, eyes.

His confusion only increased at the sight of her approaching face, at the soft sleepiness of her kiss. Her glorious red lips were like blood against the Moscow snow, her jet-black hair ecstatic against the frozen half-blue light of a Russian sky.

Soon he returned to the worry of his brother-in-law, who had quarrelled but two nights ago with his wife, leaving everyone frightened that their marriage was on the point of breaking down. But his focusing on this matter of major concern did not render any solutions in his mind; which is after all the main point: having identified a problem, is there any realistic solution to it? If there isn't, perhaps the sleepy traditionalists were right all the way along, though without having thought through or struggled through the big problems of life. All that must or can be done is to breathe deep, relax, and *dream right*. And if that can't be done, at least all concerned might be reasonable enough to shut up and not cause more disturbance than absolutely necessary.

STAP THE DREAMER

Funnily enough, Stap Izrog had never wanted to go out at all that day. The friends he was staying with lived in what for him was a rather dreary, suburban house, with all the usual comfortable 'mod cons', but he found it boring, and outside the street and local shopping centre were even worse, as far as he was concerned. He had always preferred to live slap-bang in the centre of a city, or else far out in the countryside, preferably in a remote tropical rain forest, or if possible, in Antarctica.

And so, he consoled himself with a cup of Nescafe, and sat in a plush sofa, from which he viewed CNN on his friends' wonderful television.

After a little while he fell into a deep sleep, in which he heard someone shout to him quite desperately:

"Stap! Can you hear me? I am in a deep cave now, but I want to say something to you in case I die of suffocation in the next few minutes. I was too young to join the army in time for the War, like your father, but I was living in Streatham when the bombs fell, and I knew your father's family quite well, and often said hello to his sisters, your aunts, as they hurried along the streets to school in the mornings, jogging their satchels up and down on their backs, yapping away one to another, about what I was never quite able to catch.

"This is my last chance to say it, but please listen to me! You must believe that the people who lived in that area of London were very fine people, and had many quiet, heroic characteristics, which were quite born out when the War came and the bombing began. Never forget that!"

Stap was utterly confused by this outburst. He had never had a negative view of people who lived in Streatham anyway, but so far as 'heroism' was concerned, he tended to think that people everywhere, and in any period of history, became brave when under threat, when challenged or attacked, and could not see why Patagonians or Lithuanians or Taiwanese people should be assumed to be any more or less 'heroic' than anyone else when the chips were down. It was all down to the nervous system, synapses, and chemicals carried in the blood he thought, not nationality or ideology.

At this moment in his reverie however, Stap Izrog was prodded back into a waking, conscious state by a ring at the door of the dreary, suburban house in which he was slumbering. He went as quickly as he could to the door, at which stood a newspaper boy, delivering a copy of *The Daily Blot* to the house, which Stap gratefully received. Before he had even returned to his sofa however, his attention was caught by a story on the front page, which spoke of a community of *campesinos* living in a village in the *Cordillera Central* of Colombia, where there was an epidemic of some unidentified illness, that affected only old women and young boys. Old women suffering from this affliction experienced severe neck pains, whilst young boys were struck down by a curious kind of paralysis around their knee-bones, which prevented them from running or even walking normally.

On page five of *The Daily Blot* there was a story about a teenage girl in Lima, Peru, who had written a story for a Lima magazine, but had not been paid for it even six months after its publication. Her parents had reacted furiously to this lack of honesty, but a neighbour was quoted as saying the girl was very lucky to have had her story put in print at all, and had really no reason to complain.

Stap Izrog put the newspaper down onto a coffee table, and chose a CD from his friends' collection. He picked a piece by Borodin, and sat down to listen to it. Whilst listening, he sank into a daydream, and started to think about a story his mother had told him once many years before, about a boyfriend who had been driving her home after going to the cinema, and who made a mistake at some traffic lights, and put his foot on the accelerator rather than the brake, and had nearly crashed the car against a concrete wall. But Stap did not wake up from this reverie; rather he found himself utterly transformed into a Jordanian frog, flopping about in a desert puddle, and after a while seemed no longer to possess any coherent consciousness at all.

WHO WAS SAMINO FORERO?

It had been an absolute mystery to Ricardo as to how his cousin Luz had disappeared. It was only six or seven years later that he came across a clue, quite unexpectedly, when he happened to take a taxi one day with a woman who was a 'friend', or rather lover, not his wife. Sitting together in the back of the taxi, Ricardo and this woman, called Blanca, began to argue.

The subject of their argument was some gossip that had come to Blanca's ears from a neighbour of hers. This neighbour had heard from the local shop-keeper that Blanca was pregnant from Ricardo, which was not true, but when Blanca told Ricardo she had heard that this shop-keeper, called Samino, had said this, Ricardo was furious, and shouted at Blanca that she was merely conspiring and making trouble, hoping that Ricardo's wife would hear about everything, and that then Ricardo would be utterly wrecked and destroyed.

Of course, Ricardo knew he was being somewhat selfish and two-faced in this outburst; but at the same time Blanca realized he was to some extent speaking the truth, as indeed she was slightly embellishing the truth about the details of the gossip.

At that moment in the argument between Ricardo and Blanca, to their great surprise the taxi-driver piped in:

"Is that Samino Forero you're talking about?" he asked.

Stunned in silence, Blanca peeped:

"Yes, do you know him?"

"Yes I do!" bellowed the taxi-driver. "He is a complete son-of-a-bitch, a bastard, a liar, a cheat!" he yelled, nearly crashing the taxi.

"Why?" squeaked out Ricardo, "why?"

"He raped my cousin, and then told my mother that she had seduced *him!*" screeched the taxi-driver.

He was now quite beside himself, and pulled the taxi into a side-lane, then stopped.

"We're very sorry to hear about that," said Blanca, and she and Ricardo began to move and prepare to get out of the taxi.

"No, no!" shouted the taxi-driver in a sad, plaintive voice. "I'll take you where you want to go."

And so Ricardo and Blanca stayed where they were, and the taxi drove off once again.

None of the three spoke any more now; the driver found his way onto the main *autopista*, and soon the vehicle was moving along at quite a decent lick. All three were beginning to relax, just as a traffic jam caused the taxi to slow right down, until it had to stop altogether. After several minutes completely stationary, some people came over to the driver's window, and explained that there had been an enormous pile-up ahead, and that no vehicles were likely to move either ahead or backwards for many hours. Better to get out, sit on the grass verge, and wait, they recommended. After some moments of doubt and contemplation, the three got out of the taxi, sat down on the nearby grass, and within a few minutes a man came round selling cans and bottles of beer; and so they bought some, and started to drink and wind down; as there was really nothing else they could do.

SECRET MIRACLES

For perhaps one moment or two, Skoot had relaxed, and had actually felt at peace, as he gazed out of the window and beheld some pigeons flap and flutter across his view. Then he had imagined, fancied, fantasised, some huge cranes and storks, flocking and squawking across the Paraguayan Pantanal, as he had once seen with his own real eyes, when he had travelled by boat up the River Paraguay. His remembrance of things past in this way connected in his mind with the philosophical ideas of Gussendi, the little-known philosopher who elaborated and developed some of the most crucial ideas of Descartes, respecting thought and being, and attempted to overcome a great problem that Descartes had left as part of his legacy concerning the radical dualism of substances; namely, the utter difference in Descartes' view between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, or, that is, between *thought* and *matter*. Gussendi had sought to resolve this problem, and in so doing had formulated a very interesting theory of memory, Skoot thought, as he had been able to dispense with Descartes' fatuous theory of innate ideas, which for Descartes had been put into the human mind by God.

But soon Skoot was kicked out of his pleasant, fascinating reverie by his ex-wife, who shouted something rudely about Skoot having left a pot of soup or cocoa on the stove, which had boiled over and caused a terrible smell of burnt substance to waft through the dreary flat in which the two of them had been forced by circumstances to spend a few weeks together, in utter misery it should be stressed.

Why, o why, thought Skoot, do people endure miserable situations, simply because they can think, can imagine states past or future, imagine they have a duty or responsibility to do this or that, and therefore do not do what any normal survival-orientated animal would do: namely, get out of a hole, run away from a hateful smell, sight, or suggestion; just go, never mind where, as nothing could be worse than the present swamp in which the organism, like a miserable frog, is bogged down.

And how, thought Skoot, had life and consciousness evolved out of matter, in the Fifth Miracle; indeed, modern science had not solved that mystery any more than Descartes had, or indeed any theologian from the Dark Ages, sitting in a monk's cell in some ancient monastery, scribbling away between his prayers, chants, meals eaten on hard wooden benches, or even at times sipping ale or wine; for these old Christian monks in the Dark Ages had had no great problem about alcohol: had not Jesus Himself changed water into wine to save the wedding party at Cana from going flat?

Skoot got up, put on his jacket, and decided to go out. Unfortunately it was by now the middle of the night. The night porter in the block of dreary flats warned there was nowhere to go, but Skoot was determined to exit himself from the building, and soon found himself alone in the empty, cold, rainy, dark street. He was at the point of thinking perhaps he should go back, as the porter

really was quite right; he glanced at his old, cheap, Russian watch, and it was indeed after three o'clock in the morning. All normal bars were now closed, only the dubious kinds were still open. Just at that moment of decision or indecision, a taxi drew up, unasked for, and the driver asked Skoot where he wanted to go.

“Is there a bar open somewhere near here?” said he.

“Yes, yes. Get in,” answered the taxi driver.

Skoot found himself whirled across the city, and deposited outside a dingy bar, whose huge wooden dungeon-like door was opened by three hunch-backed men, crooked from their facial features to their toe-nails, to such an extent that only someone on a suicide mission could have been such a fool, as Skoot was now, to enter the inferno that they opened up before him.

In the small, dark bar there were very few people – only two barmen and three or four tarts, bottoms and breasts bared, faces threatening, enticing, wild, dirty, gorgeous, dangerous, erotic, mad. Skoot tried to escape, but was not allowed to. He sat down, and gazed at a Chinese-style calendar painting of a pelican hanging on the wall. One of the tarts came and sat on his knee. O God, that was attractive. Her face was not pretty, but her demeanour generally was, and her soft bottom was hot and very sexy. She administered some kind of drug into Skoot's mouth, blew some kind of intoxicating smoke into his face; Skoot felt her soft, liquid juiciness with his fingers, and sucked her stiff nipples that were thrust into his face. He wondered why he was such a troubled soul, taking all things into account.

Many hours later, Skoot left the bar. By now it was midday, a streaming sunny midday, but unfortunately blood was dripping from his nose, his shirt buttons had been ripped off, and blood was drying into scab-like marks on his chest. He went into several bars but none would serve him a drink, not even a lemonade, never mind a beer or a vodka or a whisky.

But the pain emanating from his black eye and from what felt a broken nose, softened down his general level of anxiety; he remembered what his school-friend David Morris had once said about junkies – namely, that they had managed to reduce all the existential problems of life, survival, thought, being etc. etc., down to only one thing: how to get hold of some heroin.

But it was a marvellous day. The sky was blue and sunny, everything felt wonderful. Girls looked devastatingly pretty, older women were enticingly attractive, the bars with out-of-door seats which would not serve him were extremely pleasant to behold. Perhaps certain theologians were right: joy and beatitude come from contemplation of the divine, in whatever form one finds oneself immersing oneself in.

Alpine forests, Finnish fjords, plunging cliffs into the blue Neapolitan sea, or even the ripples of the English Channel seen from a hotel in Eastbourne; these were the sublime things in life. And a woman's cunt, open and dripping, tits bursting out with erect nipples, what were they? Temptations put in the way of divine happiness by the Devil, God's twin brother, in order to test us, folorn machines driven by chromosomal lusts and illusions, the playthings of Nature, Evolution, God's evil plan?

Skoot walked and walked, trying to find his way back to the flat where he was staying. At one point it seemed he was being arrested by the police, but he did not mind; and so, it seemed, they decided to let him go, so little did he resist the situation. Later, he imagined he had met a Taoist hermit sitting cross-legged in a cave, as if in one of those superb mountains in China, whose peaks pierce glorious clouds, all in a kind of swirl of Taoist Divine Nature, in which rocks, streams, springs of water, clouds, sages' faces, jumping fish full of life's essence, mists surrounding tree-topped mountain-sacred pinnacles, join together in a kind of calligraphic signature of Creation and Creator, all absolutely merged into a complex Unity.

When finally Skoot found his hateful apartment block, the porter was extremely worried-looking, and quickly announced there had been a murder in the building during the night.

“Who?” questioned Skoot.

“Signora Pinocha,” replied the porter.

Signora Pinocha was a neighbour of Skoot and his ex-wife. Skoot had met her two or three times on the stairs, but had only talked to her once. While waiting for the extremely slow lift to arrive, Signora Pinocha had told Skoot the following story:

“You are an Englishman, I doubt whether you will be able to understand the story I am about to tell you,” she said.

“When I was a young girl, I was extremely attractive. Many men said to me that I could win almost any beauty competition. Now I am old, or at least middle-aged; I have wrinkles under my eyes, my lips are cracked and vulgar, and my eyes are permanently bloodshot due to anxiety and alcohol. But when I was twenty-two! God knows I was beautiful, and desirable; men went on their knees to make love to me. Not only was I beautiful but, Englishman believe me, I was intelligent, sharp, creative, lively, artistic. I was poetically creative in exactly the way that intelligent, creative, powerful men love a woman to be, almost as if from their primordial, archetypal beings. They never understand this, but I always knew that men are driven mad by women who are *both* deliciously sexy *and* crazily creative, *but* they must not be dedicated obsessively to creation, as Virginia Woolf for example was. Men are not attracted to that; mice are, but not men.

“Now, when I was in this blissful state of female bliss, without knowing it of course – if the Divine knew It was divine, It would become egotistical and self-conscious, wouldn't It ? A beautiful girl must not be too aware of her beauty, nor of the effect she exerts in her every glance or movement. Now, when I was like this, without fully knowing it, I made a terrible mistake. I knew a man, called Storio, whom I liked, but was not in love with. He loved me, was utterly infatuated with me – to such an extent in fact, that I doubted whether what he felt was really love, or rather a mere passionate infatuation, which is something quite different in my opinion. Anyway, he was not a bad man – not very good either, but not bad. The mistake I made was that I.....”

Signora Pinocha broke off her account at that moment, because the lift arrived, clanking, creaking, and groaning. The noise and commotion of its arrival interrupted both her and Skoot's concentration, and though they entered the lift together, Signora Pinocha did not continue her story. But now that Skoot stood at the entrance to his apartment building, where the porter was informing him of Signora Pinocha's murder, by God, did not Skoot wish, in his deepest sorrow, that she had completed her account that day some weeks before.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

Cabildo came to Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, to do research on the building which now houses the *Museo Nacional*, but which was originally a prison. It was designed in the 1850s - though actually built only later - by an English architect called Thomas Reed, and anyone who has seen this building, whether he or she knows it used to be a prison or not, cannot fail to be struck by its strength, sturdiness, and formidable heaviness. But it houses now a superb museum, one of the finest in South America, including in its collections many archeological, ethnographic, and historical items, as well as nineteenth and twentieth century art, and also a great variety of scientific exhibits.

Now, Cabildo read on the third day after his arrival, an article by a Colombian scholar called Zimbrona, which suggested that this museum had retained the spirit of a prison, though now it was objects that were maintained under strict control and observation rather than people. Whereas before, prisoners were wrenched from their families and friends, and from society in general, to be held within the prison's thick walls, now archeological and artistic objects were wrenched out of their historical and cultural contexts, and were presented in ways that completely alienated them from their producers, their original conditions of social production, and from their authentic cultural significances.

Although Cabildo's research was not supposed to be about the museum exhibits held within the building, but rather his project was to study Thomas Reed's architectural achievement, he was unable to ignore the ideas presented in the article just mentioned.

He knew perfectly well, before leaving the Isle of Wight, that the building had been originally designed as a prison. This was one of the things that fascinated him about it: a prison had become, a hundred years later, the National Museum of Colombia! Implicitly, the present use of the building had redeemed its horrible earlier use; but now, after reading the article by Zimbrona, he started to have a nasty feeling that on the contrary, the original function of the building as a prison must have corroded, oppressed, and prohibited the possibility that the Museum today could be an emblem of historical awareness, a liberating haven of enjoyment and understanding.

Cabildo was not a pessimistic or weak-kneed type of person. He would not let this feeling overtake him; he was conscious that very possibly he was merely tired after his journey, jet-lagged, adapting to a new environment. He took the steps he had planned to take on his arrival; he met the professor who was to be his supervisor at the National University. He got to know the lay-out of the library he would be using for his research - indeed, one of the first journals he had chanced upon in this library had carried the article by Zimbrona which caused him the upset

mentioned. He ascertained where he would normally eat, where the bank was that he would normally use and other boring but essential matters. He even came across a book about architects active in nineteenth century Bogotá in a bookshop, which he had not known so far, and had started to read it avidly.

In actual fact, he was reading this very book in a typical sort of café-bar in Candelaria one afternoon, little more than a week after arriving in Bogotá, when a young student called Andrés started to talk to him, and Cabildo invited him to sit down at his table. They talked about many things: where Cabildo was from, what Andrés thought about the present government of Colombia, Latin American rock music, space exploration, environmental politics, and girls. They had started to drink beer when the conversation turned to Cabildo's research topic.

Cabildo was most surprised to find out that Andrés knew a good deal about the National Museum building. Although he was a student of Publicity and Design, he had a strong interest in Architecture. More importantly however, he said his grandfather had been a political activist, and had been incarcerated in the prison in the 1940s. Andrés told Cabildo that his grandfather had been completely broken by his time in the prison, and that when he was released, after three or four years, he was a changed man. Andrés' grandmother had told him that the authorities might just as well have executed him, as after he was free his life was a disaster. By the time Andrés' father had married and Andrés himself was born, the grandfather was dead. But, said Andrés, he had always wondered about his poor grandfather, who had been no more than a night-watchman, but had had an interest in politics that took him to monthly meetings of something called the Democratic Society of Bogotá, and for this he had been arrested and imprisoned.

After this the conversation moved to the history of Colombian politics. Cabildo was pleased to find that Andrés, if not exactly agreeing, could tolerate his view that although Simon Bolivar was certainly not a Stalin, he was at least a Lenin; not a Napoleon, but a Caesar. After some hours of drinking and talking, Andrés and Cabildo parted, and Cabildo made his way back to his University rooms.

He could not sleep well. He found himself in his dreams pursuing things in strange, perverse waters, always forging upstream, vaguely and confusedly reckoning with his own ancestry. His father had been half Spanish, though born in Southern England. His mother, and everyone else in his lineage as far as he knew, was impeccably and boringly English, and yet there was something strange back there, but whether it was in his family background or simply in his own psyche he was not sure. He remembered a short story, or thought he did, written by an author with a name rather similar to Fish, or Fisch, or Frisch, or perhaps Freisch, in which a man condemned to death had had a nightmare about his death, that was much worse than the real experience of dying when it actually happened, only a few days later. Cabildo was aware that his name was vaguely Spanish, but had never felt himself to be anything other than an Isle of Wight Englishman.

After this dream, Cabildo started to dream about Andrés' grandfather. It was obvious that the man had been deeply in love with his wife, Andrés' grandmother, and could not bear being away from her and their children. He was not allowed to see his wife more than once a year, on Christmas Eve, whilst in prison, and could never see his children. Somehow Cabildo knew in his

dream that this was what had broken him, for otherwise he was a tough man, physically sturdy, unruffled by events; phlegmatic, placid, easy-going even. Cabildo could feel the slow, gruelling pain that Andrés' grandfather had suffered during his time in the prison, and seemed to be presented with minute details of the man's day to day experiences, almost as if he were right there, observing and entering his being.

One part of Cabildo's dream, or perhaps it was one level of it, in the sense of a stave in music which occurs at the same time as other things, opened up one Christmas Eve, when Andrés' grandfather had been allowed his yearly visit from his wife. She was called Mariela, and she entered his cell dressed extremely glamorously for the times, and considering her penury; very sweetly, but with immense strength, she sat close to her husband and kissed him gently. The poor man had waited all year for this moment! But somehow, the way his wife was with him, made it clear that she suffered quite as much as he emotionally, even if not in the sense of being deprived of her freedom. She admired her husband, and did not despise him for having attended those meetings of the Democratic Society, due to which he was languishing year after year in prison. She was not very politically orientated herself, but she felt people should have the right to think and talk about these things, and she hoped her children would continue with the courage of their father to think and talk about such matters in the future too.

Mariela was a peasant girl originally, a *campesina* from Cundinamarca, who had come to Bogotá to work in domestic service before she met Andrés' grandfather. Her long frizzy black hair was extremely beautiful, thought Cabildo, a combination of Indian and African, and her movements and gestures were infinitely graceful, devoid of pretension, but utterly superb.

When Cabildo awoke, dripping with sweat, panting, and perhaps shouting he could not be sure, he instantly realized he must indeed continue to study Thomas Reed's architectural plans for what was now the National Museum! In the process, he would explore a great many aspects of the social and political history of Bogotá, and each aspect of his dual endeavour would reinforce the other. Though exhausted, he felt very good.

MEN IN DARK TIMES

He was walking through a dark forest late at night, wondering not only where he was, but indeed, who he really was. There were, in groves, beautiful flowers like lilies or tulips, amid spaces in which knights sparred over Guinevere-like ladies, and strange emotions of love, light, fire, and anger could break loose, until the morning star fell upon the dawn dew, and everything seemed to be redeemed, through vows and oaths to treacherous gods or fierce lovers, between whom few could choose, reality being so very difficult and confusing.

Blot had a terribly sharp spear, but his brain was full with thoughts. One was that, one day, not long before, a cousin of his called Jeronimus had walked through the same part of this forest, and had felt very lost, and so he had pelted a squirrel with stones, and killed it. Thereafter Jeronimus had lit a fire and boiled the squirrel in a pot, until it was sufficiently cooked to cut it open and present as a meal for all the fairies and supernatural beings in the forest, among whom were the Gogongos, a horrid race of beings, part parrot, part man, part dolphin, and part snail. These ghastly hybrids wandered with moist antennae through the undergrowth, but when they wanted to, they could leap and bite their prey with their large, coloured beaks, swallowing them like flies into their honey-lined stomachs, that constantly burped and gurgled up strange bubbles of unpredictable gas.

Many years before, Blot and Jeronimus had played the bag-pipes together, beside a loch in the north of Scotland, tears streaming from their eyes and down their puffed-out cheeks. Now that Blot had left Scotland for good, and Jeronimus but rarely visited it, they retained some sentimentality toward that particular loch, but on the whole they eschewed nostalgic attitudes towards the country. After all, it had long since been submerged in grey-green fluid, nearly all its trees being strewn with vile-smelling purple seaweed, and though this flood had now subsided, and nearly all the seaweed on the branches of trees had now dried out and turned hard and stiff, yet something about the country had changed irrevocably, so that Blot and Jeronimus felt it better to attach their emotions to new landscapes, such as the forest in which Blot was now walking, and through which Jeronimus had also often wandered.

During the Flood, both Blot and Jeronimus had gone to live in New Zealand, and then had moved to Harbin in China, from whence they went to Tierra del Fuego. Once the fluid over Scotland had totally receded, they settled down permanently in South America, but normally lived several thousand miles away from one another on that huge continent, although they sometimes met up near their favourite forest, to talk of old times. But, always, they strove as

noted to avoid nostalgic attitudes in their conversations about Scotland. They would talk about *peobroachs*, and *ceilidhs*, but not in sad or wistful terms. Sometimes they would whistle tunes together, but would never play the pipes, even though Jeronimus had acquired a set of chamber pipes for himself in Arica, a town on the northern coast of Chile.

Instead, they would talk about the *Iliad*, or the *Odyssey*, Bloot preferring the first, Jeronimus the second. They would drink *aguadiente*, and when extremely drunk, would play their own very strange version of chess, in which the rules could be changed at every move, so long as the new rules were properly explained by the one whose turn it was to move. This game need never finish, and indeed they had been playing the same one ever since they hit upon the idea; it became more and more peculiar all the time, since not only had the pawns been replaced by twigs, the knights by mastodon fossils, and the bishops by coatis, but the very objectives of the game had transformed many times; the idea of checkmating one's opponent had become completely obsolete, the purpose of the game having evolved by degrees into a kind of seduction, in silence, of one's opponent's queen, through strange gestures and sucking movements made with one's fingers or toes. Even the name of the game had changed from Chess to Kronkit, via Gloop, Ploptit, and Stongrit. Bloot and Jeronimus vowed to each other never to tell anyone else about their newly invented game, as to do so they thought, would dilute its purity and sanctity, and absolutely spoil its novelty.

MOMENTOUS THOUGHTS

I remember once, when I went into the kitchen, alone, and poured some milk into a saucepan, and slowly watched it heat on the stove, that a certain thought occurred to me. All was completely silent, and I had decided to heat the milk in order to make a mug of milky coffee.

I remember thinking how someone might do exactly the same thing as I was doing then, whilst worrying about his or her wife or husband, his or her children, or his or her parents. He or she might heat up the milk in a similar kitchen, whilst thinking about Roman Law, Mozart, or the First World War; about rape, mules, or blotting paper. Charles Rennie Mackintosh clocks might pop into mind, or the invention of agriculture, or even indeed, hallucinogenic drugs and their role in the emergence of human religions.

I remember there were no windows in that kitchen; it was small, and rectangular. It was about three o'clock in the morning when I went in there to make the cup of coffee; I do not remember how it tasted, even though I remember so well making it.

THE DEATH OF CLARIN STRANGE

One day, Astolfo picked up a book of short stories, called *Life Is, And Was, A Dream*. Obviously the title of this book was a play upon the famous drama by Calderón called *Life Is A Dream*, but the particular story Astolfo began to read was called *The Fate Of Scallipha*. The story went like this:

“In the far-off land of Tingron, there lived a prince called Scallipha, who had fallen hopelessly in love with a beautiful slave-girl called Pamphallada, whom he would have loved to take as his wife. But his father, the Emperor, would not hear of it, and insisted his son marry a foreign princess. Scallipha suffered terribly in his melancholy, and was unable to sleep at night. He tossed and turned, constantly trying to think of a way out of his dilemma. He considered running away with Pamphallada – but where could they go? He thought of suicide, but then he would not be with Pamphallada either, and was that not a cowardly act for a royal prince? He even considered the most terrible solution imaginable: that he *murder his father*, take the throne, and marry Pamphallada. But after a few moments’ contemplation, he shuddered and turned away from such an evil thought.”

At that moment in the story, Astolfo was woken up in his bed by a loud banging of dust-bins outside his bedroom, and sitting bolt upright, he realized with disappointment that he had been dreaming. There was no book of short stories called *Life Is, And Was, A Dream*, and the story he had begun to read called *The Fate Of Scallipha* had only existed in his dream!

“Damn,” said Astolfo out loud, “I was enjoying that story.” And he added, in silent thought to himself:

“I’m sick of the noise the men make when they collect the rubbish from the street outside.”

Astolfo lay back down in his bed, and began to muse over the details of the story he had been dreaming. He remembered in particular a moment when Scallipha’s father, the Emperor, had told his son he could never marry Pamphallada. And as he thought more about that, he began to realize there was rather more to it all than he had recollected when he first woke up. In the story as he now recalled it, Scallipha had approached the Emperor in his royal library, one of the most

sumptuous rooms in the palace, one afternoon some weeks after the Emperor had issued the fateful judgement on his son, and had thrown himself on the ground in front of his father, crying out:

“Great Emperor, Son of the Sun, Son of Paradise, my beloved father, I beseech you to grant me one request.”

“Rise up my son; never approach me in that way again, and never beg favours of me in that manner,” replied his father.

“No father, I will not rise until you have heard my request,” repeated Scallipha.

At that, in great fury, the Emperor pulled from off the wall an ancestral royal sword, and with one vicious swipe, sliced his prostrate son’s head from his shoulders, turned around, went to the huge, carved wooden doors of the library, and bellowed to his attendants:

“Remove the head and body of my impudent son!”

But how, now worried Astolfo, could Scallipha have continued in the story to fret at night about his dilemma, if his father had already killed him? Astolfo was sure that in the story, as he had dreamt it, Scallipha’s insomniac anxieties had come *after* speaking to his father on the final occasion he did speak to him; the last part of the story he remembered before being woken up by the dust-bins outside, was about Scallipha considering whether he should murder his father.

Astolfo could not resolve this strange contradiction, and in time put the dream and the story it contained to the back of his mind.

A few weeks later, Astolfo met a man called Basilio, in a bar he sometimes went to for relaxation and to chat with people he hardly knew, or even with complete strangers. On this occasion, he found himself talking to Basilio over a few beers about short stories. Basilio, like Astolfo, enjoyed reading short stories, and was familiar with some by Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges. Indeed, he knew more about these authors’ works than did Astolfo himself.

At length the two men started to speculate about the sort of subject matter that made for a good short story. Basilio expressed the view that the plot must be short and straightforward, but its implications or associations must be complex, must reverberate far beyond the events of the given story. There was no time or space in a short story to develop characters deeply, Basilio maintained, and so the central point was to delineate a human situation that seemed intriguingly simple on one level, but was philosophically complex on another. He gave an example of a story that he had heard from a friend, which was supposedly true, and which he intended one day to work up into a short story for publication. It went like this:

“My friend told me,” said Basilio, “about a young man he once knew who wanted to marry a girl from a - well, - from a much lower class than the young man, whose father was a very important judge and international diplomat. The father was arrogant, pompous, and extremely class

conscious. He was determined his son should marry the daughter of a similarly placed, important man, preferably a foreign beauty, from a rich and famous family.

“One day the hapless young man went into his heartless father’s study, and begged him to understand that he was in a pitiable plight, to please hear his plea, and to grant him mercy. Before he had had a chance even to complete the words of his desperate entreaty, his father became furious, and told his son that he should never approach him in that way. He then snatched a sabre from off the study wall that had been presented to his grandfather as a great honour, by a prince in India, and savagely sliced his son’s head from off his shoulders with it.”

Astolfo could hardly believe his ears. Was this story not almost exactly the same as the secondary part of the story in his dream, the part he had only remembered some moments after waking up, in which Scallipha was beheaded by his Emperor father? Apart from certain details that differed between the two versions, such as the library becoming a study, a sword changing into a sabre, etc. etc., were they not obviously at bottom the same story?

Astolfo explained to a now equally astonished Basilio that he already knew that story, with only some minor modifications. He told Basilio that in the version of it that he had known it was only a part of, and ambiguously embedded within, a longer story called *The Fate Of Scallipha*, the conclusion to which he did not yet know.

Basilio had never heard of *The Fate Of Scallipha*, and was wholly incognizant of the wider story about Scallipha, and of how he had contemplated killing his father, as Astolfo now narrated it to him.

“Who was the friend of yours who told you your story?” asked Astolfo with intense interest.

“His name is Clarin,” answered Basilio, “and he told me it was a true story, but he didn’t tell me the name of the young man he had known, to whom this dreadful thing had happened.”

“Please introduce him to me,” begged Astolfo.

Basilio promised to do so, but was extremely busy over the following few days, so in the end he gave Clarin’s address to Astolfo. Astolfo in his impatience, or enthusiasm, went to visit Clarin alone.

He arrived at Clarin’s address without much trouble, walked up the gravel path to the front door, but before ringing the bell he saw that the door was not closed; it was open ajar. After pressing the bell several times without anyone coming to the door, his curiosity got the better of him and he entered the house, feeling he was justified in checking if everything was alright, given that the front door was not shut, yet no one seemed to be active indoors.

He walked through a comfortable hall, into a handsome living-room, where he saw a man slumped over a writing table. Astolfo knew immediately that the man was dead, and on approaching him saw beside him the top page of a hand-written manuscript called *Life Is, And Was, A Dream*. Under the title was written: “By Clarin Strange.”

Astolfo picked up the manuscript and read the following story:

“One night, not long ago,” Astolfo read, “I had a dream about a far-off land called Norgnit, in which a princess called Pamphallada had fallen hopelessly in love with a slave called Scallipha, whom she would have loved to take as her husband. But her mother, the Empress, would not hear of it, and insisted her daughter marry a foreign prince. Pamphallada suffered terribly in her melancholy, and was unable to sleep at night. She tossed and turned, constantly trying to think of a way out of her dilemma. She considered running away with Scallipha – but where would they go? She thought of suicide, but then she would not be with Scallipha either, and was that not a cowardly act for a royal princess? Then she considered the most terrible solution: that *she murder her mother*, take the throne, and marry Scallipha. She shuddered at her contemplation of this evil thought, but realized that this was what she would have to do.

“And so, the next day Pamphallada obtained some poison, and resolved to put it in her mother’s drink at dinner time. She drew up to the dinner table at the normal hour, and waited for the moment when she could drop the deadly powder into the Empress’s goblet. However, something unexpected happened, and.....”

At this point the script broke off. In great fear, horror, and guilt, Astolfo put the unfinished story back down on the writing table next to the dead man, walked over to a telephone, and called the police.

JAM'S LIFE

His name was Jam, but he was usually called Protorga. He left home when he was sixteen, and never returned, though he sometimes met his mother in a hotel in Mexico City, but never saw his father, though he occasionally spoke to him on the telephone.

Protorga's brother was called Dig-James, and sometimes Protorga and Dig-James were very good friends, though they often quarreled, even on international telephone calls, or by email. They quarreled about money, women, politics and psychology, and even about their parents. Protorga would complain about the way his father in the past had criticized his drinking, and how he watched like a hawk how much butter he spread on his bread at lunch, or how much butter he put on his potatoes at dinner. Dig-James would retort that their father had the right to be cantankerous at times, as he was a fine person, but Protorga could not agree.

Protorga had a girlfriend called Marlene when he was between the ages of twenty-five and thirty, who always reminded him of Marlene Dietrich, though she did not look like her at all. She was crazy, sexy, very determined, even bloody-minded, but very good company except when she got dangerously drunk, when she turned into what seemed to Protorga to be an absolute bitch.

Once Marlene had a dream that she stepped out of the bedroom window, tip-toed across the roofs of the nearby houses, then turned into a tree at the end of the road. Protorga liked hearing this dream, especially the part where Marlene entered his, Protorga's alleged dream, and came into his bed in a hotel in Iceland, and made love to him even though she did not know who he was at the time.

Years later Dig-James made Protorga very angry when he claimed that Marlene had been stupid. Protorga knew she was not; she was a crazy dame, sometimes a bitch, but she was not stupid. She had a very sharp mind if she chose to use it, and was artistic and creative. Protorga found he

could not live with her however, and that was why he left her, greatly saddened, in Sunderland, England, after five years of alternate bliss and hell.

Later, when he was thirty-eight, Protorga married a woman called Tina, and was much more miserable with her than he had been with Marlene. He and Tina did not argue like he had done with Marlene, but after two or three years the marriage went flat and boring. When they separated, Protorga and Tina had a horrible, protracted struggle over money, through foul solicitors, and the experience almost broke Protorga. To fight like dogs over money with someone you were supposed to have once loved! He could not bear it, and suffered an extended nervous breakdown. This period, when Protorga was between forty-six and fifty years old, was extremely creative and productive however, as he wrote much of his best poetry and prose in those years. He wrote a novel called *A Date With God And The Devil* at this time, as well as an epic poem called *Dreaming Paradise Into Eternity*, which provoked furious, ugly reviews in literary journals, although some people found it extraordinarily beautiful.

When Protorga was fifty-three years old, he was sitting in a hotel bar in Benjamin Constant, near the triple border between Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. He drew a picture of a bird in the back of his notebook, and something very horrible happened. The bird jumped out from the page, flew into his face, and bit off his nose. Protorga screamed and yelled so loudly that the hotel barman thought he had gone mad. Protorga ran stumbling out of the hotel entrance and fell straight into a huge hole in the street. He cracked his head and bled profusely.

He need not have died, but there was no hospital in Benjamin Constant, nor apparently even a doctor. As Protorga was drunk when this happened, he evidently was unable to make sensible decisions. So he died at two-thirty in the morning, on February 23rd 2001, at the age of fifty three, leaving behind him three novels, twenty seven short stories, hundreds of poems long and short, and dozens of essays on topics ranging from monogamy to war, from alcoholism to the history of malaria. Most of these writings were published within the next thirty years, and although they did not make a big splash either with the 'literati' or the general public, they were sufficiently revered for Protorga Clate to earn a permanent, if minor place in the world of literature. He was buried in Leticia, Colombia, on February 25th 2001.

STARS OVER SHIBANA

One day Fluvius went into an internet café in the town of Iquitos, in the Peruvian jungle, and sent the following email to his solicitor in Britain:

“Dear Matthew,

There are some additional points I need to make which I believe are relevant to the divorce proceedings which you are now undertaking on my behalf. In relation to the sums of money my wife is now demanding, it is important to bear in mind that only a few days before she ran out of our house unexpectedly and without warning, with our children, she had persuaded me to write her a cheque for &10.000. This left me with no funds whatsoever after our separation. Furthermore, her sister removed a Queen Ann walnut cabinet that stood in a corner of the living room, when a few days after the separation I allowed her to come into the house and remove my wife’s essentials. That cabinet was a valuable piece of antique furniture, given to me by my beloved grandmother.

Yours sincerely,
Fluvius”

Then Fluvius sent another email, this time to his son and daughter in the U.K, whom he missed very much:

“My dearest children,

At this moment I am staying in a huge wooden house in the jungle of Peru on the River Nanay near Iquitos. I sleep in a hammock and it is far away from anything. The jungle is all around, and

all the time I see birds, parrots, monkeys and dolphins. I am doing lots of work and writing a good deal. The only thing that makes me sad is that there has been no communication from you two for so many months, even though you both solemnly promised you would regularly write to or telephone me when we said goodbye after the pantomime last Christmas.

Thinking of you both all the time,
Much love,
Daddy”

After this, with his eyes welling in tears, Fluvius made his way to the port of Iquitos and took a boat to Shibana. Shibana was a small community of some 150 people, about 30 miles from Iquitos, up the River Nanay.

After about four hours, Fluvius arrived back in Shibana, where, as he had explained to his children, he lived in a large wooden house, slept in a hammock, and looked out on the River Nanay. He could nearly always see birds and parrots, monkeys, dolphins, fish, and other animals in the daytime, as he had told his children in the email. At night the heavenly spheres were so glorious he could be entranced for many hours at a time; in the day he opened his eyes again to the trees, the river, and the sky, to let into himself whatever beauties they contained.

The day Fluvius returned to Shabana, his house-keeper, called Marita, came and gave him the latest local news. Pedro’s boat was leaking, so there was much fish in the village at that moment. Someone had dropped the gas lamp belonging to the pastor at the little church, and the glass cover around it had broken. Marita’s daughter had gone away with her boy friend to stay in another village.

Later in the day, Fluvius began to write *A Lyrical Dialogue Between Señor el Sapo And Señorita La Rana*. It started like this:

“Señor el Sapo:
Glug! glug!
Very sorry, glug! glug!
I said, very sorry
Glug! glug! glug! glug!
Don’t you want to talk to me?

Señorita la Rana:
Gling! gling!
I am singing, gling! gling! gling! gling!
What do you want, señor?
Gling! gling! gling! gling!

Señor el Sapo:
I like your song
Glug! glug!

Señorita, glug! glug!
Can I ask you something?
Can we sing together?
Glug! glug! gling! gling!

Señorita la Rana:
O señor, no! No!
Gling! gling!
I could never do that!
I'm a virgin frog-gling!
I'm a good young frog-gling!

Señor el Sapo:
O now, I'm so sad
I want to glug-glug-glug-glug-glug!
O no, I'm so lonely,
You don't want to sing with me.

Señorita la Rana:
O no, don't be sad – gling!
Please don't be offended.
I am just a modest gling,
I must keep my virtue!"

And thus it went on.

Fluvius was creatively involved in ideas associated with the fourth, fifth, and sixth *chakras* of Indian Yoga philosophy. The fourth is concerned with those forms, figures and beings, natural or human, that partake of the Divine Light, that reveal blissful paradise through the visually recognizable world. In the fifth *chakra* the soul is purged of residual attachments to earth in preparation for the Beatific Vision of God, as in the Purgatory of Christianity. Here the soul confronts the terrifying, devastating aspects of the cosmic powers in their ego-shattering roles, personified as wrathful, odious, and horrific demons.

In the sixth *chakra* the soul comes right up to the White Light of the Sacred; it experiences the Godhead itself, in sight and sound, before finally the division between the soul and God is also extinguished, and the separation between the inward eye and its perfect object dissolves, allowing the complete and absolute immersion of the soul into invisible, indivisible Divinity.

RATS, WEEDS, AND COCKROACHES

Mary Cockroach hatched from a cockroach egg in 203,000 A.D. She died a little over ten years ago, having laid many thousands of eggs in her lifetime. She merits now an account of her life.

Human beings have long since disappeared from the earth, being among the first wave of species to become extinct during the Ecological Holocaust that took place between 10,000 and 80,000 A.D. The Ecological Holocaust, like one earlier mass extinction in the history of the planet, wiped out as much as 90% of existing species and biomass. The striking difference between this most recent mass extinction and the earlier one, is the great rapidity of its exterminations of life, over a mere 70,000 years, by comparison with the millions of years involved in the earlier one. Besides Man, all the other primates, and all large mammals became extinct. Only small mammals, mainly rodents, survived the Ecological Holocaust. I, of course, am a rat, and my name is Rhetorix Flute, if the reader is not yet aware of that. We rats were one of the groups that benefited most from the Holocaust. Like other survivors, rats expanded into the newly available spaces, and adapted to myriad new niches. Biological evolution became infinitely more rapid than it had been previously, as conditions became totally different, and were moreover, continually and rapidly changing. Numbers of species from the surviving groups proliferated and multiplied. In the case of we rats, certain species like my own became very large. My own rat species developed a normal size about as large as the extinct rhinoceros, and a brain several times larger than that of the extinct *Homo sapiens*.

There are at present five main theories about what brought on the Ecological Holocaust, but naturally many rat-scientists believe there must have been a combination of causes. The five

basic theories are: 1) A huge meteorite collided with the earth; 2) The earth witnessed an epoch of massive and widespread volcanic activity; 3) There were changes in the earth's tilt; (4) There was one or more Nuclear War; and 5) There was an escalating, anthropogenically-induced spiral of planetary ecological destruction.

Gradually, around 160,000 A.D., my species developed consciousness and intelligence, and since then, we have greatly changed the environment in yet again entirely new ways. The majority of plant groups and species that survived the Ecological Holocaust were what human beings had termed weeds, and these had evolved prodigiously by the time we became intelligent. After that we cultivated, bred, and shaped the most useful species in our environment in the same way that human beings had long before created wheat, oats, maize, vegetables, fruit trees, and so on from their wild precursors. A large part of the earth is now taken up with fields and groves in which nutritious plants and trees are grown.

And just as human beings domesticated, bred, and moulded to their own advantage wild birds and mammals to produce cows, sheep, pigs, chickens and so on, which obviously all disappeared with human beings, their masters and creators, we took our cousin species of rat and mouse, and turned them into excellent food-machines, some of them as large as the extinct cow.

After reaching a unique status on the planet as intelligent beings, my species of rat began to understand that we could study and learn from what human beings had left behind. We realized that we could read human books, rather than merely nibble or gnaw at them. It was thus that we discovered the calendrical and chronological systems used by human beings, and adopted the Western dating system, referring henceforth to dates in terms of numbers of years A.D. But although many of our professors study human religions with great intellectual interest, we rats have no practical use for any human religions. We do not have the same fear of death or its aftermath that human beings evidently did. Perhaps this is a legacy of our preconscious evolution, which involved strategies very much more short-term than those displayed by the immediate precursors of hominids and humans. Neither does it matter to us in the same way that it did to human beings, how the world originally came into being – again, such speculations are of great scientific and philosophical interest, but if they all remain forever mysterious enigmas, then so be it. We feel no need to invent fanciful explanations in order to assuage irrational fears and yearnings.

We had of course developed a number of languages of our own long before we reached the stage of studying human books. But when we did study these books, we found the human languages represented in them absolutely fascinating, so we adopted some of them for our own use; including French, English, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi.

But I must return to Mary and the cockroaches. After the Ecological Holocaust, cockroaches went through a massive expansion in numbers of species and individuals. Now, as already stated, the Holocaust eliminated about 90% of all flora and fauna among invertebrate animals as well as among all other groups of living organisms. But as the invertebrates, in particular the insects, outnumbered so dramatically all other groups on the planet before the Holocaust, so did they afterwards as well. This issue underlies one of the key areas of research among our rat biologists. As I am not a biologist, but merely a writer – though I hope I am one who is fairly well-versed in

the biological sciences – I will not attempt to go deeply into the matter here. Suffice it to say that after the Holocaust the most successful group of invertebrates – indeed the most successful group of any animal with the exception of the rats – were the cockroaches. With them it was somewhat similar at first to the way it had been with the rats. Some species grew to the size of the hens that human beings used to keep, whilst others grew to the size of prehistoric rats. Gradually, one species ‘overtook’ the others evolutionarily speaking, and became very large and quite intelligent. Mary was a member of that species. She was about the size of the turkeys human beings used to keep, and her intelligence, in keeping with her species, was at a level somewhere between *Australopithecus* and *Homo habilis*. Thus Mary’s species has rudimentary language skills, considerable practical abilities, demonstrates impressive capacities for learning, but cannot be said to have reached the levels of culture, art, or religion.

And nor do we intelligent rats really want them to. The planet can take only one intelligent being at any given time. Before *Homo sapiens* there was none, and we are only the second such being to appear in evolution. It would not be a good idea to allow Mary’s cockroach species to become any more intelligent, and we will not allow it; if necessary we will prevent it through genetic engineering.

Nevertheless, we rats admire the intelligent cockroaches. They are very useful to us, as they are extremely easy to tame and train. We use them to eat scraps of waste, rotting organic matter, certain vermin whether alive or dead, and even simply other animals we do not like. And we make a delicious soup from cockroach carcasses, which we call “Cream of Cockroach.”

Mary Cockroach achieved some fame in her lifetime for various reasons. When young, she roamed the west coast of the continent that human beings called South America, but which today is called Gloofnyma, performing an anonymous service to farmer rats on whose lands she used to eat vermin. Perhaps because she enjoyed a rich diet for a number of years, she laid huge numbers of eggs, and because of this some cockroaches referred to her as “The Cockroach Whore” in their cockroach language. But then something happened which projected Mary into the public eye of rats.

One of the plants that survived the Ecological Holocaust, which human beings had previously regarded as a weed, was the stinging nettle. Human beings never discovered anything useful in this plant, but long after the Holocaust stinging nettles had changed greatly. There were now huge forests of tall stinging nettles, the only animals that could endure living within them being those that had developed effective defenses against their ever-strengthening poisons. When we rats – from now on when I refer to ‘rats’ without further qualification I will usually be meaning my own species, just as when I refer to cockroaches I will mean Mary’s species – had launched ourselves into an epoch of plant and animal domestication, we found the then existing stinging nettles to be very useful indeed.

Poisons could be extracted from them and used for all manner of things. When treated in certain ways, the harmful effects and bitter tastes of these poisons could be eliminated from the nettles, rather as human beings learned to treat bitter manioc before eating it or using it to make alcoholic beverages. We rats found that the treated poisons of the stinging nettles, mixed with the

young leaves of the nettles that did not yet contain poison, could be fermented into a delicious wine, which remains to this day with us rats a most special delight.

The stems of these nettle trees provided wood suitable for many purposes, and the seeds, after centuries of selective breeding became large, tasty, and nutritious.

Millennia after the original cultivation of stinging nettles, a rat-pharmacologist discovered that the substance which had always been used to treat the poisons – extracted from the ovaries of giant mice – was a chemical that was much more abundant in the stomachs and bowels of cockroaches. It was found that if the poisons were eaten by cockroaches – and this did not harm them in any way – the cockroaches' excreta contained the very chemicals, purged of poisons, that were needed to ferment our precious wine. Of course, these had to be separated out from other substances in the cockroaches' faeces, but this was a relatively easy task. The great advantage of using cockroaches in this way was, firstly, that cockroaches did not have to be killed, but could be used over their whole lifetimes to produce the chemical that was named "cocknet". A female mouse that had been kept in captivity for months after its birth, producing hitherto nothing of economic value, had to be killed merely to extract a few centilitres of the vital chemical from its ovaries. Not only could cockroaches of both sexes be used until they died of natural causes, but they did not need to be bred purposely, as they were and still are extremely numerous in the wild in most parts of the world.

This was one of the most important discoveries made in the period of emergence of Rat Civilization. For wine was and still is a most vital ingredient in civilized life, as well as a very important article of trade.

But there was to be, very recently, another great advance in the production of "cocknet". This is where our Mary comes in. A very large wine-fermenting establishment was located on the same coast where Mary was contentedly chewing vermin on rat-owned farms. Periodically worker rats from this establishment went on cockroach collections in the area. On one occasion Mary was rounded up with perhaps another five thousand cockroaches and taken back to the wine establishment.

Once back at the wine-producing establishment, which was situated next to a nettle forest, the cockroaches were unloaded from the wagons onto which they had been thrown. They were led to a series of huge barns, lined all along their sides with troughs containing the nettle poisons in a kind of sludge. The cockroaches were lined up with their mouth-parts over the troughs. Periodically rat-wine workers brought in another set of troughs and set them down exactly below where the average cockroach's anus would be positioned. The excrement was then periodically collected, and taken off for further treatment.

As I have already explained, these cockroaches are quite intelligent – the only animals to have achieved such a degree of intelligence other than Man and his hominid and hominoid predecessors, and we rats ourselves. Before being led to positions at the trough, the cockroaches were given clear instructions in their own language that some skilled rat-workers had learned for the purpose, combined with gestures and sign-language. They were informed about the production process, told not to defecate unless the troughs were under their anuses, and assured

that they would be required to spend only fourteen hours out of twenty-four eating and drinking from the poison troughs. Of the remaining ten hours, they would spend two more at the troughs, with the poisonous sludge now replaced with more varied food. This latter included ground-up fish-skins, rat faeces, and insect larvae. After this, the cockroaches were moved to the centre of the barn to sleep in a huddle for eight hours.

Mary lived in this way for perhaps two years, and was now a very fat, mature female cockroach. Then one day something remarkable happened. A female wine-fermenting rat-specialist called Vomistaga Anallo was carrying out a routine inspection of Mary's barn at defecation time. She examined the faeces of each cockroach, but when she came to Mary's faeces, she noticed green patches in it that she had never seen before in such cocknet-producing barns. She took a sample from the faeces with a syringe, and after completing her round, went to a laboratory only a few metres away.

The specialist analysed Mary's faeces in many ways, using all the available techniques, and came to the conclusion that it contained a new, extremely condensed and powerful type of super-cocknet. She immediately tested her hypothesis by separating those chemicals from the rest of the faeces, and set them to work on the other ingredients necessary for making Stinging Nettle Wine, in the usual proportions and under the usual conditions. Within two weeks she realized she had made a discovery with implications as immense as the original discovery of cocknet, millennia before.

This new, super-cocknet produced wine far superior in quality to that ever known before, in far larger quantities, and in a much shorter time. Subsequent research has increased the first two, and reduced the last, even further. Mary was quickly taken from her barn, and examined in all sorts of ways. Vomistaga Anallo concluded there was nothing superficially observable that was unusual about Mary, but that she was certainly a very fecund cockroach! She laid more eggs than the average female, and, due probably to a simple, chance, lucky genetic mutation, her biochemical system produced a hitherto unknown super-cocknet.

Soon numerous other rat-scientists and specialists came in on the investigation. They all agreed on one thing: it was better not to kill Mary, but rather to analyse her organs while alive. It would be best to collect her eggs, hatch them, and the moment a male super-cocknet producer was discovered among her offspring, have it breed with Mary.

All this was done, and within a few years Mary's super-cocknet-producing offspring numbered several million. The whole thing brought about a revolution in the wine industry.

It is very difficult to know to what extent, if at all, Mary Cockroach understood the important revolution she had opened up, or indeed if she was ever able to fully recognize that she was the centre of such interest. Most of our scientists believe the intelligence of cockroaches should not be underestimated: they are not as intelligent as was Neanderthal Man, but they are more intelligent than were dogs or chimpanzees. Some have argued that they do not really possess a proper language, only a system of sound signs such as human beings discovered in whales and dolphins in their own epoch, or which they could teach to chimpanzees. Some human scientists went further however, and claimed that chimpanzees could actually learn a real language. It is all

a very difficult question, and I leave conclusions to the scientists. All I should say, is that most of them today are convinced that cockroaches have rudimentary symbolic languages, not merely sign systems. One argument they present is that different groups of cockroaches, located in different geographical areas, have distinct languages.

After being used to make this momentous revolution in agricultural and genetic techniques, Mary was left to live a few dignified months until she died on the 102nd day of 203,007 A.D. She spent her last months in a cage of honour, which was moved from place to place and was looked at with great interest by very many rats.

Now Mary's story does not end here, as during the important years of her life, when super-cocknet was being discovered and developed and when she was known far and wide, there were many rat-intrigues surrounding these research breakthroughs. The most celebrated intrigue concerned a group of scientists who, while they had been working with Vomistaga Anallo, took unlaidd eggs and samples of cells from many parts of Mary's body without telling Vomistaga or any others on the team. They did this at various times between 203,005-7 A.D. Extraordinarily enough it seems to me, as a non-specialist who nevertheless cannot help holding a point of view, the others on the team, including Vomistaga Anallo who made the initial discovery, did not take samples until a few minutes after Mary had died. After a while they came to think this had been an enormous mistake, because according to some authorities cellular breakdown begins immediately after death with cockroaches, and proceeds very rapidly. Others deny this, asserting that the cells of cockroaches break down no quicker than the cells of any other animal species, and that the process has certainly not gone far in only a few minutes after death. For these experts, the real source of the conflict was that the renegade group of scientists managed to develop their research in advance of Vomistaga Anallo and the other scientists on the team. Having 'stolen a march' on the others, the renegade group were able to sign a lucrative contract with a rat-house construction company.

In time the scientists loyal to Vomistaga Anallo started to hear rumours about the renegade group who been more astute than them, as well as scheming and dishonest.

To understand the implications of these rumours and the factional divide among the scientists that now opened up, we need to look at some simultaneous agronomic developments that were occurring on the continent human beings had called Europe, but which is today known as Skuk. Of all areas of the world Skuk was probably the worst affected of all by the Ecological Holocaust, very few species of any kind surviving. The soil left behind after the Holocaust was and still is a whitish-grey powder, of extremely poor quality, lacking almost all nutrients in any quantity. The only plant that has been able to live in it is the dandelion that has evolved in leaps and bounds over the last one hundred and twenty thousand years. The dandelion has become a huge tree, its average girth at its base now being between fifteen and twenty metres. Its average height is three times that of the tallest trees from the pre-Holocaust era. It is thought that the reason these trees are so huge is that the energy required to extract and retain water and nutrients from the very poor soils is relatively less at that size, than it is in smaller trees.

The dandelion tree has lost its yellow flower, but has retained its rings of leaves along with their characteristic shape; however, the ring at its base has disappeared, but there are numerous

enormous rings of leaves at about 15-20 metre intervals along the length of its trunk. Each leaf is about twenty metres long. Just as the leaves have the same form as pre-Holocaust dandelions, except that they are now in giant dimensions, the huge trunks are still green, and are fairly smooth and straight, like the slender dandelion stalks they descend from.

These forests extend over perhaps ninety-five percent of the entire territory stretching from what was once called Ireland by human beings, up to what they called the Urals and beyond. There is little rain but the sky is perpetually covered by low-hanging, whitish-grey clouds. The weather is permanently dim in light, and cool. The region of Skuk is virtually uninhabited by intelligent rats, and of very little interest to us, except scientifically.

The fauna that have adapted to these forests consists of many thousands of insect species, mostly black, nearly all flightless, and all small; none are bigger than 2-3 mm. in length. They crawl on the trunks, branches, and leaves of the dandelion trees, chewing the surfaces or sucking juices. They are eaten by many kinds of worm that have adapted to crawling on the trunks and in the canopies of the dandelion trees. These worms vary in length from one centimetre to ten metres. They are all of them various shades of green, which begs the question: why are the insects not also green? The only answer given so far by scientists is that the worms are always so close to the insects, and have developed such excellent sight, that the insects' colour is not very important in terms of camouflage, especially as they often almost completely cover the trees. It is also rather unclear why the worms themselves should all be so uniformly green, as there are no birds in our world, not one species having survived the Holocaust. The only predators of these worms are a kind of mammal descended from the only bat-species that survived the Holocaust. They vary in size from about half a metre in width, half a metre in length and about six centimetres in height, to a size some twenty times larger, but with the same proportions. They have lost their wings and hence their ability to fly. The largest ones wrap themselves around the trunks and branches of trees. Their normal colour is black.

As they crawl up and down the trunks, along the branches, and on the huge leaves, these animals look something like skates, the fish that date from pre-Holocaust times. They have retained the ancient habit of sleeping upside down.

The only other important animals that live in these forests are the numerous species of rats and mice, all quite small that live on the forest floor. They feed on the skins falling from moulting insects in the canopies above. Many of the insect species there have larval phases and as they metamorphose into adults, their skins fall in clouds, like dust, ash, or mist. Often the forest floor is completely carpeted by the rats and mice, so that an intelligent rat-intruder finds him or herself unable to move without standing on and squashing them at every step. In addition to moulting insect skins, the rats and mice on the forest floor eat dead skate-bats and worms when these die and fall from the trees.

As we have remarked, intelligent rats have found no use up till now for any of the flora or fauna in these gloomy, sombre, and monotonous forests, perpetually silent but for the squeaking and squawking of the rats and mice. But about a year before Mary Cockroach died it was discovered that if whole dandelion trees are chopped up and ground down almost to a powder, and are treated with certain chemicals, they render a substance rather like soft clay or plasticine, with

which handsome buildings can be constructed. After some weeks or months, depending on the climate, this substance solidifies, and leaves a very strong and also attractive structure.

Now, some chemicals that have the desired effect on the dandelion tree powder have been found in the mouths and anuses of certain lizards. Others have been manufactured in laboratories. But when the group of renegade scientists started to explore the properties of different samples of cells from Mary Cockroach's body, they found that a chemical taken from cells in her anus, which could be allowed to multiply, worked on the dandelion powder far better, and far more efficiently, than any of the rival chemicals so far tried. As mentioned above, the renegade scientists signed a contract with a leading rat-house construction company. They now produce enormous round balls of the multiplied cells, with diameters of twenty metres. These are coloured with streaks of white, red, and grey. They are transported to a number of factories set up in Skuk by the company. The cell-balls are transported by flying heli-rat balls, bubbles that can be produced to almost any required size. The surface container is entirely transparent, and is made from a mixture of glass, plastic, and amber. It has a rotating propeller above it, and thick spokes pointing behind it, and it runs on hydrogen fuel.

Production of the soft clay-like substance, called "dandehouse", began about four years ago, and has been extremely successful, technically and commercially. What happens is that the chemical extracted from the anal cells, in liquid form, is poured over a conveyor-belt of dandelion powder. The huge balls of cells can produce the chemical for a very long time, if maintained under appropriate conditions.

When the rat-scientists grouped around Vomistaga Anallo became aware of all this, they were furious. They had hard-rats assault and sequester three of the renegade scientists while they were going about their business outside their homes, and had them treated to the Big Punishment.

In this widely known and frequently used punishment, the victim is tied up and rendered unable to move, while four extremely big and tough rats charge into him or her. First two charge one from each side, then the other two charge, one from the back and one from the front; then the first two charge from the sides again. Each time a pair of rats turn round after their charge they whip the victim as hard as they can with their tails. This will go on for as long as the rat in charge commands that it should. The hard-rats are like charging rhinoceroses, only without horns!

The reason the four hard-rats don't charge all at the same time, is that they hurt themselves if there is no means for the charged-on rat's body to expand, either breadth wise or lengthwise. As the reader may imagine, if the charged-on rat bursts or explodes, it is extremely uncomfortable and quite disgusting for the punishing rats.

Things got worse after the much-publicized applications of the Big Punishment. Attacks and counter-attacks between the factions led to the deaths of three out of the nineteen rat-scientists on the original team. One of them was Vomistaga Anallo herself, and her death led to demonstrations of grief and rage all over the world, as for most rats she had made the discovery that made their sacredly important wine better and cheaper.

After a few years it was realized that Mary Cockroach's cells were irrelevant anyway, as everything that could be done with them could be done equally well with the cells of cockroaches descended from her, so long as they held the particular, crucial parts of her genotype. In effect the renegade scientists had hoodwinked the rat-house construction company into believing that Mary's anus cells were unique.

At this point dear reader, I will take my leave of you, as I believe I have now fulfilled the objectives I set out for myself when I started to write this tract.

Rhetorix Flute
The 79th Day of 203,018 A.D.

A SINO-INDIAN CONVERGENCE IN LORETO, PERU

Kwang-Tzu was born in a commune near Beijing, the son of a technician who repaired tractors, but because he was clever Kwang was sent to University in Beijing to study agriculture and politics. At the age of twenty one, he was given the opportunity to spend a term at the University of New Delhi, which he jumped at.

During his four months in India, Kwang-Tzu became good friends with an Indian student called Rajib Mehta, who studied the same subjects as he. When Kwang-Tzu returned to China, the two young men kept in touch with one another, and exchanged ideas about governments and agricultural policies.

Two years after his return to China, Kwang-Tzu was involved in the Tiannamen Square demonstrations, and after they were crushed, he fled to Hong Kong. From there he made his way to Peru, where he joined some relatives who formed part of the Chinese community in Iquitos, and worked for some months in a Chinese general store. Throughout all this time he kept in touch with Rajib Mehta however, and much to his surprise the latter turned up one day in Iquitos.

“What are you doing here?” exclaimed Kwang-Tzu, delighted to see his friend in the street outside the house he was staying in.

“I am exile too!” cried Rajib Mehta quite pitifully. “I was in love, and was rejected, so I had to leave New Delhi. Where else could I go but here?” he questioned with big, wide, brown eyes.

“Well, thank God you’ve come,” said Kwang-Tzu. “I have ideas for us two!”

The two friends walked down the street until they arrived at a small bar. They sat down together at a table, and shared a bottle of Pilsen beer.

“So, what is your big idea?” asked Rajib.

“My idea,” replied Kwang, “is that we take a trip deep into the jungle here in Peru.”

Rajib immediately realized that this was indeed what they should do. They spent the next few days assembling the necessary things for the journey – hammocks, insect repellents, malaria tablets, torches, etc. – and then set off one early dawn with a boat that was headed up one of the tributaries of the River Nanay. After five days traveling, Kwang and Rajib were dropped off in a little mestizo community called Santo Paulo, where they soon managed to find a small, unused hut some locals said they could live in. They hung their hammocks, met their neighbours, and settled in quite well within a few days. They had a notebook with them, and two pens, and soon they began to write *A Chinese Monk and an Indian Rake Explore the Amazon, Separately*.

This book has since become so famous that I need not quote much of it here. But let me nevertheless present again its remarkable opening paragraph:

“I China, nearly dead, escape tanks. I India, bastard son of British Raj, yearn for opium. I look, he look, for ancestors, sorry! descendents. Siberian shamans come here first. All people here are still indigenous! We feel we were here with Orellana!

The Three Gorges in China, the Taj Mahal in India, are in our brain-cells. We do not need to return. We stay in Santo Paulo. We eat yucca, fish, and coconuts. We become real Amerindians again, perhaps Jibaro or Omagua. Keep reading please.”

JANE SLANKER

Can anyone explain why Jane Slanker killed her dog one day, when she was supposed to be one of those adolescent girls who are in love with dogs?

Unfortunately Freud is not still alive, so he cannot offer us interpretations for why Jane might have done that.

Three nights away in a Surrey field, there was a marquee all laid out with champagne and salmon sandwiches, with young girls in white garb, and only one freak smoking away at a joint in a corner.

The marriage never happened by the way. The marquee caught fire and everyone ran in different directions. The vicar suffered most, as part of his ministerial attire was sent into a blaze: he was not himself hurt however, all present were relieved to note.

This vicar, it was said, believed a Giant Star really did hover over the stable in Bethlehem, and told his pupils at the Church school to pray to God as one would ask one's father for pocket money!

Anyway, Jane Slanker became an exceedingly sexy girl when in her twenties, and she travelled all over the world on her charms. Once, in Alice Springs, she converted to aboriginal religion. But she did not stay there; she travelled on until she arrived in Greenland, after which she caught a plane to Honduras. There she became very fascinated with the magnificent Mayan art and sculpture she saw in Copan. But Jane succumbed to nature, met a man, and went to live in the suburbs of a city; whether it was Mexico City, Sao Paolo, or Caracas, no-one seems to remember.

But many of us remember her in a bikini, sipping a *cuba libre* or a whisky with ginger ale; lying back on a *chaise longue* or sitting up and talking nonsense with her dark glasses perched on the end of her nose! All of us hope she ended up happily.

CONFUCO ON THE MOON

There was a time, many years ago now, when no-one would have thought it a strange thing at all to eat a small brown ant, nor even a red one. All that has happened in the intervening time, is that values have changed. Nowadays, few people would want to do such a thing, and some people would go so far as to say that doing so was actually thoroughly immoral.

This was the sort of difficulty faced by Confuco, an Italian philosopher who left the planet Earth a little after the Last World War, and went to live on the moon. His great hero was Gitano Osculate, a scientific explorer from Milan who undertook a remarkable journey in the Amazon Basin between 1847 and 1851.

When Confuco was a young boy, it was commonly thought that the world was round, that it rotated around the sun, and that the sun was simply one small star in one galaxy in an inconceivably vast – but not infinite – universe. But during the Last World War Confuco, along

with some other philosopher-scientists, came to realize that this picture of things was all wrong. In fact the world was flat, the sun and stars revolved around *it*, the universe *was* infinite and the moon did not change size because of the blocking of light reaching it from the sun, as had been believed for centuries, but in fact really shrank then grew in a monthly cycle. When Confuco went to the moon he proved this conclusively, because he arrived on a part of it that had been bright and easily observable from Earth just before he left, but only days after he arrived that whole part of the moon broke up and disintegrated, and Confuco fell off the satellite.

And so, that was the end of that; Confuco perished in the act of proving definitively his theory. But no one took any notice of this heroic and tragic achievement, because the few human survivors of the Last World War were struggling desperately, and understandably had little time, energy, or opportunity to gaze at the moon through telescopes, if indeed any had survived the War undamaged. Confuco had in any case been extremely lucky to fly a spacecraft to the moon after the War, as there were only four or five remaining on the Earth, though it is not known what happened to the others.

STOCK THE GOOF

Once there was a goof, whose name was Stock. A goof is a kind of being that looks a little bit like a frog, and a little bit like a turtle, although goofs have developed such intelligence, and have grown to such immense sizes, that experts from a previous era would be, at least at first, utterly confused as to how they should be categorized. Stock was sick one day. It seemed he had eaten a rather long worm, as well as a very nasty fly, flicking the latter into his mouth regardless of caution, although all his friends who worked in the goof-hospital had advised him not to do that.

The main thing about Stock was that he was immensely thin and tall, and given that he lived mainly among insects this made him extremely conspicuous. Thus there flocked to him a kind of vulturous bird, which, with its huge and foul beak, sought out Stock's genitals and other sensitive

areas, exactly why, no ornithologist has yet been able to explain. The insects that surrounded Stock ranged from huge green grasshoppers to tiny little black flies that bite the ankles even of a goof like Stock. Any outside observer would be delighted to see how bitten Stock was, given his supposedly high pedigree.

Many a long tall grasshopper came to visit Stock at night. They would hop in near his kerosene flame, and like the moths and other flying insects would burn themselves to death in the glorious fire of his candles' flames. They seemed to Stock rather like Christian martyrs, the main difference being that they did not do what they were doing deliberately. One can only assume, thought Stock, that the early Christian martyrs partook of a particularly intense obsession, for they could not have known that their new religion would successfully come to dominate so much of the world.

SYMPATHY

Dear reader, please accept my apologies if this is written over- hastily and rather emotionally. I am a man who desperately needs to communicate with someone, however arbitrarily and unsatisfactorily. If you can indulge me, I must tell you my story.

I was foolish enough, but also human enough, a few weeks ago to be seduced by the most beautiful, sexual woman you could imagine who lived in a wooden house about ten miles from mine. To get there I had to walk through the forest along a very feeble path, and at night, so that no-one would know I was doing what I was doing.

It was risky - but what bliss, lay at the end of my walk! To make love to this girl was undoubtedly the nearest thing to paradise that you could find on this side of the grave - and quite honestly I am not at all convinced that any kind of paradise exists on the other side of it anyway.

One night, as I was walking along my habitual path to my delight, there jumped upon me from a high tree a foul, fiendish being. He, landed exactly on my shoulders, had me bent instantly under his domination, and kicked me to move on, although I was stunned into immobility. I felt one of my arms get twisted behind my back in some kind of nightmarish electric-like shock, and found myself trotting like an idiotic goat along the path towards my heaven.

“I’ll get off you if you give me three groats,” said the hobgoblin upon my shoulders. I scraped into my pockets and found three groats, which I gave to the fiend as he tumbled off my back. I continued on the path towards my delight, and soon I forgot this misadventure.

A few days later I made the same journey, but by then I had completely forgotten the vile being who had jumped on me before. But at the same point on the path, I was leapt upon from the same branch, and found myself clutched evermore hideously by some ghastly oppressor. This time this grip was a hundred times fiercer, and when like a weakened fool I begged him how much he would have me pay to get off me, he sneered:

“I want no money from you, libertine; I will accept nothing less than you soul!”

I gave him my soul, dear reader, because I could endure no longer the mad pressure of this evil demon squeezing me; I had to escape and almost without realizing it I had handed the disgusting wretch my soul, the very essence of me, and although he then hopped off me so very quickly, I felt no beautiful deep relief, as I had given him the only thing that matters to a man. I had now no freedom. I no longer felt like continuing my trek towards the delicious lady. Soulless, I no longer felt any erotic desire. I sit here dear reader, hoping perhaps that you at least might understand my plight, and although you can do nothing to help me, perhaps you will have a little sympathy for me; although I can never know it, even if you have.

HANS, THE LAST MAN

There was a man who had been forgotten, and lived on a huge leaf floating in an enormous lake. Because he had lost his memory he did not know how long he had been there, how he had arrived there, nor who had left him there alone, although he knew with certainty that he had once been with other people there.

This man's name was Hans, which was one of the things he had not forgotten. At night he would ponder his fate as he stared at the stars, but in the day he was too busy trying to catch a fish, a lizard, or a bird to think beyond his immediate needs.

He sometimes talked to himself out loud, and a great deal of the time he was conscious of a two-way conversation going on within his mind. This ensured that he never imagined he was the only human being who had ever lived, even if he was the only one still alive now.

Hans often wondered, at night, what kind of personality he had. Was he kind or obnoxious; gentle or ferocious; trusting or untrusting? Because he was never in the company of other human beings, and could not remember those times when he undoubtedly had been, he was never able to test himself, so to speak, against other people.

Strangely, he was fairly aware that his lack of human company prevented him from thus knowing himself, though being a solitary person permanently surrounded by nature, he was assured of an extreme awareness of his existence as the only conscious being in the universe, at least as far as his experience could bear that out.

For a long time, though he could not remember for how long, he had wished some people would come to his leaf and find him. But in time he ceased to wish this; this was at just about the same time that he had begun to keep records of the movements of the sun, moon, and the stars, and could gauge the passage of time.

He started to feel a sort of dread of what would happen if people did arrive, and so he did absolutely nothing that might draw attention to himself on his leaf. In fact he thought it unlikely that there were people within thousands of miles, if people still existed at all; but still he was mindful that if a ship or aeroplane were to pass close by, people inside might notice a fire, or any kind of disturbance of sound or sight, and so he adopted a mode of living that maintained as low a profile as possible.

The leaf Hans lived on was rather like a huge Victoria Regia lily leaf, except much larger, much thicker, and of a much darker green. Other things grew and lived upon it: small plants, mushrooms, small mammals and reptiles, amphibians, and of course numerous invertebrates, especially insects. The leaf contained a complex ecosystem, from which Hans could supplement his main diet of fish and birds. Birds came and went from the leaf, Hans could never know where from or to, as there was no other leaf within sight and the banks of the lake were out of sight. Yet he knew he lived on a lake with banks, but did not remember how he knew this fact, and so while it was not a mystery that these birds came and went, he did not know exactly where they went to or where they came from.

Sometimes Hans felt a terribly strong desire to speak to the birds and find out what lay beyond the water that surrounded his leaf. Occasionally he achieved a dialogue with particular birds, after he had ingested hallucinogenic mushrooms or the secretions from certain frogs that inhabited his leaf. From what the birds sang and told him, the banks around the lake were forever moving further away, and although there were other leaves like his within the lake, they were all of them always moving away from his leaf, rather like the galaxies after the Big Bang; and

anyway, the birds assured him, none of them had a man living on them. As for the banks of the expanding lake, the birds told Hans clearly that they sheltered no human beings at all, and that he was the only human being they had ever come into contact with.

“Have you really never seen another human being?” Hans asked them once.

“Not we, no, but our parents and grandparents used to see them,” replied the friendly birds.

“Where?” Hans persisted. But he could never get a clear answer from even the most lucid and articulate bird on his leaf.

Eventually, of course, Hans became old. He realized he was going to have to die. He found himself wondering at night, under the shimmering stars and miraculous moon, where on his leaf he would best die. But in time he came to decide that this conjecture was ridiculous: how could he know exactly when he was going to die? He might lie down in some chosen spot, then not die; or he might happen to be on a part of the leaf he did not want to die on, and then, lo and behold! He could die exactly there.

So he stopped thinking about when and where he would die. Funnily enough, once he stopped thinking or worrying about this, he found he was not dying at all. In fact, Hans has been on this leaf so long now that he sometimes wishes he would at last die. But he does not; he just lives on and on and on. The author of this account is quite sure he will himself die before Hans does, and thus be unable to record his death. For this reason the author has decided it is time to conclude this narrative, but respectfully hopes it has informed the reader in what he or she obviously wanted to know about Hans, the last man, living and not yet dying, upon his leaf in a gigantic lake.

ANT-AND-DOG FARM

Tamikrin was travelling up the Río Yavari in a motor boat he had hired in Tabatinga, which lies on the Brazilian border with Colombia and Peru; eager to see dolphins, turtles, monkeys and

parrots. He had with him his wife Charita, and their guide Huaco. Otherwise in the boat there was Sergio the *motorista*, and the latter's seven year old son, Chico.

"Four and a half in a boat!" joked Tamikrin, and in the first two days they saw monkeys, many birds including parrots, but not yet dolphins or turtles.

On the third day, Huaco informed Tamikrin and Charita that they would pass, at about midday, an ant-and-dog farm, on the Peruvian side of the river.

"A *what?*" cried Charita, unsure if she had heard Huaco correctly.

Huaco explained: "An Austrian woman with her Peruvian husband and a Russian friend have run an ant-and-dog farm there for the last seven years, but it has not yet been opened to the public. They have been breeding ants all these years to get larger, and dogs to get smaller, until at last they hope to breed a dog with an ant, but nobody knows if they have succeeded yet."

Tamikrin was inclined to ignore what Huaco had said but Charita was troubled by it, although she had no idea whether to take the story seriously or not.

The boat chugged along the beautiful river, and Tamikrin enjoyed seeing many superb birds flying across it, until, at midday almost exactly, he and Charita were shaken by a strange, perturbing sight. Swimming out from the Peruvian side of the river was a most disturbing looking animal. It was about the size of a stoat or weasel, with a head shaped somewhat like a dog, except that instead of ears, two waving antennae protruded out from it. It had not four, but six legs paddling away, and its body was divided into a thorax and a much larger abdomen, joined by a very narrow waist. Every few moments it made a noise like a cross between a bark and a kind of hissing, shivering sound. It had a short tail that lashed against the river's surface behind it. It was a reddy-brown colour, and seemed to be making its way towards the motor boat.

Tamikrin and Charita were utterly mesmerized, if not to say terrified, but neither could speak; whilst Huaco, Sergio, and Chico looked at the animal quite unmoved.

The boat began to turn towards the right, just heading off the swimming animal, and made towards a group of wooden buildings by the side of the river.

"No!" screamed Charita, but Sergio continued to steer the boat towards the bank.

"Why are you going towards those houses?" shouted Tamikrin, and Sergio replied:

"Because we need more fuel for the motor, and also water and other supplies"
Tamikrin thought this was probably true, so he said nothing more.

They drew up alongside a wooden jetty, and Tamikrin and Charita stepped warily off the boat. All was quiet and peaceful, and there was no-one to be seen.

The five of them walked up to the first house. Huaco rapped on the door, but just as a white-haired woman appeared, several ant-dogs rushed out from behind the house and leapt on Chico, who was quickly brought to the ground. The gnashing teeth, the hideous saliva, and the stinging poisons of these vile animals soon silenced the young boy, and with the help of a number of other animals who quickly gathered round the kill, Chico was completely devoured; bones, skin, and all.

Tamikrin and Charita were utterly speechless, but Sergio spoke up presently:

“This happens sometimes,” he said. “We must accept it as the Will of God.”

Tamikrin and Charita were shown to the cabin where they would be staying. They quickly shut and bolted the door, and waited for nightfall. In the heat they sweated, and in their fear they were immobile and unable to speak more than a very few words to one another.

“When will we leave?” asked Charita eventually.

“I don’t know, tomorrow morning I hope, answered Tamikrin.

Night came, and with it the usual noises of the jungle completely surrounded them. Insects, frogs, and birds filled the air with their incessant sounds. Later on they started to hear the hideous bark-hisses of the ant-dogs, rising up above the jungle orchestra. They held hands, coldly, throughout the night, but at five o’ clock in the morning Charita realized that Tamikrin was dead. She got up quietly, and opened the door of the cabin.

Outside it were dozens of the creatures, pressing their snouts and antennae close up to her, but they did not, for some reason, attack her. Instead her mind gave way, and she collapsed. She never regained normal consciousness, and today she is in a psychiatric institution in Manaus, on the Río Negro, in the Brazilian Amazon.

THE CIRCULAR FATE OF JULIUS/BRODBIN

Julius began to think about which portraits of people important to him he would choose to have on his walls, if, that is, he had a house with walls to hang them on. He decided: the portrait of Shelley on the front of Richard Holmes' biography of him; the portrait of Mozart on the front of Hildesheimer's biography of *him*; the portrait of Beethoven in the Oxford Companion to Music; the self-portrait of Leonardo da Vinci that everyone knows, in pencil with his long grey-white hair; and Rembrandt's last self-portrait as an old man.

He was on the point of leaving his room in a lodging house in Dubrovnik, putting on a light jacket to go outside, when these thoughts came into his mind. As he went down the stairs that led from outside his room into the street, he began to remember things that had happened to him when he lived in Iquitos, Peru, and he was still musing over these memories when he arrived at his local bar, and sat down to drink a beer.

Images of palm-trees along the river-front on Malecon came flooding into his mind. He saw a bar in his mind's eye that he had often frequented, with strange, surrealistic paintings on its wall, of naked medusan ladies, mermaids, seductresses, and also of fishermen in canoes spearing fish, and flocks of amazingly-coloured birds flying over the river from one side to the other. The Amazon was covered in such deep purple and black clouds, the sky shook when the thunder began, and when lightning burst out and broke the sultry peace with streaks of electric fire.

In his room in Dubrovnik, Julius had a comfortable, though very old and torn leather sofa; a nice but very scratched and weakened mahogany table, and two wooden chairs that were also quite comfortable, on one of which he always sat when he was writing at the mahogany table. He was presently writing a kind of circular novel, that went from Dubrovnik to Iquitos and back again many times over, pursuing the experience of its hero, an aspiring, struggling composer whose music was deeply appreciated by certain small minorities but who somehow never managed to break into a wider circuit. This character was called Brodbin, but Julius was quite prepared to accept that Brodbin's personality was drawn from himself to a considerable degree, in a concentrated, condensed, unbalanced, and uneven way, and that Brodbin's fate was most certainly in many ways a reflection of his own, as best Julius could interpret that illusive, shifting, deceiving, manipulating, and cheating phenomenon.

Drinking at his local bar just a few strides from his lodging house, Julian returned to his thoughts about portraits. The portraits of painters, a poet, and composers that he had included into his imaginary collection were not the only ones he would have liked: but there exists no authentic portrait of Dante or Shakespeare, while Van Gogh's self-portrait painted after he cut off his ear is too sad, too much a tragic work of art in its own right to treat as simply a portrait. Rembrandt's last self-portrait is also tragic of course, thought Julius, but Rembrandt had at least known better times, whereas Van Gogh never had.

Julius knew of no really powerful portraits of Tchaikovsky, but he had seen superb portraits of Dostoyevsky and Mussorgsky when he went to Moscow a few years before. He wished he knew portraits of Tu Fu and Li Po, for by no means did Julius consider that great artists of infinite soul came only from Europe. He would have loved to know a portrait of José Silva for example, the great Colombian poet. But of such later artists, poets, and composers as Mahler, Richard Strauss,

Shostakovich, Baudelaire, Lorca, Pablo Neruda, Jackson Pollock, Ernest Hemmingway, or William Burroughs – all of these he knew too well in photographs for him to yearn for their portraits. As for Wagner and Bruckner, he knew very good portraits of both great composers. But for some reason he would not have wanted them in his special, imaginary collection.

Brodbin, the hero of Julius' novel, had started to compose music seriously at the age of twenty-four, just at the time he became engaged to marry the daughter of his father's best friend, and just as he was completing his final exams in engineering and design. Musical thoughts simply squeezed themselves into his mind, so he left Dubrovnik and went to Peru, where after some years of wandering he ended up in Iquitos, on the Amazon in the eastern rainforest. There he composed a good deal of music, for a great range of instruments both Western and traditional Peruvian, and for voice. Friends of his in Iquitos organized concerts of his music at various venues, both public and in private houses, but after several years Brodbin found his situation more and more frustrating, especially as he earned no significant money from his work. He was always in debt, and only scraped enough money to live on by giving occasional German lessons, except when he received money from one kind, sympathetic aunt of his who lived in Zagreb. This aunt loved Croatian Impressionistic music, and imagined that her nephew, although he wrote music in a different style from that which she most loved, was in some sense an heir to the movement she had believed in so devotedly in her youth.

And so Brodbin returned to Europe, and lived in Dobrovnik again, eking out an existence teaching German and designing posters for shops and restaurants. Julius felt that Brodbin represented something symbolically important in the historical and cultural interaction between Europe and South America, and planned to have him return to Iquitos in his old age. But as time went by Julius began to feel tired, and worried whether he could in all honesty have Brodbin return to Peru. But something happened to stir up his enthusiasm once again, in the most unexpected way.

In the bar where Julius was drinking beer, there sat at a table near to him a woman with a black imitation leather hand-bag, and Julius found her rather pleasing to behold. She looked about forty, while Julius was now fifty-eight, and so her few wrinkles were rather attractive to Julius, as were her large but shapely thighs, easily seen as her skirt was pulled up as she sat, apparently alone, at her table drinking a glass of white wine.

Somehow or other, as the evening moved along and people came and went, Julius found himself sitting at the same table as this woman, whose name was Eva. Quite effortlessly conversation commenced between them, and one thing led to another, Julius and Eva parting late that night and agreeing to meet again the following evening. A liaison evolved between them, which changed Julius' feelings about life and himself very profoundly.

Eva lived quite comfortably with her sister, and so neither she nor Julius changed living arrangements, though they would stay at one another's home several nights a week. Julius felt something like a rebirth of his soul.

Then there came about an extraordinary coincidence. Eva worked as a part-time secretary in a Dubrovnik-based Import-Export company, that had offices in various parts of the world,

including South America. One office was in Iquitos, on the Peruvian Amazon. One day she was asked if she would like to work in that office as she could speak Spanish reasonably well, and so she brought the matter up with Julius. Julius thought it was a wonderful idea, and encouraged Eva to say yes. He imagined he would go with Eva to Iquitos.

Over several months Eva and Julius discussed and planned their future in Iquitos. The exact nature of Eva's appointment; what Julius would do in Iquitos; how long they would live there, or if indeed they would ever return to Dubrovnik. As the months passed however, a certain unease took hold of both Julius and Eva about the project. Julius began to feel that perhaps he would not be able to pick up the threads of life again in Iquitos now he was older; even though, or perhaps because he would be with Eva. Eva wondered what would happen if Julius was unhappy there, and whether she would feel pulled between completing her assignment, and returning to Europe. After some heart-rending nights discussing the problem, Julius decided he would not, after all, go to Iquitos with Eva. Perhaps he would join her later, after some time had passed. They could easily communicate while she was in Iquitos and he was in Dubrovnik.

So Eva went alone, flying from Dubrovnik to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to Lima, Lima to Iquitos. Once she was there, she easily sank into the tropical life-style and mental state that Iquitos induced within her, while Julius grew into a somewhat fatalistic, sullen state of mind, his heart-strings pulling away from the memory of Eva and returning with full thrust to his novel about Brodbin, which he had provisionally entitled "Brodbin's Circles".

Julius had Brodbin return to Iquitos instead of himself. In the novel, Brodbin met a commercial trader in tropical fish in Dubrovnik called Katchuk, who, on finding out that Brodbin had spent many years in Iquitos and spoke good Spanish, suggested he should work in Iquitos as Katchuk's agent. Brodbin loved fish, and dying to return to the rain-forest, accepted Katchuk's offer. He went to Iquitos by the same flights that Eva had taken: Dubrovnik-Frankfurt-Lima-Iquitos, and was delighted to be back in his beloved Iquitos, now without the crippling financial anxieties he had suffered before; as he now received a salary from Katchuk's firm.

One evening, shortly after Brodbin's arrival in Iquitos, the Peruvian secretary in his office invited him to a party in a friend's house at which Brodbin was told there would be a number of other foreigners. Brodbin went; and who should he meet, but Eva? Brodbin and Eva, able to communicate in Serbo-Croat, talked and danced all night, drinking Peruvian rum mixed with various fruit juices all the time.

Eva and Brodbin clicked emotionally, culturally, erotically, and in every other essential way. Within a year they got married, and lived in a modest flat in Ricardo Palma, a street in the centre of Iquitos. With tears in his eyes, Julius finished this part of his novel one Friday evening at about ten o'clock. He put down his pen, and went out to his local bar, where he drank beer for several hours until he almost collapsed.

He was helped back to his room by two of his regular drinking partners, and slept soundly for some fourteen hours. When he awoke, he immediately realized he must go to Iquitos as soon as humanly possible. Out of his window he saw the superb towers and spires of Dubrovnik spiking into an azure sky, and dreamt ahead in thrilling anticipation of even more azure skies above

Iquitos. He became obsessed with the urgency of arriving in Iquitos before Brodwin's marriage with Eva had settled into a complete certainty. From that moment on, Julius could not move well, though the doctors at the municipal hospital of Dubrovnik were unable to explain why; he could only walk slowly, hunched, and for little more than a hundred metres at a time.

It took Julius some while to organize his trip to Iquitos, the biggest problem being, inevitably, obtaining the necessary money. His aunt in Zagreb, now very old indeed, sent him some money, but her notions of money's value were locked into a distant past, when a large sausage cost the same as a single stick of chewing-gum costs today. Once he was able to buy an airline ticket and had spoken to his landlady, Julius suffered some kind of nervous breakdown, but was lucky to be taken to a psychiatric clinic run by a kind and clever woman called Gabrielle Mishka, who had read some of Julius's essays and poetry, and greatly admired them. Julius's mind gave way completely after several weeks in the asylum; in his last vivid memory he was in Iquitos with Eva, looking out over the River Amazon from a bar on Malecon, composing a chorale; both the words and the music were his, in a remarkable blend of Croatian-Bosnian and Peruvian musical opportunities. It was a very beautiful memory, a dream in which all traditions mingled in deep wonder and equality, the sky blue as a deep ink-well, with the sun pelting down, the brown-crazy river drifting lazily and magnificently and muddily along its strange Vishnu-dreaming way.

When Julius came to, so to speak, some twenty months or so later, he was extremely clear-minded, exceptionally sane, and precise in his mind's focus. He got dressed, kissed Gabrielle on both cheeks, and left the clinic. At the doors of the hospital, can you imagine whom he saw? There, walking towards him, in a modest but shapely dress, full-breasted and radiant in warm, milky middle-age, was Eva. He stopped in his slow steps, as Eva approached him; they hugged each other in some form of beautiful, happy union and then kissed a little very gently.

The clouds gave way, and the eternal sun streamed and streaked its rays through the radiant air, and Elizabeth's Prayer from *Tannhauser*, or something close to it, flooded from the upper spheres of truth down unto the sweet kisses that passed between their tender lips.

"When did you get back from Iquitos?" asked Julius eventually.

"I didn't get back" replied Eva, "because I never went there."

Julius was bemused, but felt it better not to pursue the question. Later, Eva explained that at the last minute the arrangement, according to which she was to have gone to Iquitos, had been cancelled.

"Why didn't you tell me then, if you were here all the time?" panted Julius.

"Why should I have done, when you wanted me to meet Brodwin anyway?" exclaimed Eva.

"How on earth did you know that?" continued Julius.

Eva did not reply, but months later Julius did at last go to Iquitos, concerned finally to find out whether Eva had been there or not, and if so for how long; and also, what she had done there.

When Julius arrived in Iquitos, he spent the first few evenings drinking in bars on the riverfront. He detected no evidence that Eva had been there. At first he felt very bad and guilty for having distrusted her. But in time, as he gazed over the warm green stretch of *varzea* that spreads out between Malecon and the river, whose bank is nowadays far out, Julius started to feel relaxed; but at the same time he was entirely confused emotionally about Eva.

Meanwhile, Eva went to visit Julius at his lodging house in Dubrovnik, only to hear from his landlady that Julius had gone away, for good, as far as she could understand.

Eva had all this time been living with her sister, but now she decided to move into Julius's old room, as she found his former landlady quite congenial.

Meanwhile, Julius spent several months in Iquitos, but then decided to return to Dubrovnik. On his return he began to feel he should call himself Brodwin, having spent so many years pursuing and shaping Brodwin's fictional life. When he went to the flat in which Eva and her sister had always lived in the past, he rang the bell, and Eva's sister, called Tanya, opened the door. Julius, now called Brodwin, was invited in by Tanya, a middle-aged woman equally as attractive as Eva, though of a different hue and flavour. Brodwin entered, and on that very night a relationship between him and Tanya began to flower.

Brodwin and Tanya have stayed together until now, whilst Eva, once she heard of her sister's and Julius's treachery, immediately pressed her boss to send her at last to Iquitos; she went there, and met a Peruvian man called Cesar, and the two of them soon started to live together. At the present moment, Julius/Brodwin lives with Tanya in Dubrovnik, whilst Eva lives with Cesar in Iquitos.

NUBREEK'S WANDERINGS

A lizard slipped off Nubreek's knee, though he was not responsible for this. He was reinventing Macchu Picchu, dreaming its endless growth and its piling up to the infinite stars, like fireworks of earth and stone flying up into the skies.

Nubreek was coming to terms with a big life-break: an understanding that no longer could his blood flow like orange stains down the river; now it would have to become part of the green snake that created everyday the dark brown colour of the river, but in an opposite direction.

He was now very tired of taking orders from anything or anyone, yet he was determined to flow with the Tao, though what that meant exactly, he was always changing his mind about. Sometimes this caused him anxiety, at other times he rejoiced in the uncertainty; but he always felt sure ultimately that obedience to the Tao was the same as freedom. In the Tao, Free Will met with Determinism, Heaven with Hell, Life with Death, Love with Hate. To be one's own master or mistress, one had to try to follow the Tao, although that often meant pushing from one mistaken extreme to another, like a river that pushes against and erodes first one bank, then the other; always changing its form, yet ultimately always pulsing with the same life-force. The Golden Mean is never a fixed certainty; merely an ideal, an abstract concept, something emerging as a dream from thesis and antithesis; in a transient, glorious synthesis.

Later on, Nubreek imagined he had met Georg Friedrich Hegel, but then that wonderful vision was shaken up and fragmented into a different one, as he now felt he was in the presence of Friedrich Nietzsche. How had an enormous, silvery, grey and blue, and then rainbow-coloured river changed into an infinitely fragmented, chaotic, broken pile of stampeding crystals, dancing in wild, mad night; making no coherent shape, merely crazy, delicious light-sounds and movements, howling at the edge of an abyss?

Ah, how beautiful all could be; how to cope when Hell breaks free. Nubreek dreamt, and rolled on his bed; saw Wonder and Mystery before he awoke.

KOMMANDER KRAT-KYO'S MEMORANDUM

Kommander Krat-Kyo sent this Memorandum to the World Axis New Order Rallies, held simultaneously in Berlin and Tokyo, in May 1968:

“The Great German Führer and Visionary of the New Order, Adolf Hitler, has died. Let us grieve, but also worship his greatness! Thanks be to Providence that we, the primordially interlinked, racially superior peoples of Germany and Japan, had the Führer as well as the Great Divine Japanese Sun Emperor, to lead us through these dark and dangerous times, threatened as they are by degenerates, terrorists, racially mixed mongrels, inferior sub-humans, spiritually impure criminals, drug addicts, homosexuals, and moronic modern artists! Thanks to Adolf Hitler's example, we have not appeased the enemy; the rat-lines of killers and insurgents everywhere in the world are being destroyed and crushed, and we will win! Thanks to the example of Adolf Hitler, we no longer accept terrorists who burn our flags, threaten our civilized order, or indoctrinate young hoodlums to kill and maim decent German and Japanese citizens, as well as those of our decent, civilized allies. Now you know why we fight these people!

Our enemies, the terrorists, against whom we wage eternal and righteous war, try to force us to give up, and abandon the work of Providence, that wills our commitment to peace, correctness, racial purity, and normal decency. But we will never give up; we have vowed to fight for the next thousand years to achieve our great and just goals. The enemy does not know us very well; they are *Untermenschen*, criminals, Jews, Islamic fundamentalists, cowards, liars, cheats, impure Orientals, liberals, democrats, Communists, and perverts of all kinds. We will not be subdued by their foul propaganda, through which they seek to exploit our kindness, and claim we treat them other than justly in our prisons.

We will hunt them all down, even in their beds, and eliminate their threats to Civilization through our missile attacks on their hide-outs, in our gas chambers, through summary executions, by defoliating their fields, or by the use of biological and chemical means to extinguish their vile presence. We will never surrender, nor remain supine, nor flinch before these swine, rats, cockroaches, gooks, wogs, wops, workshy niggers. We will continue forever to kill them all, as we have on our side heroes and magnificent bombs, heroes and magnificent bombers, and will use them in our War against Terrorism forever and ever.”

Berlin and Tokyo,
May 1968

Kommander Krat-Kyo

AN ARTIST IN IQUITOS

Sipani, son of Sanabi, with his wife called Uchanama, had a son and a daughter called Chasnamote and Chatasama. They were Tabalosos, Indians who lived on the Río Mayo in the Seventeenth Century, and had been subjugated by the Spanish Conquistador Martín de la Riva Herrera and by Jesuit missionaries.

A descendent of Chatasama, called Olleta, more than two hundred and fifty years later, was a 'coqueta cortesana' in Iquitos, of great charm and beauty, whom the General Prefect of Loreto, called Alvarez, turned into the 'First Lady' of Iquitos. With her perfumes and jewellery, and her fine parasols, Olleta was a renowned personality in Iquitos before 1914. Of course, 'respectable women' turned their gaze away when Olleta was nearby; but everyone else loved her dearly.

One of Olleta's sons by Alvarez was called Jenaro, who was sent to England for his education. He went to Charterhouse, then to Cambridge where he studied Classics. When he returned to Iquitos in 1935, he became very interested in the work of Iquitos artists. Rather than taking on a career in politics, diplomacy, or business, as his parents had expected him to do, instead he became extremely committed to the 'Iquitos School' of art. One Iquitos artist was a black Barbadian called simply Jimmy – he never used any other name – who had turned up in Iquitos in the 1920s. Though his paintings are difficult to locate now, they are said to have been of an extremely broad brush, very bold and powerful, bursting with the light of Iquitos and the River Amazon, dancing with the trees and animals of the jungle around Iquitos.

Jenaro and Jimmy became good friends, and would spend many hours together talking about art – what it was for, what it meant, what it should be or could be in Iquitos. One evening the two men were walking along Malecon when Jenaro tripped on a piece of metal piping and was knocked unconscious. Jimmy tried to pick him up, but Jenaro was too heavy to lift very far. So Jimmy propped him up against a lamppost and ran off to find a policeman or just anyone to help.

Jimmy was never seen again, while Jenaro is denied by some, ever to have existed at all. By 1939, when the Second World War broke out, both Olleta and Alvarez were dead, and their surviving offspring denied they had ever had a brother called Jenaro. Jimmy is remembered as a great local character and is still mentioned today in books about the history of Iquitos. Local art historians continue to search for his paintings.

The lamppost against which Jimmy leant Jenaro still stands on Malecon, and one hopes one day that someone will place a plaque on it; for Jimmy was evidently a great artist and Jenaro was wise enough to recognize that fact. The location of their last parting is surely worthy of some honour and celebration.

JULIO'S DILEMMAS

Under a pelting sun in Iquitos, the largest town on the River Amazon in Peru, Julio was drinking a beer at an outside table of a bar. The bar was right by the river, on the riverfront street called Malecon. Sitting under an umbrella that kept him mercifully shaded from the direct brightness and heat of the sun, Julio gazed out on the beautiful sky and water. Huge white piles of wool-like cloud hung calmly and lazily over the shimmering, flickering water, its moving flecks of blue, brown, silver, and green sending him into a kind of trance.

Julio was an Iquiteño, that is a native and citizen of Iquitos, though his father, now dead, had been English. Julio lived in an apartment on the same street as his mother, a born and bred Iquiteña.

Julio was a poet and writer, who sometimes worked as a journalist to earn money. As he gazed at the river, the sky, and the jungle on the opposite bank, his thoughts focused on the distress he felt about an argument he had had earlier that day with his girlfriend Maria. He wondered whether this time the relationship was really over, as the argument had followed an oft-repeated pattern, with Maria winding him up over some trivial matter, and then Julio exploding and shouting at her, which only caused her to wind him up more until finally he unforgivably flailed around with his fists, punching her on her arms. This would happen before he properly appreciated what he was doing; and when Maria made a great drama out of it, gesturing like a martyr, contorting her face into an expression of exaggerated anguish – or at least, that is how it seemed to Julio in *his* state of anguish and desperation – his blood would only burst into yet fuller flames.

Perhaps permanent kinds of relationship with women were an absolute impossibility for him, he wondered, in blood-letting, internal pain. He turned in his mind to the perennial preoccupation of poets and artists: was the creative, poetic temperament simply incompatible with long-term, monogamous love? The self-control, the constant suppression of impulses, the requirement for a certain amount of order, and for great amounts of restraint almost all the time, were perhaps impossible for a person whose very life-blood and living soul were intrinsically impulsive, extreme, and frequently overwhelmed by experience; by the senses, the emotions, by intuitions, and by dreams.

Or was it that his father was English? Not that the English are especially poetic or emotional, God forbid! But the fact that he, Julio, was a product of two very distinct cultural and psychological traditions, a schizophrenic maelstrom of opposing, or at least differing, orientations: perhaps this condemned him to being an outcast or exile, condemned him to an existence in which he would always find himself misunderstood, at least from his own point of view? He mused upon the mixing and merging that he felt within him, of Iquitos traditions of

folk-tale telling, shamanistic chanting, and Amazonian legends: of mermaids, dolphins, and black snakes that emerged from ox-bow lakes, on the one side; with English literary traditions on the other: Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, Keats.....! A thought occurred to him: he could write a kind of autobiographical novel and title it *Julio Turner*, as an echo of Thomas Mann's story called *Tonio Kröger*. Tonio Kröger's mother was a dark, sensual Italian, while his father was a fair-haired, northern, rational German. The hero was torn between two life-worlds, able to *feel* both wholly, but unable to *live* totally within or without either of them.

Actually however, Julio's English father had been called David Grahams, but Julio imagined he could easily have been called Turner, a name as characteristically English as Kröger was emblematically German. David Grahams had been an engineer who worked for many years in Iquitos in the repair workshop on Malecon. He had had relationships with several local women but the one that lasted longest was with Julio's mother, who was called Cecilia. David was an engineer by profession, but an explorer, dreamer, and artist by nature. He had never applied himself strongly to art, but had drawn quite well, and sometimes wrote poetry. Julio had some of his poetry, and thought it very striking. It was in English of course, but some of it was about Iquitos – its people, its streets, its women, its smells, its sounds and sensations; and some of it was about the experience of sailing on the river in boats – often those whose engines David had himself repaired.

As far as Julio knew, his father had left Iquitos when Julio was about seven, but whether he had returned immediately to England Julio did not know. Maria, his mother, was not very forthcoming about Julio's father's departure from Iquitos, but apparently David Grahams had lived on for some considerable time afterwards, sometimes writing to or telephoning Maria, before finally dying in Truro, Cornwall.

Julio himself had traveled a little in Colombia and Brazil, but never outside of South America. He held in his mind certain strong images of England, and felt he was destined one day to visit the country; but his heart was embedded in Iquitos, towards which he felt obligation, commitment, and love. His soul however was not entirely immersed in Iquitos; he felt the whole planet, indeed the whole universe, made up his soul's matrix. In the sense that Iquitos was a microcosm of the whole world, and of the universe, why yes, his soul burned at the centre of it. Indeed this was both a conscious and unconscious theme in much of his writing – both in poetry and in prose. But sometimes he felt a yearning to go somewhere beyond the Amazon: to Vienna, Dubrovnik, or perhaps Edinburgh. Something in him would have liked to see tall church spires, medieval buildings, very old stone bricks. And of course he knew he should go to Cusco, Ollayntaytambo, Macchu Picchu, and other magnificent Inca sites.

There were beautiful red and pink flowers growing in the flower beds around the old gas lamps – now running on electricity – that punctuated Malecon, and Julio started to observe them closely. It was late afternoon, still hot and bright, yet the colours were everywhere beginning to change to deeper, more intense hues. But it was not yet dusk. Not yet were there blood-dark reds, crimsons, velvet purples, thick dense greys and heavy sinking blackening clouds crushing in and drowning the soul in pain and ecstasy. There was still time yet, so Julio started to drink another beer.

Once night had really come, Julio's thoughts began to turn to death. Was Death a portal into a new Life, or was it a mere snuffing out of all we know, whether good or bad? That is the old question, which has hit human beings between the eyes from the moment of their first appearance, addressed so admirably by Hamlet in his famous speech. Along with the other Big Question - who or what created us and the world, and why? - the question concerning what happens after physical death is the main one, perhaps the grandest of all. Never can a living human being ever know the answer! Julio knew the life of Shelley, and how only weeks before his death he had been in a boat out at sea with Jane Williams, and had suddenly declared: "Shall we now find out the answer to the greatest mystery?" Jane had answered along the following lines: "No thank you Shelley, my children need their supper first." And so, as Julio looked out upon the black, now silent river, he felt he might drown in a boat, though not on the Mediterranean, but here on the great Amazon.

Of course Julio was aware that Shelley had later drowned in a small sailing boat with Jane's husband, Captain Williams; a severe storm had capsized their boat off the coast of Leghorn, the absurd English name for Livorno. (Presumably British sailors thought Liv-orn-o sounded like Leghorn at some point in time.)

Julio would not have liked to drag another man down to a watery grave with him, so his suicidal equivalent would have to be a solo effort, in a boat all on his own, perhaps a canoe, that he would take out for the ostensible purpose of spearing a few fish.

But, Julio thought, Shelley had not consciously tried to commit suicide; he had been driven by purely unconscious and preconscious drives, that had pushed him, unknowingly even to himself, to dissolve into the wider universe. This was due to the pressures of guilt, moral self-doubt, loneliness and painful agony, combined with a kind of yearning for immersion into oceanic oneness; and a drive towards dark, erotic fulfillment, the same kind of merging of Eros into Thanatos that Jim Morrison had felt one hundred and fifty years later. Shelley had to become part of the "One that remains, while the many change and pass."

"Break on through to the other side," resounded the lyrics of *The Doors* in Julio's memory, a song he had loved since the age of seventeen. In an Iquitos discoteque, all crazy hell would be let loose by a song like that, in a way that in its country of origin, the United States, it could never do.

Imagine a Bacchanalian festival in Ancient Greece, or a ritual performed by the Yamonami on the norther border of Brazil with Venezuela, thought Julio; or the chanting of a Yaminahua shaman as the Mother of Ayahuasca starts to take her total hold over the minds and visions of her adepts! Consider the frogs, the insects, the sloths; the night-birds, the dreaming spirits everywhere, in the Amazonian forests! Do they not represent far more than they should, of a buzzing, whispering, screaming, dancing, infinitely multi-dimensional Life, beyond life?

VOLUME TWO

NIGHT SPELLS, OR: LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND

In moments of enchantment, the air is full of magic, fireflies zig and zag through the pitch-black night, and other huge flying insects crowd round the pale flames of the candles, and the sounds of the jungle are as a many-sectioned orchestra of insects, birds, and frogs.

At such times the jungle all around rushes in with its infinite, heavy darkness, drowning our tiny space of candle-lights, at the same time as it sucks this magic womb-world outwards centrifugally, which wants to fly outwards and disperse into the infinite forests of night all around us.

One thinks of isolated witches' cottages deep in the forest, or of some magical temple like that of Sarastro's in *The Magic Flute*, immersed in forest; or of the house into which Sigmund stumbles at the beginning of Act Two of *Die Valküre*. Isolated wooden houses in the wild woods must by definition be magical and supernatural, or else they would be instantly absorbed into the forest, like a speck of dust into a cloud, or a drop of water into an ocean.

Octavio Paz wrote of the magic moment after midnight, when everyone else is asleep, but when the poet starts to sing. This is also when the shaman enters into his visionary flights.

The Colombian writer German Arciniegas pictures the English political philosophers, such as Hobbes and Locke, sitting in front of wood fires on winter evenings, drinking ale and asking ultimate questions about human freedom, and whether God really appointed kings to rule on Earth. He imagines they arrived at their answers after long nights spent gazing, rivetted and enchanted by the flames, embers, and sparks of their English fires.

Perhaps when I was a child, I acted as a child and spake as a child; but when I became a man I did not put away childish things. On the contrary, an enchanted wood, a dream from beyond, music that comes from other realms, and the celestial spheres in the sky at night, not only retained, but intensified their wonder, amazement, and bafflement.

Now they have rebuilt the Old Bridge at Mostar, it is possible to enjoy the sight of it again, whether in photos from before or after its destruction. It is fascinating to read of the Sultan Suleiman's instructions issued in 1565 - thirty one years after Jimenez de Quesada founded Santa Fe de Bogotá - that the architect Hajrudin should design the bridge. There is at this moment an exhibition running in Zagreb, called 'The Old Bridge in Mostar'.

Here in Mishana, our house-keeper and friend Magnolia is very cross with the young man who has got her thirteen-year old daughter pregnant, not because he made her pregnant, but because of late he has been bragging to friends that the baby is not his, and that he is going to run away to Iquitos. But after a good talking-to, he seems to have changed his tune, and the couple seem, at least to the eye, to be quite happy together.

If there is real, palpable, sacred magic, as I felt at the top of a mountain near Rio de Janeiro during a Santo Daime ritual in a 'heaven', after taking Ayahuasca, when all present intoned and breathed the holy spirit "Cristo! Jesus, Cristo! Jesus", that was how it must have been for the early Christians, a small band of absolute fanatics scattered between Jerusalem, Damascus, Athens, Alexandria, and Rome.

The night-birds are so strange one feels transported into a realm of other, remarkable communication. The sounds, notes, so loud and clear through the dense night-air, make miraculous magic music, that no earthly musician could possibly compose.

I am nothing in the night, I have nothing, I am dispersed in the darkness. All that I was, all that I yearned for, is as the particles of darkness that surround me now. I have no contact with anyone I love, but that means nothing, as we are all part of the same ludicrous web of gems and jokes; I touch all, all touches me, with every breath I take, every sound I suffer to hear. I am alone, but as central to all as are my worst enemies.

Isn't it incredible that one can feel alone without being lonely and lonely without feeling alone? The first is not unpleasant at all, indeed it is very pleasant, for example, to be in a quiet jungle spot without anyone interrupting you. Whereas the second is merely a case of being lonely in a crowd!

Mmmm, the insects soften off, like woodwinds towards the end of a Schubert symphony. I can't help wondering what kind of character makes a politician or a statesman. There are remarkable types, like Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Winston Churchill, F.D. Roosevelt and so on. There are mediocrities, would-bes, like Thatcher, Blair or John Major. And there are real bad bastards, like Hitler, Stalin, George W. Bush, etc. There are failed idealists, like Robespierre or Lenin. And there was Alija Izetbegovic, a very tragic figure, not bad, but largely inappropriate for his moment in history.

In the depths of the night, not merely a mosquito nor an immense biting fly, but a huge wasp has just stung me. I feel venom pouring through my veins, from my shoulder down to my waist. I must stiffen up, and be quiet. I must be forever self-subjugatable here in this jungle enclave of ours.

In the night, the main magic pours into the mind; you are sitting wherever you are, the life-forces sing and jump all around you; yea within you. It is all beyond questioning, answering, or any kind of fatuous redemption, resurrection, or solution. Here you just sit, don't even listen, as there is nothing really that the Cosmos is trying to communicate to Itself. I should realize I am no more than a dried carapace of a cockroach, or a disintegrating wing of a dead insect.

It is all a mingling now, the forest sounds make up one, like the Unity of the One with the Multiplicity. It is all beyond wonder, beyond questions, after the glass has been withdrawn that stands between an observer and the Universe. All is merged into multiplicity and oneness.

Some of the huge leaves that make up the roof are gull of rats' nests. The rats run up and down the poles at night, exploring the kitchen for crumbs and any other bits and pieces of food. Pedro has tried to spear these rats, but they are difficult to target.

It must be one of the last spiritual illusions of the modern world, the idea that through art someone can be redeemed from mediocrity. Proust's magnificent thought that his life could be raised to transcendence through literature, is rather like the desperate Saint Francis bending, yearning, destroying himself through his wish to identify with Jesus Christ, to be stigmatized with the same blood-nailed holes in his hands. But Van Gogh only suffered; he laid himself on the line and created glorious art, as did Shelley or Beethoven. Their souls were not saved however, any more than was that of Saint Francis; nor do they live in eternal beneficence because of their earthly pains and triumphs. Their martyrdoms affected their souls no more than the bones of Saint Francis of Assisi disintegrated in a form any different from that of other human, or indeed animal, bone.

And so really, one might as well spend one's life pursuing money, sexual gratification, power, or whatever kicks turn you on. But of course that does not work, as there are many people who have dedicated their lives to these ends in all historical periods, not always at all having turned out to be happy. Really, probably people are driven from early childhood by their temperamental drives, and continue thus, regardless of what they think or believe at any time. These temperamental drives, presumably, are an intricate mixture and interwoven chaos, made up of genetic structures, experiences, up-bringing, and the wider environment.

The one thing that is a very bad idea, is to devote oneself to improving the human condition, expanding human freedom or justice, fighting in solidarity with people's struggles against oppression. That is a recipe for being hated by all sorts of people; for certain every motivation of yours will be misunderstood – or, perhaps, understood in ways that are beyond your own powers of comprehension. You can be absolutely sure of the resentment and dislike of others, of loneliness, failure, and desperation, if you are so foolish as to try to improve the condition of all humanity, in your short, narrow, limited, restricted life. Yet some people are unable to do otherwise. Their miserable fate is sealed. They will suffer.

Of course there is no God, nor is there love in the world as some general, dispersed principle or force. However, as Nietzsche might have said, these realizations only intensify the individual's burning quest to spread Love wherever he or she may wish to do so, as best he or she can.

Actually, it only martyrizes further the thirst for, and the yearning to expand Love, wherever and howsoever one can.

Shelley was like someone she has just fallen in love all the time, floating in ecstasy, in idealized air. He felt like this with everyone and everything. His love and earnest concern wrapped around everything he saw; he was intensely courageous at the same time, ready to sacrifice all. The world, sadly, was not ready for him, but never mind; others learned things from him later on, most particularly Mahatma Gandhi.

O my gold, my delicious air, this heaven is mine, in the middle night. O, the insects sing so wonderfully; ay, I feel liquid jewellery pour upon me, in sound.

People here in Mishana are not saints. But a mother like Magnolia bursts warmth from her smiles, scrapes heaven with her laughter and her welcoming of all life. The jolliness of people is superb, the nastiness on the whole is negligible. There is a certain amount of bitchy gossiping, but it never seems to amount to much. Life here is simple in form, complex in action, deep in reward.

Well, what if we slip into the seas, or we fly like giant insects into the clouds, or if we flap or tumble like other loud invertebrates into the puddles and pools of the night! What do you want? Who do you seek? Butterflies, flies, and mosquitoes all poke their proboscises into a plant's stem, or the vesicles of a limb, or the flesh of some victim. It is time to sleep, covered in mosquito nets, repellents, and shamans' dreams.

SHORT PREAMBLE TO A NOVEL

I think tonight is the night I must start to write a novel. The place in which the story takes place is not real, but is a legendary recreation of somewhere that does exist. I am sure that if the reader is not already bored, he or she will realize that everything involved in this venture is extremely unstable. I can only apologize if he or she is badly affected, or disorientated, by coming into contact with these confessions and with this narrative.

All life it seems, is like a series of cupboards in a hotel, alternately occupied by different people in their transitory lives. Sometimes the cupboard doors swing back and forth, and the different realities of different people's lives interchange and shift from one to another, or rather clatter like crazy boxes that confuse the mind, as happiness moves to tragedy, and back again.

THE DECISION

Early one morning the hero of this story entered my mind while I was perhaps three-quarters asleep; so it was really almost a dream in which he appeared to me, came to life, and took on some forms of reality. I did not, like Saint Pol-Roux, have a sign hung outside my bedroom door saying “Poet At Work”, but like the French proto-Surrealist poet, I was engaged in unconscious creativity while curled up in my bed.

The hero, a thirty-five year old man from Hamburg, Germany, was half German and half Colombian. His mother came from Bucaramanga, the capital city of the Department of Santander in northern Colombia. She had been a typically beautiful Bucaramangan girl who married a German man in the 1970s. They had a son, who grew up with them and studied Law in Hamburg.

After graduating, the son practiced law for a good few years, but was deeply unhappy with his profession. He wished he had read Archaeology instead, and yearned to go to Colombia where he could study the pre-hispanic goldwork that comes from archaeological sites on the Caribbean coast, and on the high plains of the Eastern Cordillera. It was during the months in which the hero of this story was making his decision to stop practicing law and travel to South America, that he came alive in my largely unconscious mind. Alongside his character, I saw very clearly an early Sinu piece of goldwork shaped like the pincer of a crustacean, and a wild, Xth C A.D. Tairona golden piece, representing a shamanistic man with jaguar features, powerful and aggressive, his hair filled with rings and other more extraordinary shapes.

During the months when our hero was making his decision to go to Colombia, the days ground in and out; it really made very little difference to him what happened, or on what day he happened to land up in such and such a mood or situation. Progress, development, and decline were for him largely illusionary. Everyone loves and needs others he felt; who these others are is something that constantly chops and changes. He often felt like a Neanderthal man or a Paleoindian, in the sense that what he did was obviously doomed; the future would have no room for him at all.

Such thoughts on the part of the hero were certainly influenced by the stress he was under while making this most important decision.

The hero of this story was born in an ordinary German hospital; his father held the hands of his mother at the moment of his birth in such a manner that his finger bones were almost broken. Seven months before the hero's birth however, his mother had left the flat in which she normally lived with her husband. She ran away to Sicily, where she stayed about five months with some people she and her husband had met in Kiel one day. She returned to Hamburg only two months before she was due to give birth. She told her son about this when he had grown up, but never explained exactly why she had done it. The episode remained very much in our hero's mind however, and he constantly wondered about the reasons for his mother having done this. It was particularly at the forefront of his mind in the period in which he was deciding to stop practicing law, leave Hamburg and Germany, and go to Colombia.

T

I dreamt one night that I had been with Alonso de Ojeda in March 1510 when he founded San Sebastián de Urabá, the first fort on the Atlantic coast of Colombia to be built by the Spanish. Of course the land had not even been named Nuevo Reino de Granada yet, let alone Colombia. At this stage it was simply known as Tierra Firme. San Sebastián de Urabá was soon destroyed by hostile Indians, but for a short while it was a haven of gambling, prostitution, heavy eating and drinking of wines and aguardiente brought across from Spain.

But I had never really been there at all, as I only came to the land that would later be called Colombia twenty eight years later, with Sebastián de Belalcázar, from Quito. I lived for ten years in Santa Fé de Bogotá, before I was imprisoned for treason and shipped back to Seville. I had my dream about being with Alonso de Ajedo at the founding of San Sebastián de Urabá, while I was still living in Santa Fé. Afterwards I was in a prison outside Seville for four hundred years, until I was released, finally, in 1948.

I left Spain in September 1948 and came to live in England. I started life again so to speak, and grew up as a child in a town situated south of London, called Esher. Many years later, when I went to live in Bucaramanga, Colombia, I remembered the dream I had had so long before in Santa Fé de Bogotá, about being with Alonso de Ojeda in 1510.

Alonso de Ojeda had mounted a horse, raised his sword, and bawled out a challenge to anyone who might oppose his founding of the city and his possession of the land.

While living in Bucaramanga, I planned to make a journey to Urabá and see where San Sebastián had been founded so long before. But as I was kept busy with my work for several years, and could not make the trip, I read about the early history of colonial Colombia in various history books. It was in the course of reading those books, during which time I became more and more fascinated in the subject, that the events I am about to describe took place.

As I was at that time working at the Industrial University of Santander as a professor of Cultural Studies, I used the University library to read about the early colonial history of Colombia. One day, as I was walking across the beautiful University campus to enter the library, a student came up to me and asked me an extraordinary question.

“Excuse me, T, but could you let me know something,” she asked. “If you had been a Spanish *conquistador* in the sixteenth century, would you have preferred Spanish, Indian, or African slave women?”

“My God, what a question!” I exclaimed. “Are you serious?” The girl, whose name was Lucia, was laughing, but she said: “Yes, of course!”

“Well, probably all of them at one time or another,” I replied, and Lucia laughed more loudly.

We were approaching the entrance to the library, so I asked: “Where in the library are you going?” “To the History section, Lucia answered. “O, so am I,” I said, and we went together to the third floor.

We were browsing at books on the same shelf, when Lucia suddenly let out a long howl. “Look at this!” she cried out, and I looked at the page of the book she had open. It showed an old map of the Department of Santander, before it was called that, in colonial times. Near the town of Bucaramanga was a small cross, that looked as if it most probably signified a grave or graveyard.

“Well, what about it?” I asked. “It’s just a cross.” “I know,” said Lucia. I want to go there, and see what it means.”

I stayed in the library a few hours reading a book about the colonial history of Colombia. Lucia left after about half an hour to go to a class, but said she would tell me when she had found out what the cross on the old map had meant. “Okay, certainly do that,” I said. “Next time we meet.”

Sure enough, a few days later I bumped into Lucia again in the University campus. She was ghostly white, a terrified expression on her face. “Hello,” I said. “You don’t look very well.” Lucia got out a piece of paper and a pen from her bag, and wrote this down:

“I have lost my voice and will never be able to speak again. I cannot explain what happened to me when I went outside Bucaramanga to find the place where there was the cross on the map.”

The four hundred years I spent in a prison near Seville, were rather like the eons that the *djin* in “The Arabian Nights” story spent in a bottle at the bottom of a river. To begin with, the *djin*’s attitude was: “If someone finds the bottle I am in, and rescues me, I will give him everything I can; all the treasure I can put my hands on, all the gold, all the money, all the beautiful women, every palace or grand house I can find.” But as the centuries passed, and then the millennia, he became bitter, and started to think in the following way: “If someone fishes this bottle out of the river, and lets me out, I will heap curses upon him, make him suffer every woe and pain, every misery and hardship. Then I will put him into the bottle, and throw it far out into the river, where it will sink deep down to its bottom.”

Once, in 1651, I escaped from the prison. I was in my cell one afternoon, as usual, when a prison guard came in to make a routine search to check I had not been able to obtain a weapon or some other useful item. I was sitting on my wooden bed, and for a moment the surly old guard turned his back to me, while he fumbled around in the far corner. I looked at the keys hanging on a chain from his leather belt; but a glance at the prison door showed me it was anyway open a jar. There was no point in trying to lock the guard in the cell, so I just slipped out while he was still looking away from me. I had soft leather shoes on, so I made no noise, and I turned right when outside the cell, and ran. It was a long, badly-lit corridor, and as soon as I came upon a little alcove to the right of it, I stopped and hid in it. The guard had not had time to realize I was gone, and run out of the cell, before I hid in my alcove; hiding, I dimly saw him look right and left outside the cell, then rush a little to the right in my direction, only to stop and run back, and keep running in the opposite direction.

When the guard seemed to have got sufficiently far away, I belted off again in the direction I had been running in already. I didn’t stop or slow down for several minutes, until I saw an open door with two heavily armed guards standing at each side of it, on the inside. There was nowhere to hide, I knew I could not run back, so I decided very quickly to bluff myself past the guards, and get outside. I slowed down only a little as I approached them, and pointed outside as I yelled: “Prisoners have escaped! One of your fellow guards has been killed!” This was enough to disorientate them for a split second, they jerked their heads to look outside; so I rushed past them. They did not have their sharp, evil pikes at the ready in that moment, so I got out into the daylight, into a large courtyard, and ran as far as I could till I reached a wall. The wall was about four metres high, so I turned right and kept running alongside it. Once I felt I was well out of sight of the door I had escaped from, I looked around me, and saw a huge heap of kitchen waste piled against the prison wall. I ran up to it, and pushed my way deep into the mountain of rotting vegetables, fruit, meat, and fish, where I lay down, stopped moving, and stayed hidden.

There I remained until night-time came, and I imagined it was well after midnight before I crawled out of the heap of rotting rubbish. I made my way back to the outer wall; there was enough moonlight to inspect it; there were rough patches and indentations between the stones which could serve as footholds. So I scrambled up the wall, more in frenetic madness than in coherent logical plan, until I got to the top, where I stood and looked around. A bit further on towards the right there seemed to be a heap of sand piled against the wall on the outside. I tip-toed my way towards it; once there I jumped down onto it.

My landing was not too hard, the sand was quite soft. I continued running in the same direction, close to the wall, now on the outside of it. I went on and on, through orchards of fruit trees, past barns and farmyards, under the mild moon, hearing chickens, dogs barking, and occasionally people's voices. Dawn began to break, and I found myself standing on a ridge from where I could see a port. There were ships of all kinds and sizes in it, so I made my way towards it.

I spent a number of days in the port, picking up bits and pieces of clothing, so I could discard the hateful clothes I had been wearing in prison. A sailor gave me some trousers; I stole a pair of strong boots off a drunk man asleep, which luckily fit me well. I was able to find food, and in due course fell in with a group of sailors who had found work on a ship that ploughed its way from one port to another on the Mediterranean, carrying bananas, oranges, wines, aguardiente, and metal cooking pots. I went on board with the sailors, and was taken on as one of the crew.

I left the ship in Alexandria, Egypt. I travelled inland some way, to a small town called Al Jaboula, where I felt I could melt away so to speak, out of sight of all kinds of disturbing authority. Here I met a beautiful girl called Amal, with whom I fell in love. We married, and had a family of two girls and a boy. I earned a living teaching the languages I can speak: Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian were all in considerable demand. Merchants in particular wanted their sons to learn these, which would be useful when later on they were to travel for their family businesses.

After living about ten years in Al Jaboula, I went one day by horse and carriage to Alexandria, in order to buy goods for my family. I was standing by a stall of pottery, considering how I might purchase some of it, when a man hit me from behind with a stick, and I fell unconscious into a ditch. I was asleep there for a few hours apparently, before being taken to a hospital. I regained consciousness to find myself being looked after by some Orthodox Greek nuns. I was fed, washed, and nursed for a day or two, and was planning to leave the hospital the next day, after one more good night's sleep.

Well, I went to sleep, but when I woke up I was not in Alexandria, but back on my miserable wooden bed in my prison cell in Spain. I had not escaped at all; the whole adventure had been a dream. I still had nearly three centuries more to endure before I would be let free from the prison, and could travel to England, to become a child again.

It was during a summer holiday in Esher, when I was about nine years old, that I made my first trip to another planet. I was playing one day on Western Green, a piece of common land that had quite a magical significance for me, and climbed to the top of a wonderful old oak tree. Sometimes I would jump from here to the ground, to test out my bravery and endurance, but on this occasion I just sat on the uppermost branch of the tree, gazing over the common land and woods, and sank into a trance. Somehow I found myself soaring up from the oak tree, high into the sky, through a deep warm blue patch in the white clouds, far above the earth. I carried on soaring and flying upwards for hours and hours, ever faster and faster. I flew past planets,

moons, asteroids, clusters of rock and every form of terrifying, exciting, cold, silent, dry inorganic lump and particle, until I landed, quite gently, on a planet that was a light blue-grey from the distance, though the ground where I arrived was a kind of soft, silvery powder. I found myself sitting on this silvery ground, staring at what seemed like a mountain range of extremely pointed peaks, perhaps a hundred miles away. I turned to look behind me, and in that direction it seemed as if I was looking at a lake, with a shiny, shimmering surface. I stood up, to look at it from a higher vantage point, and began to think it must be a lake of liquid mercury, or some other very similar substance. I thought it was a most beautiful sight I was beholding, its brilliant, bright liquid tones of colour shimmering and rippling. I was not sure whether the ripples were really moving on its surface, or whether the effect was due to reflections from the light coming down from the sky. Because, when I looked up, I saw to my astonishment that this planet was lit up by three suns, or at least three orbs that poured bright yellowy light upon the planet just as our Sun does upon the planet Earth.

I started to walk in the direction of the mercury lake. I walked for a very long time, but did not seem to get any closer to it. Perhaps it was a mirage, I began to wonder. After some while, I noticed things like rocks to my left hand side, and started to walk towards them.

They were indeed rocks, and when I got closer to them I saw they surrounded the entrance to a cave. I walked towards the cave, and found the soft, silvery soil giving way to a harder surface, of a dark purple colour; it was some kind of rock, but was covered with a layer of purple dust, though only very thin.

I entered the cave, and found the ground going downwards. Everything became darker, but in due course I noticed that light was coming from the roof of the cave. It was as if the rock were transparent, and let in light from above; or, that the rock was itself emitting light. As I found myself descending ever further into the depths of this planet, I found if anything that everything became brighter – certainly not darker. I could not understand how the subterranean world I was entering was so bright, but so it was, and I began to realize that many objects in it had extraordinary colours. There were rocks coloured purple, blue, brown, yellow, green, and red. There were oval-shaped objects, the size of giant rugby balls, coloured in some cases blue, in others yellow. I tapped them to see what they were made of – they were not rock or wood. After I had walked for some hours, I came to an area in which tree-like things stood. Trunks came up from the ground, and reached a canopy of purple-blue. Each canopy seemed to have several trunks, and was flat and only about thirty centimeters thick. Some of these trees had round fruits hanging from their canopies – I was immediately quite sure they were fruits – and were coloured the most brilliant, translucent, even psychedelic colours from every wavelength of the visible spectrum. How beautiful they were! In the complete silence of this planet, they seemed to make inaudible, magic music.

I walked for many hours more, and began to realize that night was not coming, because the three suns in the sky had hardly moved at all. Presumably darkness did come if all three suns sank beneath the horizon, but whether that ever happened, and how often, I could not begin to guess.

And so when I became very tired, I lay down on the purple ground, and slept the deepest sleep of my life.

When I awoke, I guessed I had slept about ten hours, but I had no watch, being only nine years old in 1957. I started to walk again, in the same direction as before, until I entered a space like a grove – because it had an intimate feel, and the trees were fewer and thinner in it – where I saw a sight that froze me in amazement, excitement, and fear. There were living beings moving among the trees, picking the round fruits, and eating them. They were short and stubby, moved on two legs, but had four arms on each side, making eight in all. They used two or three hands on each side at a time – and their hands had twenty fingers each! – to pick the fruits and put them into their enormous mouths. That is, their mouths were enormous in relation to their heads, and were like huge circular holes in their faces. They had no noses, but two eyes they did have, again very large and round, coloured orange. Their bodies, limbs, and heads were generally brown, like children’s teddy-bears on planet Earth.

These living beings were very quiet, but they did make a slight chomping sound as they ate. I walked closer to them, but they took absolutely no notice of me. They continued to pick the fruits and eat them, and it was as if I was invisible. I walked quite close to some of them, yet they still seemed not to be aware of my presence.

Years later when I looked back on this encounter, I wondered whether those beings had been a rather pacific, ape-like animal, or something much stranger. I was studying ethology at Cambridge University, around the time that Jane Goodall was becoming known for her research on chimpanzees. How I then wished I could have the opportunity to visit that planet again! O, how differently I would have approached that phenomenal experience of meeting living beings in a different world!

I stayed in that grove-like space for what must have been a couple of days, as I grew tired and went to sleep at least twice, before walking on once again. Shortly the dark, purple, rocky ground gave way to a very light green powder, that billowed out in great clouds with every step that I took, so light and tiny were the dusty grains. I felt I was descending ever deeper into the planet, although the rocky roof of the huge cave remained at the same distance above me, and the ambient light remained at the same intensity. After some time I came upon what seemed like a crater, not very wide in diameter, but seemingly extremely deep. Indeed it was impossible to see the bottom, so far down it was, and so dark; there seemed to be a black, oily liquid down there, that issued a strange greyish-blue mist. I sat by the edge of this crater, and looking down at the black liquid at its bottom in an almost trance-like state, I felt some influence working upon me that I could not define or put my finger on precisely. It was as if something was changing the circuits of my brain cells and making me think differently. I started to feel, for example, that there was no point in walking further on within this planet; I might as well stay sitting where I was and let whatever was destined to happen to me just happen. I started to feel there was no point in striving for anything, as all events were already fixed in space-time; all was not exactly predetermined, but already existing, and so why push one’s way to find something that was coming towards you anyway?

Years later, when I studied philosophy, and came upon the issues of free will and determination, and the philosophy of science, with its questions concerning the implications of twentieth century physics – especially Relativity and Quantum Theory – I remembered the sensation I had

had sitting at the edge of that crater. It was as if I had experienced existentially some of the deepest questions of philosophy and metaphysics.

Once, during the ten years that I lived in Santa Fé de Bogotá in the sixteenth century, I went on a trip in the company of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, the city's founder, to Honda. The great *conquistador* had to go to Honda, a port on the Río Magdalena, to inspect the arrival of some new Spanish troops and a good deal of new equipment, including harquebuses and swords. A number of important functionaries, and also soldiers and Indians, accompanied him on the journey, as well as certain individuals who were chosen for some particular expertise they were known to possess. I was quite well-known in Santa Fé as a leather-worker – although that was not my main occupation – so I was taken along in case Jiménez de Quesada might need me.

One day I found myself riding on my horse nearby the great *conquistador*, when to my surprise the normally taciturn, grizzled old man turned to and asked me my name.

“Really; T.?” he said, to my reply.

“And how long have you been living in Sant Fé?” he asked.

“Right from the beginning,” I replied. “I was with Sebastián de Benalcazár in 1538.”

Jiménez de Quesada frowned slightly, as Sebastián de Benalcazár had been his great rival over the foundation of Santa Fé de Bogotá. Nevertheless, he continued to speak politely to me.

“How well do you know Honda?” he asked.

“Not well, but I have stayed there,” I replied.

“Well, the fish and wine are good; perhaps we will dine together one evening,” he offered graciously. I bowed my head in respectful acceptance, but at that moment one of his close companions rode up close to Jiménez de Quesada, and began to speak to him. I drew back, and that ended the only conversation I ever had with him.

During the following five weeks I spent in Honda, I learnt one interesting thing. I dined one night with a Franciscan friar – not Jiménez de Quesada! – who told me certain things about the Bible that I had not previously known. The most interesting thing he said, which was absolutely new to me, was that the Apostles – Matthew, John, Luke, and Mark – had never known Jesus Christ. They wrote their Gospels many years after Christ's crucifixion, and could only have heard the story of Jesus's life from other people who did know Him.

While I was on the ship that plied its way from Seville to Alexandria, after I had escaped from the prison, some most extraordinary things happened to me. For example, one day I was ordered to wash the decks, but as I was doing the job, two crewmen began to argue near where I was, and as the argument became physical, they spilled over towards me. Very quickly I was enmeshed, engulfed in an angry fight, and in the process of merely trying to extricate myself, I was stabbed in the arm. My wound was not serious, but it was enough for me to get taken to the sick deck, where the ship's doctor bandaged my arm. As I lay on a bunk, feeling faint but not in great pain, the doctor began to talk to me.

"Are you an educated man?" he asked me.

"Well, it depends on how you define 'educated'," I answered.

"I mean, do you know Greek and Latin?"

"A bit," I said.

"Do you know the poets of Greece and Rome?" he asked.

"Yes, some of them," I replied. "Sappho, Pindar, Aeschylus for example, and Ovid, Virgil, and Catullus," I continued.

"Right," said the doctor. "You're coming with me."

When I had recovered a little from my loss of blood, the doctor pulled me up, and guided me along an interior corridor, until we arrived at an officer's cabin. The doctor knocked at the cabin door, and in response to an abrupt shout, he opened the door and pulled me in.

"This is T.," he said to the officer. "He can out-quote you in Latin verse, and you will have to give me my money back."

"Oh no," replied the officer, and waved his arms in the air. "I'm in no mood for ancient poetry."

The doctor pulled out a vicious-looking knife, and pushed it near to the officer's throat.

"Alright," relented the officer, "but at least make it modern verse!"

"Yes?" said the doctor, looking at me. I nodded.

"Well, who wrote 'Life Is A Dream'?" asked the officer.

"Calderón," I answered.

The officer looked nasty, and bringing his face very close to mine, he yelled:

“And who wrote: “To be, or not to be?
That is the question.””

“William Shakespeare,” I shouted back.

“Then I give up,” said the officer, and took out some coins from his purse, which he gave to the doctor.

“You are a gentleman,” said the doctor, most surprised and even more relieved.

“I know,” replied the officer. “And even more, a fool.”

After this strange encounter, I returned to my usual bunk. I had a good few swigs of rum, then fell into a deep sleep.

When I was a child in Esher, I walked to school up what we called the Old Hill, which in autumn was covered in horse chestnuts, or “conkers”, which fell in amazing quantities from the huge trees on both sides of the road. Half way up the Hill, there was an old farm gate that opened onto a very large field of un-maintained grass, which always seemed menacingly wild and dangerous to me. Some of the boys that walked to school past that gate would say there was a horrible man who lived in that large field, and that if children ever ran into it, he would grab them and eat them up. Once I dared to go a few yards inside the field – after climbing, in a trembling state, over the gate. I could almost smell the dreadful threat from the horrible man, though I did not see him.

Though I never saw the horrible man, I had a strong idea of him deep in my mind, though it was not a clear visual image. His head was large, and had a smudgy shape, and was permanently dark as if hidden in shadows. He normally lumbered along in a dreadful kind of walk, but if he saw a boy or girl, he started to run terribly fast towards him or her, and could easily catch up with him or her however far away he was, unless the child was very near to the gate that led onto the road up the Old Hill. Then the pursued boy or girl might escape, but otherwise he or she would be grabbed by the horrible man who would drag him or her off, still alive, and only rip him or her apart after he had dragged them behind a shed that stood in the middle of the big ugly field. There, once ripped into pieces, the child would be devoured by the terrifying man, and no remains would be left of him at all. No one ever knew what had happened to the child who disappeared in this way, as no one ever saw him or her being run after and captured by the ghastly fiend.

When you reached the top of the Hill you immediately saw, through some dense trees, the village green of Esher, on the other side of which stood the school, and next to that, Esher Church. It was a rather beautiful, whitish-grey church, quite reassuring to look at after one had been walking past the field where the horrible man lived.

It was while I was walking across the village green one morning, towards my school, that I was swept up by a sudden wind high into the sky, and found myself flying extremely fast towards another planet. It was not the same planet I had visited before; this one was as black as coal-soot, and looked very rough from some miles away, but when I came up to it, thinking I would be smashed to smithereens on impact with it, I was amazed to find it was not solid, so that I simply passed into it, as if it were a dark gas. I flew for days through pitch blackness, not knowing where I was going or where I would arrive at, nor even what was propelling me along.

When I burst out of the darkness I found myself in deep black space, hurtling away from the black planet towards enormous numbers of bright, sparkling, shimmering stars in huge clusters.

A STRANGE PARTY

Not long after guests arrived at a party in a tall, brown house on Styair Street, Quawkle District, Flamborough, they realised they had been invited to a strange party indeed. The house was at number twenty-three, and like most of the houses on Styair Street, its owners were either Latvian-Colombians or Taiwanese-Patagonians. They were not bad hosts; on the contrary, the moment guests arrived in horse-drawn carriages they were offered a whiskey or an aguardiente; a few moments later they were served with a pot of shrimps or mussels. But the guests realized, even as they received these delights, that the householders of 23 Styair Street, Quawkle District, were not ordinary people. They were frightening to look upon, rather like the elderly couple in Polanski's film *Rosemary's Baby*, who lived next door to Rosemary and her husband, and who supervised her conception of, and giving birth to, the Devil's child. After half an hour or so of settling in, the hosts, Dr. and Mrs. Harg, announced to the assembled guests that all present should form into "binary opposites" as they put it: should form into pairs, but should strive to ensure these pairs were not simply couples who had arrived together. Partners and spouses

should split up for now, and as far as possible the “binary opposites”, the new pairs, should not know each other well. After some laughter, perhaps some of it a little nervous, such “binary opposites” were duly formed, and Dr. and Mrs. Harg proceeded to explain the purpose and rules of the game, or exercise, or undertaking, that the pairs were expected to engage in.

The human world is thoroughly alienated, Dr. and Mrs. Harg explained. One aspect of the abject condition of modern society is the extreme fragmentation that prevails, in terms of the way people perform extremely partial tasks and activities, ensuring that everyone inhabits different mental worlds from their neighbours, and people do not together make up a whole in any true sense. By arbitrarily putting together two human monads, everyone in the company would become more deeply aware of this condition; each one’s task would be twofold: first to become the “other” of the binary pair in which they now subsisted, and then to transform themselves and their partners in such a way that each would become a different “other” whose relationship to his or her partner was truly harmonious. Though each partner in a pair would remain different from the other one, they would now form a kind of yin-yang pattern between themselves; and they, in relation to all the other, now yin-yang pairs of binary opposites, would form a miraculous, holistic pattern: not a fragmented pile of arbitrary, angular bits and pieces of partial humanity, but a four-dimensional dynamic whole, a kind of moving cosmic mosaic, the realization of a Divine Mind’s highest thought. And so, with some trepidation, each member of the “binary opposites” strove with great concentration and with all his or her psychological might, to become the “other” of their binary opposition. Once having achieved this, each “other” of the new sets of inverted pairs, strove to complete the second task demanded of them; which was to become part of genuinely yin-yang, complementary sets of pairs, which would spontaneously integrate into a new cosmic totality, a form of human reality that reflected the highest dream of the Universe’s “becoming conscious of itself”.

But here was where the guests at Dr. and Mrs. Harg’s party, at 23 Styair Street, Quawkle, ran into trouble. Some of the now inverted binary pairs simply disintegrated together into nothing, as they strove to accomplish the second part of their twofold task. Others entered into ferocious, violent fights, their faces taking on terrifying, vicious expressions as they kicked, punched, hit, slashed, and tore at each other. Yet others merged into single, foul organisms that no one could identify; organisms that bore no relation to any previously living thing, contemporaneous or recognizable from the fossil past. Other pairs still, merged into non-living, huge, dreadful-looking rock formations, harsh and dark, hard and cruel. But the most awful result of all that overtook some of the binary pairs, was to be turned into bizarre hybrids of animals: in the drawing-room of Dr. and Mrs. Harg’s house, there appeared a tapeworm-pig, an elephant-cockroach, a vulture-snail, an earthworm-eagle, a mosquito-giraffe, a hyena-slug, and a dragonfly-whale. Dr. and Mrs. Harg themselves, though they had not participated intentionally in the utopian experiment, quite spontaneously and unintentionally turned into a termite-warthog! They were perhaps the most astonished of all the assembled company at the outcome of their human-psychological-utopian experiment.

THE POOR COUPLE IN A DITCH

There is a legend, I don't know from what country, of a poor couple, a man and a woman, who lived in a ditch. The woman always complained about living in this dirty ditch, telling her husband how feeble he was for not getting them into a better place to live.

One day, while the woman was complaining as usual, a fairy appeared with a magic wand. "What, dear lady, do you want?" asked the fairy. "I want a house!" yelled the woman. At that, the fairy waved her wand, and the poor couple were transported into a modest, decent, comfortable house, overlooking a beautiful lake, on which swam swans and geese, and over which flew gulls and cormorants.

After some time, the woman began to complain again. "Oh, this boring, small house" she said, "is not good enough at all Where is that fairy?"

The fairy came back, holding her magic wand. "What, dear lady, do you want now?" "I want a palace!" screamed the woman. So the fairy waved her wand, and the poor couple found themselves living in a fine palace, with gold and ivory, silver and mahogany walls and furniture.

After a while, the woman began to complain yet again. "This is not good enough!" she bawled "Well, what do you want?" asked her husband. "I want us to be a king and queen, not just with one palace, but a whole city of castles and exotic palaces, everywhere covered with gold, diamonds, emeralds, and pearls!"

The fairy returned again with her magic wand "What now do you want, dear lady?" she asked. The woman explained the contents of her desires to the fairy in wonderful, bold, extravagant terms. The fairy then waved her magic wand yet again, and the poor couple found themselves once again in a ditch, but this one was even more ugly, more dirty, and more wretched than the first.

At length the woman started to complain to her husband: "Why is this ditch even worse than the one we lived in before?" "Because the fairy's magic powers ran out," replied her husband. "Oh well, it will be a good story to tell our children one day, when we have some," said the woman.

After many years of living in the dirty, dark, ugly ditch to which the poor couple had been banished in the fairy's last magical act, the woman said to the man: "It is time, my husband, for us to prepare for our deaths. We have not a bean to pay for our coffins, let alone for our funerals. What shall we do?"

"Why not call up your fairy friend again?" answered the man.

So the woman shouted: "Come here, you old hag! You put us into this ditch, so at least provide some dignity for our deaths!"

At this command, a hag really did appear - not the delicate fairy of many years before, but a foul, stinking, ugly, demonic old woman, with a face as ferocious and vile as hell's fire itself. She screeched:

"What do you want of me? I can provide no coffins nor arrange your funerals! The only thing I can do is turn you both, on your dying days, into a hag like me and a hog, and thus you would remain forever. You would never die - you would live forever like me!"

"No!" said the man.

"Yes!" said the woman.

And before either the poor man or the poor woman had a moment to reconsider their decisions, the man fell desperately ill, and collapsed upon the couple's straw bed, obviously about to die

very shortly. The woman on the other hand, was instantly transformed into a hag even more ghastly than she who had magicked her transformation. As she saw the foul black hair grow upon her arms and body, and her breasts age and droop deeply down, she shrieked in surprise and horror. But this shriek did not compare with the terrible sound she emitted when she turned to the small, broken mirror the poor couple kept in their ditch, and saw how terrifying her face had become. Long hair protruded from her snout-like nose, her tongue had become forked, and had grown so long she could hardly hold it inside her hideous mouth, the lips of which were now like bulbous, sprouting roots. Her now pointed teeth were as black as soot. As she shrieked and yelled horrendous noises, her husband expired with a hollow sigh upon the straw bed; the woman glanced at him for a moment, then pranced out of the filthy ditch, and ran off in the same direction as the magical hag.

And after her ran her five children.

STAYING WITH THE COMMANDER

Once, a very long time ago, I went with my wife to stay with a famous military Commander, in his handsome palace. My wife and I were invited to sojourn in his home after he and I had met at a Royal Concert; I had written a number of the lyrics for the songs that were performed for the King, and most surprisingly, the Commander liked them, We began to talk over a goblet of wine during an interlude in the entertainment, and as well as commending me for the words I had penned, he invited me, and of course my wife, to visit his palace. Once having heard that I lived a good long way away from him, he invited my wife and I to stay some weeks with him there.

When we arrived, on a stormy evening after dark, it was as if we had come to Macbeth's castle. All was sombre, stony; the building was built of grey, granite stone; the rooms were huge and

cold, the ceilings enormously high. In some of the rooms a wonderful sparkling fire danced in a large fireplace; in others, everyone wore fur coats and muffs to keep the cold at bay.

We were soon presented to the Commander. After perhaps an hour of amicable conversation, during which he requested I recite to him some of my recent sonnets, he ushered us into an enormous hall, where we were conducted by servants to large wooden chairs which were extremely finely carved and very comfortable, In front of us was a huge, long wooden table. We were at some distance from the Commander, so we could not talk with him during the meal that was shortly served.

We were in the middle of a very fine meal, consisting of roasted meat accompanied by good wine and ale, when a man sitting across from us, with whom we had entered into minor conversation, suddenly proclaimed that the Commander kept slaves. I was horrified, because I had understood that in this Kingdom slavery had been abolished.

But the man insisted it was so. I turned to my wife and asked her whether, if this were so, we should not leave the castle immediately.

"Why so?" she hissed. "What does it have to do with us?"

"We are not in agreement with the institution of slavery, surely," I replied.

Quite to my astonishment my wife jumped up from her comfortable chair and rushed over to the King. She bent over towards him, across the wide table that divided them, and spoke words that I could not hear. The King seemed unperturbed, and spoke back to her. At that moment such a combination of shame, anger, sorrow, and loneliness overcame me that I too jumped out from my comfortable chair, and rushed out of the Great Hall, past the guards with their immense and disturbing pikes, into a cloistered area, and then into a cobbled courtyard. That is where I am now, not knowing what to do. My wife is still inside the hall, and I now realise I have left my paper roll of poetical compositions behind there too.

WHICH MAN?

Many years ago, I have heard it said, there was a man who was swept overboard from his ship in a storm, and hours later found himself alone in a choppy sea. There was no sign of his ship, and no sight of land. Exhausted, and nearly at the point of sinking into the deep, warm, blue sea, he suddenly confronted a hideous monster, a sort of serpent which lurched up in front of him, with a huge dark head, a mouth filled with frightful teeth, and eyes that seemed to pierce into his very soul.

Suddenly the scene changed, and the man was in a maternity hospital, where all the newly-born babies, lying in huge long rows of cots, were premature. All of them had been born after only seven months of pregnancy.

After this, the man went home, and found a long-lost cousin sitting in his favourite chair, watching the television. "What are you doing here?" he asked the cousin. "Watching television," replied the latter. "What is the programme you are watching?" asked the man. "Just look!" said the cousin.

The man looked. There was an enormous mushroom cloud billowing out behind the Cathedral of Saint Peter's in Rome. Snakes were wriggling in the foreground, while a small girl climbed an almost infinitely long ladder up to the sky, which she knocked upon so hard with her knuckles that it cracked, and purple-green smoke in magnificent puffs emerged from it. The man's home disappeared, and he found himself on the top of a tree, all alone, looking at a flight of kites above his head, while parrots were screeching noisily on the branches around him. He must have been in France, or Siberia, as snow was on the ground, and there were no crows. "Thank you," he felt like saying to his cousin, but did not, as the latter was no longer in his company.

This man had tried very hard in recent months to understand his neighbours, whom he had almost come to hate for various reasons. The effort he had exerted in his endeavour had caused him great strain to such an extent that he had sometimes felt like dying. But he had not; he had merely gone to sleep. As Shelley wrote:

"How wonderful is Death,
Death and his brother Sleep!"

THE BLACK CAT

I want to spread my wings, perhaps I am a demon, or a saint, although I doubt the latter. By the side of that lake, in the arms of my sweetheart, how free and wonderful I felt! The herons flew, but mostly waded along the shallow edges, frequently swooping with their ostrich-like necks into the water where they snapped up a fish and threw it down their gentle but greedy gullets.

My brother had other thoughts: fantasies of strange beings, half women and half swans, and a garden where the flowers all came alive, miraculously, as in Wagner's *Parsifal*. And his Vision contained the high-up peaks of Chinese gentlemen-mystics, gazing into vast mountain heights, soaking themselves into the spiritual truth of swirling mist and clouds.

But my ninth brother was lost in a huge forest, the lianas and branches and bushes and shrubs enclosing him and the horse he rode upon, beating and bashing against the thick undergrowth, shouting at the cruel gods that had put him there, but would not help him out of it.

Earlier he had flown to Pluto, and circled around it in such philosophical and scientific silence and such a frozen mind that he hardly remembered the journey after his return to earth, though in his dreams and nightmares it all came back, transformed into feelings and thoughts of pigs, cows, and other terrestrial domestic animals.

But the tenth brother really had a tale to tell. He went to visit his aunt one day, who lived in a small house a little way outside of the town. He had intended the visit to be friendly, although he had not seen her for more than the years.

He came to the front door and rang the bell. "Who is it?" yelled the aunt, from her living-room window. "It's me!" answered the tenth brother, so the aunt came to the front door and opened it up. The tenth brother walked in, and immediately placed his umbrella in the aunt's umbrella stand.

"What are you doing?" screamed the old aunt, her ancient apron spreading apart as she stood, open-legged, head bowed forward, towards a nephew that she scarcely remembered, and certainly did not recognize.

Her nephew picked up one of the other umbrellas in the rack, a fine orange-coloured one, and whacked his aunt over the head. He bent down, and saw that his poor old aunt was as dead as a dodo, and so he jumped out of an open window into the garden. There he slipped on the slimy path, and fell into his aunt's fish-pond. He did not drown, but he was knocked-out, unconscious, until many hours later the police came, because a neighbour saw him over the garden fence.

The police dragged him out of the pond, and when they had revived him, they started to interrogate him.

"When did you get here?" they bawled.
"Yesterday I think," the tenth brother replied.

The police were too lazy to ask him any more questions, and so they pushed him out of the house into the street, where he started to stagger along, while they picked up the corpse of the aunt, and wrote some notes in their notebooks.

"Dead as a poker," wrote one. "Quiet as a conker," wrote another. And then they dragged the dead old aunt onto the street, and left her on the neat pavement, while they climbed into their horse-drawn sleigh, and drove away.

A GREAT – GRANDMOTHER

One of the most extraordinary things about life, is the way nothing works out according to your predictions, and nothing seems to vindicate your most intense involvements, your most important investments of energy and moral fire. Because of this, a friend of mine decided one day to jump

into a lake, where many fish swam, surrounded by glorious mountains, thinking he would solve the ultimate mystery, as Shelley hoped he could when he said to Jane Williams in a small boat: “Shall we find out the answer to our ultimate mystery now?”

Jane Williams very sensibly answered: “No Shelley, my children need their supper first!” And so Shelley and Jane returned to shore, and he only found out the answer to his great question later, when he managed to get drowned with Jane’s poor husband in a storm in the sea off Leghorn, after which his body was swept ashore and Byron, with Mary and some others, burned it on a Grecian funeral pyre, after which Byron swam out to sea in celebration of his friend, in spite of the handicap of his club foot.

So Shelley managed to go out with a splash, so to speak, and the sparks from his funeral pyre probably still glitter and crackle in the air above the Italian coast where he drowned, though we who are alive now can never know what he discovered as he gulped and groaned, sinking down into the sea, full in his thoughts with the glorious poetry of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*.

But my friend did not drown; strangely and luckily he was buoyed ashore, where he looked up when his eyelids opened to see a funny old lady, whose wrinkles were more pervasive than the canyons in Colombia, vast as they are, splintering to the amazed viewer like cracks in a holy cake.

This old wrinkled lady spent as much of her time as was allowed her, rocking her great-grandchild in a pram, to keep the baby quiet.

THANATOS

I could not understand how I had arrived there, but it was obvious that this was a very strange place. The man sitting next to me said: "I came through the strait gate, completely unexpectedly. How did you get here?"

"I hardly remember," I think I said. "But I was not attempting to fulfill some kind of plan."

A bat flew under our knees, and then another man asked: "Did you always believe that you would go to Heaven, or Hell, or are you now extremely surprised to be here?"

"Why?" I answered. "Is this Heaven or Hell?" "Well, different voices have different words for what this is," said the man.

A very wizened old woman then said: "I tried to live well, but I don't know if anything here will recognize my efforts. I breast-feeding, I maintained a home, I became old, and then I died. But I did not expect to end up here in this dreary place, that looks like a suburban railway station, as I remember them from my youth."

"I ran all over the surface of the earth," spoke a very sombre short man who was obviously listening in. "But I never knew this place existed."

"Well, what is this place?" I yelled, in fury and desperation. "What do you think it is?" answered another old woman. "Is it Heaven, or Hell, or Purgatory?" she shrieked, and then burst into a ghastly laughter.

"It must be the Afterlife," I think I said, remembering my childhood dreams and fantasies. "It's not called the Afterlife," said a tall man wearing a weird hat, rather like the nightcaps that grandfathers wore in the nineteenth century, which fell like woollen bells over their overly concerned faces. "It's called the Afterdeath."

I recalled, as if in a terrible dream how awful the idea of an Afterdeath was. I remembered walking with my mother along the main street where we lived when I was young, past the Embassy Cinema, then past the public lavatories, and then along the long road that was lined on one side with a strange wooden fence, strange because it was organized in slats or planks or like piles of paper spread out to allow one to see whichever group of papers one wanted to consult something in.

I remembered my uncle, who would not let me light a firework somewhere near there. He thought it would be dangerous, and that my mother would be angry if he did allow me to.

The cock crowed. I looked at the wall on which a religious poem was written:

"Before the cock crowed,
I betrayed my Saviour Christ,
Three times, without knowing what I did;
Now, my lord, I realize."

In immense fear I turned to an ugly man sitting on the floor near me, and asked:

“Is this a place in which one is judged according to particular religious precepts, in respect of particular religious commandments?”.

Far from it!” replied the ugly man. “No one understands the criteria applied. It is just as much Buddhism or Hinduism that map out frameworks of judgement here, as any reference to the Bible!” His eyes were quite extraordinary, bending their glances towards me, while I felt dreadfully confused, alone, and evermore depressed.

“You must be joking,” said a man with a face like a crocodile. “How could you really imagine where we are is real?”.

Now a huge man blew an enormous whistle, and all the males lined up in orderly teams. A big ball was thrown at the first in line of each team, which he then banged back at the thrower. If anyone’s white plimsols were at all dirty he was whacked on the backside with the same plimsol. This made it fair, explained those in command.

There was an awkward moment in which a callow youth invited a pretty young girl to dance, though she refused with all the aplomb and artistry attained over millennia. But that moment passed; the braincells of the Afterdeath took over, uninvited, and all these ever older, evermore hideous, and increasingly unintelligent men and women sat quietly, scarcely aware that they were inventing, moment by moment, a reality of life beyond the tomb.

RAUOBENON

It is common for a person to be strong in some ways, and weak in others. He may have determination over the long run, know periodic bursts of intense creative energy, show valour in the face of physical danger, and often walk in the valley of the shadow of death without losing faith in his ultimate self. Yet at the same time he can have moments of shuddering insecurity, lose his self-control when he feels threatened in ways that fire into his very heart or soul, explode or shrink away when he feels only doubt of purpose, and seek at such times feeble forms of escape from being alive.

Such was the case with Jonathan Susan, whom the reader will certainly remember as the perpetrator of certain strange behaviours some years ago, which were widely reported in the newspapers at that time. The reader will know how Jonathan Susan jumped up so high one night, that he would have probably hit the Moon, had not there been at the last moment an intervention on the part of Mister Lemon.

What the reader may not be aware of, is that at the same time as Jonathan Susan was performing this extraordinary act, and was subdued and saved by the brave Mister Lemon, a group of Colombian scientists were working in Kamchatka, searching for dinosaur fossils, or bones if possible, and taking measurements of ice-flows and tundra soils. One of these scientists was called Alejandro Anibal, another Jessica Blanca. Among them and the other five in the team sojourned a female Siberian fox, whose name was Hiball, known also as the Lady of the Camp.

The seven Colombian scientists, five men and two women, lived in wooden cabins, well warmed by coke fires and kerosene heaters. When it was dark – which it was for long periods in winter – they could not work outside for very long at a time, and so, although there was plenty to do inside examining fossils and bones and analyzing all kinds of data, there was also a great deal of other time to fill, which was helped along its way by drinking vodka.

As Colombians, these seven scientists naturally preferred *aguardiente* or rum to vodka, but they were nevertheless not inclined to scoff at or scorn the latter. Sometimes, while drinking vodka, they played a kind of Siberian-Colombian Metropolitan-Monopoly, seeing by the light of kerosene lamps and candles.

On one such occasion Alejandro and Jessica found themselves in a kind of mortal combat, that went on and on and on whilst the other five scientists sank down lower and lower in the game. The pitch of conflict and the vodka-fuelled excitement of all seven rose up and up, until it absolutely snapped, and the roof of the cabin flew off, so that the smoke of the coke fire quickly changed its direction and curled upwards in a perfect spiral in order to escape into the freezing air, through which could be seen a perfectly transparent night-sky, with the stars, the Moon, and the shooting-stars so bright and clear that among the seven appeared an ancient shaman, whose name was Rauobenon.

Rauobenon had not been in this place for many centuries, perhaps even several millennia, but now here he stood, his arms flailing upwards while he uttered very ancient, sacred, magical chants:

“Jo ji jey wok
Si-ceh wammoo poh
Ji bah dinkalog in topp
See dee bling-a-pinja bloo!”

Rauobenon jumped up down, and sometimes flew up and out of the open-roofed cabin high towards the constellations, yet always he returned to ground; that is, into the cabin, to envelop himself in the smoke and flames from the coke fire.

Suddenly the roof came back into place, and the cabin became warm and cosy once again. The seven Colombian scientists sat down again in great relief, while Rauobenon danced by the light of the fires, and continued to chant his magical incantations. Strangely, the seven soon found they could understand the words of these incantations; though they could not speak at all, but only hear.

THE DISINTERMENT

It was in a small, country town in central Colombia, that Gerald Scrooting found himself in a difficult situation. Gerald was an Englishman married to a Colombian beauty called Desdemona, who came from this country town. Gerald and Desdemona lived in Cartagena on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, but had come to Desdemona's home town because the time had come for Desdemona's father, now dead for nearly ten years, to be disinterred and reburied in a casket, according to Colombian tradition.

Gerald felt that this town was lost less in a hundred years of solitude, than in a hundred years of sleep, dream, and craziness. Nowhere in Colombia was so much *aguardiente* drunk than here. But this was not unpleasant as far as Gerald was concerned; on the contrary the town was a friendly and convivial place, and Desdemona's mother's house, where they were staying, was a warm and agreeable place to be. There were chickens in the garden, and many lovely flowers, as well as a very fine view of the Cordillera Central, green and fertile all around, often submerged in dramatically imposing clouds.

The problem for Gerald was that he did not feel he wanted to attend Desdemona's father's exhumation; it seemed to him that it would be morbid to do so, since he had never known the man. The latter had died before Gerald met his wife, and somehow it felt voyeuristic to him to stand at the graveside of his deceased father-in-law while his decomposing coffin was opened up, revealing the skull and bones of a man who had evidently been something of a terror while alive – a great womanizer who had left behind a huge number of children from different women, a keen drinker, as well as a raconteur of memorable proportions.

However, Gerald did want to offer respect to Desdemona's dead father's memory; both on the level of his own personal feelings as well as in terms of a display of respect and regard to Desdemona herself, whom he loved dearly, and to her family, which he liked very much in general terms.

Gerald Scrooting was not exactly consumed in Hamlet-like agony over this dilemma; it was a fairly gentle pulling between inclinations that he experienced. The reason the conflict was really quite mild was partially because Desdemona and her family were not making a great fuss about what he decided to do; they were quite happy to accept whatever decision he came to, without putting the slightest moral pressure on him.

Anyway, on the evening before the disinterment Gerald decided on the following course of action. He would not go to the actual exhumation, but he would go to the Mass that was to be held afterwards.

He felt quite relaxed and contented with his decision. After everyone had gone to bed, including his beloved Desdemona, he was sitting at the dining-room table late at night, reading and writing whilst drinking rum and orange juice. Suddenly, at about three-thirty in the morning, a wonderful little bird flew into the room, with a bright yellow underside. It flew around and settled numerous

times, then flew again, sweetly. It was in the room for at least fifteen minutes, and Gerald looked at it in great happiness and awe.

The next day, after the disinterment that Gerald did not attend, he told Desdemona and her family about the bird's visit the night before. Desdemona's mother was delighted at the story, and said to Gerald that the bird was undoubtedly the spirit of her deceased husband, who had come to pay kind regards to Gerald, even though he had passed on before Gerald had ever met his daughter.

ALL TOO QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

It was a battleground in the First World War on the Western Front. The trenches of each side were only a few hundred yards apart from each other: on the one side the Germans, on the other, the British. The shells and mortars ripped and roared in all directions: explosions and light-flashes broke and disturbed every particle or cloud or piece of earth under the feet of the soldiers on both sides, knee-deep in hell, clay, exhaustion; and death. Also of course the wounded: screaming, yelling, howling from the gashes, broken bones, flowing blood, and brains gone mad.

Every day it was the same. A British soldier looked through the telescopic sight of his rifle, and found soon a German getting out of an old rusty bath, naked. He did not feel he could shoot. At the same moment a nearby German soldier awoke from a dream in which he had been bayoneted by a British infantryman, and although he was ordered to throw a hand-grenade, found that he mis-aimed, blasting only a clump of earth, killing a horse, a dog, and whatever other life there was in the area bashed apart by the explosion.

Adolf Hitler was not in this particular battle area, but he was not far away. Field marshal Haig was also quite near; about ten miles behind the British lines. Soldiers from both armies rushed across to their enemies' trenches, back and forth. Because this was a *Great War*, hundreds and thousands of soldiers on each side were mown down by their enemies' machine guns, scythed like wheat in the field in the dimness of wintry daylight.

All the time, the soldiers of both sides ran, hampered by their back-packs, their heavy boots, and the choking gas of the guns. It went on and on, nobody knew for how long, because as soldiers were killed they were replaced, at a rate of about ninety percent on each side every year. The few who survived more than a couple of years became mad, shell-shocked, demented, and lost their memories. Sometimes the lines moved a few hundred metres in one direction or the other, only for the situation to be reversed a short time later.

Suddenly, a kind of Angel, magician, cosmic weirdman, or Zarathustra appeared, floating above the battlefield, waving his extraordinary wand. The effect of this was to cause *all* the soldiers, on both sides, to collapse, fall down, faint, and enter into a deep hibernating dream that lasted a very long time. Then this Angel sent a huge horde of intelligent Zebras onto the battlefield, who moved about one half of the British soldiers into the German area, whilst carrying at the same time about fifty percent of the German soldiers into the British area. Then they stripped the clothes off about one half of all the soldiers from either side, and changed them over so that fifty percent of the British soldiers had on German uniforms, while fifty percent of the German soldiers had on British uniforms.

The Angel-magician-Zarathustra and his horde of intelligent Zebras went away. In due time, all the lying-down soldiers recovered and started to yawn, sit up, and after a while, stand. They were all extremely confused: half the British soldiers were wearing German uniforms, whilst half the

German soldiers were wearing British uniforms! Also, their positions were all mixed up: Germans and British were mingled up fifty-fifty all over the battlefield!

After a few minutes of confused inactivity, outbursts of violence began between man and man in all parts. Not necessarily between British soldier and German soldier, since everyone was absolutely perplexed about who was on his side and who was his enemy! The mutual killing grew and grew until before long it saw a death-rate even higher than before, when there was a proper war going on!

But in time things calmed down a little. Men everywhere on the battlefield began to realize that they were like white and black chess-pieces, mixed up and bounced around. The violence declined. Men began to try to communicate with other men around them, in any language, and regardless of their uniforms.

After some time, men of all stripes began to feel thirsty and hungry. Some groups found themselves near supplies of drink and food in the trenches, other groups found they were not near any food or drink. Soon different gangs formed; some with access to supplies, and others without. Conflicts now broke out between the gangs: between those who had supplies and those who were desperate to obtain some.

This state of multipolar group war continued for a long time, until the number of live soldiers, British or German, had decreased enormously. After a very long time – no one quite knew how long – the groups with access to supplies became comfortably entrenched, whilst the groups without access to supplies were ill, dying of hunger, groaning, and terribly weak.

It was at this point that the main armies of both sides – British and German – burst upon the scene from behind the front-lines, not having any idea of what had happened in the zone, since all lines of communication had been broken by the Angel and his Zebras. Finding the situation absolutely and shamefully chaotic, with rank insubordination and gross treason clearly present on all sides, the normal, sane officers in each encroaching, advancing army ordered the capture of all the men they found huddled around, regardless of their uniforms and regardless of which language they spoke – English or German – and took them away; to face either very justified courts-martial, or else indeed simple imprisonment.

Normality thus restored, it was possible once again for all to continue the war, properly.

BRIGHT EYES

I was at Gallipoli, as in the film, with the Australian soldiers who landed on the shore, to last so short a time before we were mown down by the Turkish guns The tragic , extraordinary, enigmatically sad music of Albinoni played through us, as we lived our last hours, gazing at the reflections of lights from the boats, and from the stars, upon the wine-black sea

Earlier I had been with Magellan, sailing through the straits named after him at night, staring in astonishment along with his crew at the fires burning on the shores of Tierra del Fuego, as that land was to be thereafter known. The flames of the Haush and Yamana camps threw glittering, crackling sparks through the translucent sky, upwards towards the stars, while in quiet trepidation but absolute determination we sailed onward, and onwards

Later I was sitting on the branch of an acacia tree, looking at an animal crawling towards me. It was a pitch-dark night as in silence I saw a strange creature that was half fly, half crustacean. It had two compound eye stalks of fantastic colours - blue, turquoise, silver, red, and green. They waved around, mesmerizing me, as I looked at them in both delighted astonishment and frozen terror, feeling I was being drawn right down and into them. They derived their light from the half-moon that was making its wandering course through the silken sky above us.

THE WEIRD STORY OF THE POWERFUL

When they died, the powerful insisted that others should die with them, and be buried in their grand tombs alongside them. As well as all the powerful people's gold statues, mother-of-pearl bead necklaces, and wonderfully painted pottery, those dominating rulers required that hundreds of servants, hundreds of young women, and even hundreds of cats or parrots should die with them, from suffocation in the tombs after they were closed up by the tomb workmen. From Cahokia to Giza it was the same, but Jig Coggirana could not accept it.

Jig, or Jiggy as he was often called, would not accept that when one's own fate was sealed, one should drag down others in one's own disaster. Like a man or woman who knew he or she had Aids, deliberately having sex with someone else without telling them the truth, just to see if their partner might get Aids as well! Jiggy even thought that Shelley had been cruel when he went out in a small boat with his friend Captain Williams, into a storm off the coast of Italy, and got Williams drowned alongside him when their small boat went down.

Nor was President Bush right, when, Jiggy thought, he plunged thousands and even millions into death and misery because of his individual fixations, without being prepared to accommodate his obsessive ideas to reality, to the way the world actually was (something which everyone finds difficult of course, but which, because most people do not have such immense powers as Presidents, Prime Ministers, or Chairmen, their human limitations cannot cause as much harm as Bush, Blair, or Deng Xiaoping could).

Nobody knew, not even Jiggy, that Deng had an ancestor who lived high up in the mountains of western China, in the sixth century A.D., a gentleman Taoist and Confucian, a calligraphic artist and poet of profound intensity, although his descendants had slipped down in the social hierarchy and had become peasants a few generations later. If Jig had known this, it would probably not have changed his view of Deng much, since the latter was a murderous tyrant in Jig's view, and it mattered not what social class he came from, any more than Stalin's social origins made the slightest difference to one's judgement of the man's mass murders and destruction of deep historical ideals.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that another of Deng's ancestors was a pig-farmer, as well as a Taoist artist and poet. He also lived high up in a beautiful mountain, surrounded by swirling mists and clouds, and had a wonderful view from his small pavilion, of a huge mountain range, replete with waterfalls, streams, peaceful fishermen, and geese that flew in threes or fours across the glorious skies. This ancestor, called Ping, had lived in the eleventh century A.D.; at the same time as an ancestor of Jiggy called Robert the Cross had lived in Europe. The latter was a fierce Lord and a very early crusader, a man who tried before his time to muster an army to conquer the Holy Land for Christianity.

Ping and Robert never met, but they could have done had Fate played out its game differently; a few Europeans did travel to China at this time, whilst a few Chinese also visited Europe at that time.

But they did not meet, though it is fascinating to consider what might have happened between them if they had done!

LAST THOUGHTS

One night when Jip Storky was sitting under the moon, gossiping with himself, he wondered what it must be like to be gunned down by a soldier, or a gangster, or a terrorist of some kind. He remembered how frightened he had been as a child, when the family car rolled backwards over him, squashing his upturned legs, and he had felt his backbone was going to crack. He had been helping to push the car up a slope, but had slipped over.

It is true that Jip sometimes suffered from delusions, but generally his memory was good, and often he was mistakenly thought of as someone who invented things, when in fact they were perfectly true.

The time had come, on that night when he was sitting under the moon, for Jip Storky to face the fact that he, like all other human beings - in fact, like all other living organisms - was going to die one day. It suddenly seemed extraordinary to him that when people died they were remembered for a shorter or longer time, but no longer existed, no longer could think, no longer had consciousness! It seemed extraordinary too that generations passed by in any civilization, any society, but that projects continued, such as building a church, expanding an empire, or creating an irrigation system. How could the living care what would happen after their death; how could the living continue with something that had been started by others long dead, when these last no longer had consciousness?

Of course, Jip realized, most people at most times in history had believed they had *souls*; and so death was not a complete end of things; so projects could indeed continue over generations, over centuries, even over millennia, quite easily. In fact great deeds or great thoughts might possibly exist for eternity! But Jip himself doubted this, and considered the prospect of a run-down or contracted Universe.

It got quite late before Jip Storky decided he had better go to bed. There was no cosmic reason to do so of course, but perhaps it was best, in order to maintain ones sanity, he thought. So he went to bed, and dreamed of mollusks, spiral nebulae, and the cow who jumped over the moon; although, as he discovered in his dream, this cow was really an octopus, called Mister Leakey.

JACOPO'S NEIGHBOURS

There was a man who became ill and lay in a bed in a small room. In the room next door he could hear other people, though he did not know them. One of these neighbours was an angry man, obviously a father, who frequently scolded a young girl, presumably his daughter, for meeting a young man in the street outside.

The man who was ill, called Jacopo, was upset to hear this frequent quarrelling so close; sometimes it seemed to mingle with his fevers in a very unpleasant way, so that he felt he was wading through swamps of nightmare; neither awake, nor properly asleep, he seemed at these times to suffer a terrible suggestiveness in things.

There were of course times when everything was quiet. Jacopo was surprised however that these times were more often during the day than at night-time. Night seemed to invite activity; darkness apparently summoned up noise. Jacopo constantly hoped that he would recover soon from his illness, so that he could go to the next-door room to see who these people were. But he did not get better.

Instead he sank into an almost permanent trance-state. It was not exactly a coma as he was still conscious of the arguing that went on in the room next door. Now however, he found himself balancing on the edge of the words he heard from next door. He would wag his finger as if to tell the father, and in time the daughter, to shut up.

But this made no difference, and so he became gradually more and more angry.

In his state of incapacity and trance-like anger, Jacopo decided that when he was able to move, if that were ever to be, he would get up, leave his room and go to the door of the next-door room. He would not go in, nor knock on the door, but would wait until somebody appeared at it. If whoever opened it was an angry man, he would push his face right up against his and would hiss, howl, and yell. If the door was opened by a girl or woman, or a peaceful-seeming man, he would offer his hand to shake, and introduce himself as Jacopo.

Once, when he really fell properly asleep, Jacopo dreamed that he had recovered sufficiently to get up, put on some clothes, go out of his room, turn to the left, and stand in front of the next-door room. He waited there for hours, until he was nearly falling over with tiredness. He put his arm out to press against the wall next to the door, and tried to lean on it so he could partially doze off. When he was nearly asleep, his eyes almost completely closed, the door opened abruptly, and a man yelled at him: "Who are you?"

Before Jacopo was able to pull himself together the man punched him, and he fell to the ground. When he came to, presumably hours later, he was lying on floorboards, breathing in the dust on them nearby his nose.

But of course he was not really lying on the floorboards outside his neighbours' room, and soon woke up again in his bed, and quickly realized he was still far too ill and weak to get up. It would be a long time before he could put his plan into action, and go to stand outside the neighbour*' room. After a little while he came to think the idea was perhaps not a good one after all, as he pondered what had happened in his dream.

After a very long while, Jacopo felt slightly better. He had not completely recovered from his illness, but he felt strong enough to get up. So he did so, and pulled on some clothes, and throwing caution to the wind opened the door of his room and went outside, turned left, and stood outside the door of the next room.

"Why am I changing my mind? Why am I returning to my earlier plan?" he thought to himself.

A few minutes passed, and then there was an almighty thump inside the room. In unthinking reflex Jacopo pushed upon the door wide, and beheld the sight of a furious middle-aged man standing on one side of the room brandishing a huge, long, dangerous knife. On the other side of the room was a young woman, also very angry, holding up an equally cruel, vicious knife. They were both standing still, and for an instant Jacopo felt suspended in a state of utmost dread and fearful anticipation. It appeared that there were other people in the room too, pressed against the walls, but Jacopo could not make out how many there were, or if they were men or women. They were in a haze; Jacopo could not take his gaze off the man and the girl who held up knives, and anyway the instant lasted no more than a lightning blink; the furious middle-aged man and the angry young woman rushed at each other at an apparently equal speed, and in the middle of the room clashed, each one plunging a knife into the other's chest. Both fell down, groaned, and started to bleed all over the wooden floorboards which, like those outside the room, had no carpet or rugs and were dusty and dirty. Jacopo walked a few steps towards them, but stopped when he could see they were dead. They were not moving, nor breathing, but the blood was streaming from both of them.

Jacopo looked around, and saw an old woman in a long skirt, a young man in rolled-up shirtsleeves and a child, a young boy of about seven years old. They were all frozen, petrified; after a moment Jacopo slowly walked out of the room through the still-open door, turned right, and then went back into his own room.

AT AN ENTRANCE

A Play In Three Scenes

CAST:

Nightwatchman (male).

First, Second, and Third Travellers (male or female).

Monstrous Form (male or female).

Spirit of Jim Morrison (male).

Young Sprite (female).

Satyr (male).

Goat (male or female).

First, Second, and Third Nereids (female).

Scene One. At a gate, night-time.

Nightwatchman: Who comes now?

First Traveller: I know hardly who I am, it seems I am an idiot - but sometimes I am very clever.

Nightwatchman: Do you drink?

First Traveller: Drink of what? Of hemlock, of the waters of Lethe? Yes, and no. Do you drink; if so, of what?

Nightwatchman: Impertinence! I shall keep the gates closed!

Second Traveller: Good man, do not do that! My friend has not been meaning to offend you.

Monstrous Form: It matters not who thinks who has offended or understood or misunderstood whom. I am here, behold me, how do I seem?

Third Traveller: It would be best to die.

Monstrous Form: But do you not believe in immortality? Or, at least, in transmigration, or reincarnation?

First and Second Travellers: We do not think that you would understand one or any other of these terms: it is obvious that you know nothing of the soul's life.

Spirit of Jim Morrison: Didn't you understand? You cannot know what is on the other side if you have not yet broken through.

Scene Two. A bright, magical place, both under the sea and at the same time in idyllic countryside.

Monstrous Form: None understand whom I represent, nor who I am. But does that matter? Perhaps the truth is independent of whomsoever happens to be the bearer of the evil news. I am telling you who listen, these three travelers are thoroughly doomed, whoever they are, or wherever they are trying to get to.

Young Sprite: Oh, how I love to turn.
Simply to dance upon the morn! I love
To sip the morning dew, or drink the
Early light of dawn.

Satyr: My horns are wondrous as I prance.
I wonder whether I will meet a zephyr
In my dream. I feel something is afoot.

Goat: O yes there is! I do not eat,
Yet wish that all of you together
Gathered, had a little more intelligence,
A tiny touch of sense.

First Nereid: We shall be falling down into the delicious drowning sinking sea. There you will begin to feel there are realities you had not yet known.

Second Nereid: My friend here pretends to know as much as our master Neptune, softened and soaked for all time along the ocean's floor, but that he cannot.

Third Nereid: It was not so many thousands and hundreds of years ago, that Great Alexander poured us wine, as he crossed the Hellespont.

Scene Three. Same as Scene Two, except that it is now in dimness, lit only by the growing hints of dawn.

Young Sprite: What shall we do this morning? Do you feel the early dew is sufficient to see us drinking it as we dance for what may seem to be Eternity?

Nightwatchman: None of that is my business. My command is to keep outside whoever or whatever comes, who or which has no right to enter here at all.

Spirit of Jim Morrison: That is very clear! I heard it said in the seminary that you should petition the Lord in prayer. But that cannot be done. And I have some friends inside the place you try to keep them out from; they are awaiting their resurrection.

First, Second, and Third Nereids: It is time for all this nonsense to be silenced. Surely all receptive beings must realize that the lower down we are within the oceans' depths, the more the sounds of the wind and the rustling trees, of the singing birds and the simmering volcanoes, are drowned out by gurgling music of a schizophrenic type; the more all sentient beings can start to feel ever so little the tininess of the peace within their limbs, and over all their bodies, as the corals and sea-weeds curled around and colouring everything in pink, purple, white, or red as the deep tons of increasing water overpower the waiting under the Water Authorities, as the waters on the rich northern Colombian coast, and their families, were massively chaotic: though is it not fascinating, like the silence it is superciliating, for a mother who meant to seem quietening after matters were down, now considered by the Hugeness?

THE MAN WHO WAS SAD ABOUT HIS SONS

There was once a man who missed his sons very much. He could not understand why they had gone away and left him, since he had always felt very close to his boys.

But for some years he had not had any communication with them at all. If he tried to write a letter to them, he got no reply. Shortly afterwards he always heard they had moved, but they continued not to make contact with him.

After many, many years like that, the man started to feel very weak and drained in his being, not exactly ill, but lacking in good health, happiness, or energy.

One night he had a dream, in which he felt very frightened about getting old. He sensed his limbs were being pulled out in all directions, and that his stomach was turning into a hideous slaughter-house.

Suddenly he recalled a big black bird that had swooped down near to him when he was a child, and had grabbed a red squirrel in its beak.

On that occasion he remembered the view of a forest around him, full of oaks and acorns, trees that he later learned were highly Druidical. One worshipped such trees simply by looking at their gnarled trunks and branches, their extraordinary flakes and flaring shapes and shadows, their silhouettes made against the sky in all its seasons, their solid yet moving sculptures of ancient nature.

Nothing was resolved concerning his sons who refused to talk, meet, or communicate with him in any way. But, he did begin to feel a little bit cheerier when he saw the sun flood the tree that grew very near to him in beautiful, bright, creamy, warm light. At the base of this tree wonderful flowers blossomed, in superb, mystical colours like purple, mauve, orange, yellow, blue, and turquoise, coloured flowers that absorbed his sight into eternal communion with the cosmic essence, and immersed him, if only temporarily, in Shelleyan, beatific, sacred ecstasy.

IN GOD`S GRANGE

In the farm called God's Grange, a man named Jamper tried to manage many chickens, as well as some crops, though life was hard and often quite unrewarding. Not many plants yielded much to eat, but Jamper could at least rely on his chickens to produce eggs, and every once in a while he would kill one to eat it.

All the chickens on God's Grange made almighty noises day and night, to such an extent that Jamper often felt human beings had wrongly bred these animals over thousands of years. Yes, Man had succeeded in rearing a creature that had a huge body, a tiny head, and a very devolved brain; the chicken was easy to control and never realized it was being kept only for its meat and eggs. Man had succeeded in divesting the chicken of practically all bird-like qualities: it could not fly, though it could just about flap and hop about in order unceasingly to find food to peck at, and liquid to sup. The chicken still strutted and poked its neck around as real birds do, and even the chickens on God's Grange jumped up onto the branches of trees or thin horizontal wooden poles at dusk in order to sleep: most inconvenient places to sleep, Jamper thought, but a remaining vestige of bird behaviour at least.

But the chickens' ridiculous clucking, and the territorial crowing of the male cocks at all hours of the day or night, made no sense to Jamper at all. Why had not deliberate breeding of chickens by Man got rid of these redundant, irrelevant behaviours, so wasteful of energy, and so annoying to him? Why had this noisiness not been bred out, as had the free spirit of wild birds, the ability to fly, the independent searching for varied food? Why had the chicken lost all that, in order that it should be a stupid, gullible, controllable mini-meat-and-egg factory for human beings, yet had not lost that ridiculous, useless noisiness at all?

One night, that turned out to be Jamper's last, he began to learn a little concerning the reasons for the normal noisiness of chickens. Just after dark, when his chickens had retired to sleep on branches of trees and horizontal wooden poles, Jamper was rejoicing at the absolute peace he felt, now that the chickens and cockerels had temporally stopped making their noises. Now there was the sound of frogs croaking and insects singing, but not a squeak from a chicken. Jamper knew this bliss would not last for long, but he could not have imagined what was going to happen next. About an hour after dusk Jamper's chickens and cocks grew to several times their normal sizes in the space of a few seconds. They changed colour,

were transformed in shape, form, and character, each one in very different ways, but the most terrible and distressing thing was that their behaviour changed utterly. Now, suddenly, some of the chickens attacked Jamper's house on God's Grange, and caused its walls to crumble and eventually to fall. Others flew in wild circles and ellipses around the farmhouse and aimed their droppings to fall on any space in Jamper's house that was opened up as the roof collapsed and the walls fell down, Jamper himself becoming entirely covered very quickly, in what were quite obviously completely conscious and deliberate acts of insolent sabotage.

The thing that Jamper found most extraordinary however, was that his cocks and chickens now made not a sound. Their violent attacks upon him and his house intensified and increased, until at last his chickens were pecking at his eyes and nose, while at the same time Jamper's farmhouse was crumbling and disintegrating into broken pieces of brick and dust. Yet, even when Jamper was clear in his mind that the moment of his death was soon to come, still he could not hear the slightest sound from his chickens. In his last few seconds Jamper began to feel that this silence was the most horrific and terrifying aspect of the whole affair: why, when the artificial birds had been dismally docile and imbecilic had they made all the time such a dreadful din, while now that they had been transformed into ghastly monsters, they had become silent?

Jamper had time, before his death - that which everyone eventually experiences - to wonder at this question, but he died before he could begin to think of any fundamentally satisfactory answers.

GRIGGLE WHISK

Because he never felt at one with all sorts of things, Griggle Whisk was always extremely anxious to find some kind of quiet relationship with whomsoever he happened to be with. But often things would not work out like that: he might find he was too friendly with a companion who would then disappear, or he would be unfriendly in general, and find himself throwing stones at chickens that clucked and rushed away from his nasty ambushes.

Griggle Whisk was not a bad person, nor exceptionally nice: he was average, nothing very different from all the billions of other people produced since the origins of *Homo sapiens sapiens*; i.e. not Leonardo da Vinci, nor Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, nor Albert Einstein; no one like that. But he was not stupid.

Griggle Whisk loved to look at the animals that arrived after dark on his farm, when the lights – electric or candle or otherwise – attracted insects of every kind and every size: coloured beautiful grasshoppers, moths with wings that seemed to be sewn like tapestries from gold and precious silky materials, huge stag-beetles that clutched the ground as they stayed there, or walked a little, their spiky legs and huge bodies advertising themselves so amazingly.

Griggle Whisk did not feel very pleased with himself in many ways; but he did aspire to the highest of spiritual heights. He loved the Lao Tzu, Dante, and Basho. He also loved Plato, Hegel, and Nietzsche. He loved Shakespeare's tragedies, the *Nocturnes* of José Asunción Silva, as well as the music and lyrics of Bob Dylan.

One day Griggle Whisk was burning a great fire on his farm: the flames leapt up and sparks flew out like dangerous pirates of the dark imagination. Suddenly, after hours of burning, with Griggle Whisk meditating in the mesmerizing mist, a hideous witch appeared, a foul hag with only two teeth that pierced forth into the horrible air; her vile nose poked forward like

nightmares of burning frogs and cooking rats: smouldering chicken bones and beaks of ducks also filled the air with terrible odours, and all in all the whole thing was awful, like a nightmare – but even worse because it was real!

The witch rose up and said to Griggle:

“Why are *you* here? What is your objective? Don’t you know that you must be the next king of this world on which we live?”

“Oh God, no!” replied Griggle Whisk. “No, I did not know that at all.” Then Griggle Whisk remembered an earlier time, and began to tell the hideous witch the following tale:

“Oh witch, please listen to me until I finish this story. When I was born, my mother tells me I had only one ear; my fingers were short and my mouth was little more than a small hole. I grew up; and then became various things: a vicious delinquent, a frowning foal, a musical genius, a hard-working reaper. In time I found myself an astronaut, an astronomer, as well as an asterisk. Later on, I seemed to become a tragic poet and a fisherman of goldfish; also it transpired that my sacred destiny included that I should skin rabbits!

“Not too many rabbits for me, please! Even if I can do one, I would hate to do very many. But my dubious nerves can certainly fold, and I can dream outwards like a drowning fool, and I can imagine those woods just outside Edinburgh and the nearby fields, where a few horses graze – what is that place called? – it was a nice place where I used to walk, on afternoons on Sundays, back then, when I still worried about my ambitions.”

By the time Griggle Whisk had arrived at this point in his oration, the foul witch had dispersed herself hence. Griggle was intensely relieved on one level, but on another he was deeply disconcerted by what the witch had said to him about the inevitability of his becoming king. Was this a trick, a kind of evil ploy pretending to be an oracle, a pronouncement of destiny, such as the three witches had entangled Macbeth with? Should he, Griggle Whisk, ignore her disturbing words, or act upon them – and if so, in which direction, such as to make the prediction come true, or to negate it?

Griggle Whisk let the fire he had made burn out, and then he went to sleep. But the next day he felt very troubled. He ate an egg that had been laid by one of the chickens on his farm, and then sat down and looked over the mountains that surrounded and overlooked his farm. The mist dipped down and drenched the green mountains in greyness and rain. A few drops dripped over his head and touched his ears. What lay under the earth, he thought. Magma, molten iron, and silicon he recalled – or something like that, his memory was vague. But when he thought of the witch’s words, that he was to become king over the world *on* which we live, he came more and more to fear that the witch was pronouncing an unavoidable destiny, and that it concerned not simply the “world” in the sense of the surface of the earth, or of some particular territory, nor even of the more metaphysical idea of coming to “rule the world” that appeared in much European literature; or of coming to “win the world”, as Wagner had it in *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*. He realized that he was destined to rule over the Planet Earth, all of it, its surface, its atmosphere, and all that lay within its round circumference and surface.

Griggle Whisk was paralysed, terrified. He made no more fires, and hoped no one would come near his farm, nor tempt him to speak to them or do anything. He sat silently and waited for his destiny to overcome him, and reel him over to its intentions; as he realized he could not resist his destiny, nor escape his fate.

As he gazed into the mountainous distance, Griggle Whisk heard a voice recite these words:

“THE FUTURE

One writes, at best
Only for a short time,
As Man will die out,
And then the Earth will sink
Into the sun - though *much* later:
It is salutary
To remember this;
There will be no Bach, Shakespeare, nor you,
After some tens or hundreds of thousands of years.
And so? Well, nothing,
Life will continue, though temporarily disrupted
By Man's negative influence.
But then, much later, all will disappear!
Whoopee!”

A MAN AMONG THE BEASTS

There was a man, who was forced by strange circumstances to live in the fields like an animal, among the various beasts of the field. He never really knew what his name was, but he had heard people refer to him, when speaking to others, as Nebucha, a name which they always spoke with a sneering smile on their lips, and a side glance of nasty contempt.

But in truth, this man did not really care what his real name was, because he thought he should be called, and always should have been called, Bysshe, because that was the first sound he remembered hearing when he was an infant, though where it was that this occurred he really had no idea.

Nebucha Bysshe spent seven years crawling on his hands and knees, his hair growing ever longer like a lion's mane. He ate of wild fruits and nuts, and scraped out roots from the hard soil to survive. When wild animals came to attack him, he feigned an aggressive roar, a shout so terrifying and peculiar that even an animal many times more powerful and vicious than him was frightened: stopped in its tracks, and usually turned tail. If the beast did not go away, Nebucha Bysshe would pretend to be even more furious, when in fact he was terrified, and lurch forward, making a noise yet more horrible and disturbing to the stupid, yet cunning, hateful attacker.

And so he survived the seven dreadful years, always wondering what would occur when he had emerged from this purgatory. What kept him going it is difficult to say: perhaps it was the sense that he had been *sentenced by God* to this seven-year period. On the other hand perhaps, it was because in some ways he preferred this wild existence, with only animal skins and furs around

him to protect him, to the existence he had known before, although, quite extraordinarily, he found less and less that he could remember his previous life anyway.

THE MAN ENTERED

A man opens a brown front door that leads into a small rectangular space from which rise up stairs quite steeply. He walks up these stairs until he arrives at a landing from which open several different doors. He opens the first door on the left of the landing and enters a room in which sit a number of people, both men and women. These people, the exact number of which the protagonist cannot make out, are sitting on upright chairs in two groups. They hold glasses in their hands, and it looks as if they are having a kind of party, or celebratory occasion. The protagonist sits down on a spare chair and talks for a while with a dark-haired woman and two men.

Dark-haired woman: Did you come a-dancing, jigging like an Irish dog, or were you pushed in, drunk as a spunk? Ho ho!

Protagonist: Neither. Destiny never was so simple.

First man: Jug-a-dug-dug, three coats in a mug!

Second man: Foolish Polish, what is a Croat?

The protagonist stands up and walks out of the room. Back on the landing he sees an old-fashioned black telephone on a small walnut-coloured wooden table. He goes over to it and bends down to read the number on its dial. He says the number out loud:

Protagonist: 4-9-7-0-2! Very strange number, very discrete.

The protagonist walks up to one of the doors on the right-hand side of the landing, and enters another room, similar to the first, except that at its end, blocking the window, is a bunk bed with wooden steps leading up to it. Sitting in a brown-cushioned chair, with wooden arms that make it more comfortable than the upright chairs in the first room, is a very sexy blonde female, about twenty-eight years old, with a shortish skirt on and a simple grey blouse. The protagonist sits down in a similar chair placed close to that in which the girl is sitting.

Protagonist: Why a dream was such a party in the first place, amazes me, would even distress me, if I could know where it was, and what there was to drink.

The girl: Destiny divides into two slants, one that speaks for all eternity, the other singing in quick, slipping gulps, like frogs at night in the tropics. Do you know Greek?

The protagonist finds himself boldly putting his left hand around the girl's buttocks, pulling up her skirt as he does so, and touching her wonderful, soft, smooth skin. Surprisingly the girl does not object in the least, and continues to talk:

The girl: The night strays with its strange lights, and the cat should be distraught, but is actually thrilled.

Protagonist: I could never understand from my mother how she pushed the pram with my brother and me in it years before. The pram was black, and before it was mended, the huge wheel on one side had been jammed by a turnip and a wooden doll.

The girl: Ah, that explains it.

Protagonist: Do you find that because the Universe has already existed for fourteen billion years, while the Earth will eventually fall into the sun, that these things make life meaningless?

The girl: Fifteen billion years.

The protagonist gets up and walks towards the wooden stairs that lead up to the bunk bed. He turns round and stretches out his right arm to the girl, who slowly, after some considerable delay, gets up and walks towards him. They walk up the stairs to the bunk bed together.

All goes dark. After a long interval the light returns and the two of them are now sitting cross-legged on the floor, dressed exactly as they had been before, facing each other.

The girl: Hey!

Protagonist: Ho!

The protagonist stands up and walks a few slow steps to a table covered with a white plastic table-cloth decorated with very red roses. There is nothing on the table except at its very centre, where sits a large, ripe grapefruit. The man picks up this grapefruit, slowly turns around, and walks up to the cross-legged girl. He offers the grapefruit to her. After a considerable while, she takes it.

The girl: Switched was the bottle at the beginning of time, damn-dunked considering it was snowing outside too. Eggs got eaten by every fly in the town.

Protagonist: I know.

The girl: Not that boring Book again!

Protagonist: No, no, no! Only my fictitious lamb, my egregious soul, the stars that turn above the dull swamp. Oh, have you ever danced with a mosquito on fire with a mercury flame?

The protagonist bends down in front of the girl, still cross-legged, looking straight into her eyes. All goes dark again.

THE END

STOG

Stog was a real bog-man, drinking in dew cupped into the holes of trunks lying prostrate on the ground, in clearings of the forest. Stog, whose real name was Gripter, lived in a wooden cottage very near the centre of the wood, usually alone, as his aunt and grandmother had both recently died. Only occasionally a giant dragon-fly came to stay with him, called Stoopery, but never for more than a few days and nights.

So Gripter was a solitary type, passing his time working in the forest, gathering nuts or cutting down trees to make fuel, except when he was visited by Stoopery.

Recently however, Gripter had fallen out with Stoopery, because the latter had been unfriendly to him when Gripter had asked Stoopery to gather up some wood from outside the house, in order to help make the evening's fire.

"Go to hell", had shouted Stoopery, and Gripter did not like that.

And so Gripter decided late one night that he would pour some boiling oil on Stoopery's wings while the latter was asleep. This he did, but unfortunately the wings on Stoopery's left side were burnt more significantly than those on his right side; the consequence was that Stoopery, when he tried to fly, went round in circles, instead of flying in a clear direction.

This was why Stoopery went away in a very circumambulatory kind of flight the next day, and never returned.

Gripter was very sad to be alone, especially because his aunt and grandmother had died quite recently. Not that he had had a particularly fantastic communication with either of the two – conversation with his aunt rarely advanced beyond discussion about the number of cooking pots required for the kitchen, while the grandmother found it difficult to hear Gripter even when he shouted – but at least they had been there in the house, moving around and sometimes making sounds. Now Gripter felt very alone, even more after Stoopery had fluttered and flipped off with his unequally burnt wings.

Gripter started to feel guilty about all three: his aunt, his grandmother, and Stoopery. He wondered, in the middle of the night, if the disappearance of all three had really been entirely his fault: but as soon as he began to think about these things, anxiety flooding through him in waves of electricity-like pain, he reminded himself that it was not his fault that his aunt and grandmother had died, nor that Stoopery had gone away, although he recognized that it *was* his fault that he had poured burning oil on the latter's wings, although he had had no intention of doing serious harm to Stoopery, and missed the latter very much: besides, had Stoopery not shouted "Go to hell" at him? Surely that was an unbearable insult that no one could expect Gripter to put up with, without getting angry, and responding in one way or another.

Gripter lived fifty more years in his wooden cottage near the centre of the wood, completely alone, sometimes thinking that the ghosts of his aunt and grandmother had returned: and always hoping that Stoopery would fly in, or, if necessary because of his burnt wings, crawl in.

A GOOD FRIEND

When Marlon was in a good mood, by God he liked to have a party. He could happily drink all night, with all and any companions he happened to find himself sitting around a table with. Any night of the week, month, or year was okay for him, including Good Friday when even the pleasure girls stopped operating – well, nearly all of them. Among the many companions he kept company with was a man called Trigo, in his early forties, a lively soul who liked Marlon's company and could act a good foil to him in joking and chatting up women.

Unlike Marlon however, who was fairly well-off financially, Trigo was poor. He lived in a cheap rented room, and worked at what he could. His parents had either died or disappeared: whichever was the case, they had no connection with Trigo and certainly never helped him. This contrasted with Marlon's parents who, although by no means very rich, did periodically put their hands in their pockets to help him with some money.

Marlon, Trigo, and the many good-timers that they hung around with or who hung around with them, lived in Morón, a very average town in an average part of the South American country called Argentina. They drank rum, brandy, or whisky, often until dawn, when they slithered home, or didn't, finding their ways into the bed of some free-living girl or other, whom they seldom disappointed.

One March night when Marlon and a goodly number of his cronies were assembled around a table in one of Morón's many bars, Trigo did not turn up. After some hours a young man called Manuel asked Marlon if he had noticed that Trigo was not among them. "Yes," answered Marlon, "sure I realise Trigo has not showed up tonight. And so? What's up with him then?"

Marlon explained that Trigo had taken ill that afternoon, and had been rushed to hospital. "And who paid for that?" quipped Marlon, not taking the news in, in a very serious way.

"A nephew or niece of his, I think," replied Manuel.

Marlon was for a moment struck quiet, but his moment of consternation came quickly to an end when one of the pretty girls sitting next to him asked him for a cigarette.

A few nights later, another companion sitting at a table with Marlon told him that Trigo was still in hospital, and not at all improving. "What's wrong with him?" asked Marlon. "I'm not sure whether it's tuberculosis or emphysema, or something else," replied the companion.

Time passed, and the nights of revelry and fun rolled by. But one night the jollity was somewhat disturbed for Marlon when a pretty young girl among his company handed him an envelope, addressed to him. Marlon opened it, to find a letter written to him by Trigo. It read:

"Dear Marlon,

I hope not to be a burden upon you by writing. The problem is, I think I am going to die very soon, and would like it so much if you were to visit me just once before I float away. Do you think you could? You know the hospital I am in, and if you come to the main reception they will tell you which ward I am in, and in which bed I lie. Marlon, I would like to ask you one other favour. When I die, I have no money to pay for my coffin or my funeral. A distant relative has paid for my hospital bill but she cannot afford any more. Please could you help? I will be eternally grateful to you, in my immortal soul, eternally, if you do. My deceased mother would be horrifically distressed if she knew I had not been decently buried when I died.

My very best wishes, your good friend,

Trigo."

Marlon rushed straightaway to the hospital, only to be told by some nurses that Trigo's bed was empty. Marlon was really struck down now, and buried his face in his hands, desperately. He staggered out from the hospital without speaking another word, crossed the car park outside the entrance, and waved down a taxi.

Once inside, he told the taxi driver to take him to a warehouse on a pier on the river. Once arrived, he paid the taxi driver and solemnly got out. Just outside the warehouse a solitary man stood with his back to where Marlon was standing, holding a fishing rod over the river's water. It was a dark night, but the moon was bright. Suddenly, the man who had been standing so still, seemed to jump into the air, and leap into the water. From the huge, white splash that burst out from the dark river, Marlon could discern the face of his friend Trigo, very different from when he had last seen him, as if it were disfigured with pain. It was appalling for Marlon to behold this face, so familiar to him yet so altered by suffering and the process of dying.

After what seemed like a short eternity, the face of Trigo disappeared, along with the watery adornment around it. The disappearance of Trigo's face brought about a kind of disappearance of part of Marlon's soul, in what felt to be something like karmic cause-and-affect. The next strange thing that happened to Marlon was that he felt a sudden, strong impulse to find that 'distant relative' of Trigo's – was it the niece mentioned by Manuel? – who had paid for his time in hospital. And that was the beginning of the adventure which must now be related.

Marlon tried to find Manuel, in order to track down this niece, or any other 'distant relative'. He no longer felt like going to his old haunts at night, in order to meet Manuel, and so he went to the street where he thought Manuel lived, though he had no idea of the number of the house in which he resided. So he went to a bar at the corner of Maipú, where he asked people about Manuel.

Marlon was directed to number 900 Maipú. He arrived at the front door and rang the bell. An extremely old man came to the door, after a good long time, and gingerly opened it. When he saw Marlon, he grimaced, and seemed to try to close the door again quickly. But Marlon hurriedly said:

“Please señor, I just want to ask you about Trigo. Are you related to him?”

“Am I related to him?” screeched the ever older-looking old man. “I'm his grandfather!”

“Well then,” asked Marlon, “who is his niece?”

“What the hell has that got to do with you?” screeched the ever even older-looking man.

“You know Trigo has died?” asked Marlon, almost having to put his foot in front of the door to stop the wretched, ancient creature from shutting it.

“Of course I do, idiot!” screamed again the ancient creature. “But I do not know what niece you are talking about.”

So Marlon went away, and decided to go to the police or look up civil registers to find out about Trigo's relatives.

After much investigation and many enquiries, Marlon found out about an uncle of Trigo who lived in Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia. So he went there, by bus, plane, and bus again. On

his arrival at the bus terminal in Bucaramanga he was struck by the loveliness of the sunny climate, and ate a delicious *empanada* with *aji* before taking a taxi to the house where Trigo's uncle supposedly lived. This was at *Carrera* 17, No. 78, and when the taxi got there, Marlon paid the taxi driver and got out. Children were playing in front of No. 78, kicking a football against the trunk of a beautiful palm tree.

Marlon rang the bell of No. 78, and at length there came to the door a rather attractive dark-haired young woman, of about twenty three or twenty four.

"Ola!" said she. Marlon explained that he was looking for Trigo's uncle.

"Oh no, he died six months ago," said the attractive girl. Marlon felt almost like falling on the ground in despair after all the effort he had made, but then this attractive dark-haired girl said:

"I'm his granddaughter."

"So you are Trigo's niece!" Marlon almost screeched. "Yes, of course," came the reply. Marlon asked if she knew that Trigo was dead, and whether she had helped pay for his hospital treatment. It turned out she had no idea that Trigo had died, and had not seen him for years. She invited Marlon into the house.

After much conversation Marlon found himself invited to stay at No. 78 *Carr.* 17, where he would have to sleep on a sofa on the ground floor. That evening, sitting on the terrace and beholding a glorious view of the Andes encircling Bucaramanga, just as dusk with its pink-streaked sky was giving into glittering and sparkling lights, the attractive girl, called Anna, admitted to Marlon that she had had an incestuous love relationship with Trigo about four years earlier. This had been brought to an end when the family found out about it, and Trigo had gone to Morón, in Argentina.

"Why there?" asked Marlon.

"Because it is a very average, un-special, anonymous place," replied Anna. Marlon winced internally at this, having always himself thought that Morón was a rather nice, distinctive place, with fine architecture, beautiful girls, good bars, and a friendly easy-going atmosphere. It was neither too big like a large city, nor too parochial like a small provincial town. It was just right, and that was why he, and he fancied Trigo, had liked it. But he wouldn't be able to enjoy it again the way he had before.

All in all Marlon was not really a very persistent person, and so, once he and Anna had entered into a lovely relationship, affectionate and sexual, he gave up his pursuit of matters concerning the poor, dead Trigo. He and Anna lived together in No. 78, *Carrera* 17, which was her house now that her grandfather had died.

Ten years later the two of them separated, but that is quite another story.

SATIN CAMP

Satin Camp was a young man of twenty-four when the events occurred that underpin this story, but it was thirty years later, when he was fifty-four years old, that a more important event took place in his life. Camp was only ten years old when Britain and France declared war against Hitler, thus initiating the Second World War, and so he could not of course have participated in it.

Satin Camp was twenty-four years old in 1953, and was a sort of proto-Teddy Boy. He used Bryl Cream to smarm back his hair, and wore winkle-picker shoes and very tight black trousers. One evening, outside a café, he slipped over and banged his head on the pavement, and was left permanently brain-damaged by the accident. He was picked up and taken to hospital in an

ambulance, but although he was given the best treatment then available, he was never to recover satisfactorily.

Thirty years later, in 1983 when Camp was fifty-four years old, he was living in the house of an aunt of his, called Madge. One afternoon he went out to buy a newspaper and a pint of milk, and on the way back he was attacked by a large bull-terrier, and fell onto the pavement much as he had done thirty years later, though for different reasons. This time he got up on his own, and was not taken to a hospital. The accident did not apparently affect him either negatively or positively, in spite of the fact that he hit his head quite as hard as he had done thirty years before. He even picked up the milk and newspaper and walked back to his aunt Madge's house, and although she wondered why he was dusty and dirty in places Satin did not seem to her at all different from the way he normally was. Satin did not mention the mishap that had befallen him on his walk back from the local shop.

Thirty years after this last incident, Satin Camp will be eighty-four years old, if he is still alive, and it will be 2013. It is impossible to say what will happen to him then, as now we are still in 2008. But if something spectacular occurs to him, as it did in 1953 and 1983, we can be sure it will be noted and reported as accurately as the above has been.

PRESIDENT KIDNAPPED BY UNIDENTIFIED GANG

New York Times. Jan. 2nd, 1974

PRESIDENT KIDNAPPED BY UNIDENTIFIED GANG

The world shook in amazement at the news that early this morning, the U. S. President was snatched in his sleep, from the white House, This staggering event has few precedents, the only comparable one in our era being the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1966.

Presidential security forces and the C.I.A. are totally bewildered. Formal press announcements have stated that they do not know how the intruders entered the White House without sounding the alarms, nor how they silenced the guards. Where the president is, or who his kidnapers are, is unknown.....

Washington Post. Jan 2nd

KIDNAPPING OF PRESIDENT – COMMUNISTS SUSPECTED

The American people are once again faced with a disgrace to their nation, in hearing of our president's kidnapping. The Secretary of State has announced his suspicions of Communist involvement....

Dock of the Bay. Jan. 2nd

....we were lucky to get the news before printing this issue. Folks, it seems as if some very together dudes have pulled off a cool number. None of us know who they are, or where our much-loved president is....

New York Times. Jan 3rd

...We have since heard that the Soviet Premier and the Chairman of the People's Republic of China were kidnapped at almost exactly the same time. After 24 hours of silence, the kidnapers have given their terms of ransom: 100 tons of nuclear explosives must be dumped at a specified place in the Atlantic at midday, Jan 5th, in return for the president's life. That this might be a hoax cannot be ruled out...

Ramparts. Jan 4th

....which makes me believe this is the work of a very efficient international organization. The same demands have been made to the Russian and Chinese governments. I suspect this group of having a highly developed world-political consciousness, thus choosing realizable demands which the governments in question would consider worth granting for the sake of their leaders' lives. They obviously realize that to demand total abolition of nuclear weapons would be utopian, and that the destruction of all weapons and plans, etc. could never be ensured. Instead, they have brought the situation to the world's attention, showing also the power available to organized subversion.....

Pravda. Jan 4th

....The Soviet people should not be alarmed by this bourgeois imperialist trick. The fact that the Americans claim their president to have been kidnapped also should not for one moment make us question the origins of so foul an action. We can rest assured, however, that our security, the best in the world and dedicated to the protection of the Russian People, will succeed in bringing the imperialist renegades to task. Naturally, their absurd demands deserve no more than sneers from the Soviet State.

Peking, Jan 4th

...Whether this plot to undermine the defence of the People's Republic of China comes from the Soviet Revisionists or the Western Imperialists, is as yet uncertain. Certain however, is the fact that both Enemies fear our growing ability to defend our country, our people, our world destiny. Naturally, the demands of these subverters of Communism and Justice are unthinkable.

Washington Post. Jan 4th

... it is intolerable to think that any U.S. government will consent to say terms from these hoodlums. Any such "deal" would mean international humiliation, a drop in not only our prestige; but in our self-respect and security of mind at home. Even with our president's life in danger, we must be unwavering Americans, true to the cause of Liberty, Democracy and the fight against Communism and the subverters of Law, Order and Authority.

New York Times. Jan 6th

...Since all three governments agreed to the demand of dropping 100 tons of nuclear explosives into the sea, and all three leaders have been mysteriously returned, knowing nothing of what happened to them, one can only ask, what will the kidnappers do next? Clearly the dropping of the explosives cannot be an aim in itself.

Dock of the Bay. Jan 9th

...It's really far-out that the world has 300 tons of nuclear explosives less than before, but it's too bad they included our Chinese comrades in their attacks. That makes me feel they must be some kind of fanatic religious group, devoid of political orientation.

Ramparts. Jan 11th

... What's more, they are very well equipped. Submarine and helicopters were seen near the sites of bomb-dropping, and successfully resisted attempts to encircle them.

LOOKING FOR A WOMAN

I was trying to find a woman. God, did I want a woman. I just wanted some lusty whore to appear to me, pull her huge beautiful tits out of her worn black evening dress and offer them to me like delicious mangos at a tropical market. Then to grab them with a wicked grimace on her face and knead them, squeeze them, and open them out to me. And then with a self-possessed look to gently pull up her tight dress past her knees to show the slight soft hollow behind them; and to expose her thighs in black stockings stopping at soft suspenders which only slightly push

into her white legs. And as she approached her gorgeous secret, her face moves to a grin of “here you are!” gently whispered; she shows it all and gives it yet more by thrusting her buttocks forward to open it, let the lips pulsate and invite.

The building I was in seemed to be a modern one, something like an office block. There were lots of people milling about including some nice-looking women. I walked up a couple of flights of stone stairs with the sounds of people’s laughter and chattering wafting through my head. The door of every office – if offices they were – was opened wide, and in each a group of people were drinking, dancing, laughing at jokes and flirting. Everybody seemed very much in the mood for the sort of insane indulgence I felt like – or more truthfully I think, I needed, to smooth off a growling sense of foreboding which was trying to erupt within me. I should have no trouble finding a jovial companion to enjoy the party with – then to slip off and find a bed after a few hours of alcohol and mildly adventurous foundlings had aroused our urges to exploding point. While I thought this a pretty girl smiled at me as she walked with a group of other people up the stairs.

I went into one of the rooms. There was a good-looking woman of about thirty-five leaning against a wall, smoking a cigarette. She was not dressed over-glamorously but somehow the not-too-short dress she was wearing made her legs and buttocks much more desirable than if she had had on something that teased more obviously. The way she leaned against the wall twisted her body in such a way as to cause her bottom to protrude deliciously in my direction. Her waist was filled out in a solid womanly way but was not plump. Her breasts were a nice size and moved as she breathed, and again not too much was visible above her neck-line. Her face was warm and attractive, mellow and mature. She was probably the wife of someone – who hopefully wasn’t around – and had the look of a woman who has taken on certain elements of respectability and modesty but whose body pulsates all the more from beneath, flaunting itself of its own will.

After I had looked at her for some time she turned to me and smiled – a perfectly ambiguous smile which caused me to tingle all over. I went over to join her and the man she was talking to – a slim, smartly-dressed fellow whom I noticed now for the first time. I simply said: “Hello”, and smiled at each of them, not wanting to come out with some clever party-line nor wanting to pretend I had something particular to say. The lady quickly took it up and asked me some question. I answered it and made some remark that allowed her to reply. After a conversation in which nothing of significance had been said but during which we had been able to exchange looks with one another and hear each other’s voices, I thought I could reasonably ask her if she would like another drink and if we might seek out the alcohol source. I left it up to her to sort out, through a few subtle remarks and gestures, whether the fellow was to be with us or not. To my great excitement he responded to the lady’s suggestion that we would be back in a little while by smiling amicably and saying: “Fine, see you later!” Good, he wasn’t upset. I didn’t want anyone to feel bad.

We left the room. She said the drink was upstairs. There was little room to move on the stairs past the huddles of half-drunk people, and I put my hand gently on her waist and the round of her hip as if to help her through. We got to where the drink was and laughed when I poured cider into her glass which fizzed up and flowed over her fingers, and I noticed her nails were varnished in blue! We made more inane conversation which allowed us to dance round the Garden of Eden

but not yet enter it, and to exchange naughty glances which she would terminate with a lowering of the eyes and a sharp movement of the head, as if to imply unconvincingly that I should watch my step.

Then she burst a bomb. She really must return to her husband. Was that her husband I met? Oh no. That was a friend of her husband, her husband was somewhere around. But she would try to sneak back to me later. I explained that I don't like that kind of set-up. O.K., so she would give me her address and we would meet another time. We would make love for hours as she would like us to do now she said (she was a little more drunk by this time).

Sadly I said goodbye to her and put my arms around her and kissed her whilst I felt over all her body and she held my head first and then brought her delicate fingers down my back to touch my skin at the bottom of my shirt. She gave me a slip of paper and left.

Damn. I would have to start looking all over again. It would be great to see her another day, but I needed someone now. I looked around the room – there was no woman there that wasn't obviously attached. I went to another room. I felt the same there - there were one or two doubtfuls though. One girl in particular didn't seem attached to anyone from the way she acted. I stood still looking at a wall. After a while I noticed she was right next to me fumbling through a bag she had evidently left near to where I was. I made a remark to her – I think something about being glad I hadn't trodden on her bag, and she gave me a blank unfriendly look.

So I left that room. A loose group seemed gathered at the top of the stairs. I joined them but after some time I felt I was no part of them and left. Up some more stairs and in another room I could make no contact. If I joined a group it would disintegrate after a few minutes and I would find myself either alone or with a couple of guys. Once a girl didn't even hear something I said to her, but then I felt thankful as I quickly thought her response would not have been very different if she had heard me. I found it more and more difficult to say anything, and if I did it would always be unpropitious or wrongly timed or unhumorous. I began to feel very unhappy, wishing my yearning had not been so enflamed, and feeling very out of place and lonely. Soon not even unattractive women took any notice of me and I felt I was looking glum even when I tried to lean against a wall and feel unconcerned. I knew I would never meet anyone if I looked depressed.

I began to feel just how many people there were around me, none of whom I knew, and how crowded and jostling the place was. There was so much laughter of which I had felt a part before but which I now seemed to have jumped out from into a different time-flow. I seemed to be in a timeless instant, encased by glass from all the people whose movements and sounds I observed as if they were made by puppets.

I sat down in a chair somewhere. Everything about me was curled into my centre; I had shrunk light years away from the people. A girl sat down next to me. She turned toward me for a brief look but I couldn't say anything. She stayed there about ten minutes in silence. Suddenly she said:

“Do you feel like company or are you deeply into yourself?”

For seconds I could not reply but I managed eventually to stutter out that I felt like company very much but that I didn't feel like talking. She nodded and kept looking at me, without a smile but kindly. She had wavy blonde hair that was nice and messy, flaring out in hazes. Her face was rather brown and freckled. She was a smallish woman with a clear neat figure. I was leaning back in my chair, my immobility added to by the alcohol. She started stroking and rubbing my chest, arms, and then my thighs. Not for some while did I respond by pulling her blouse out from her skirt and touching her fair bare back. I felt her whole body tense and make a slight jerk. I was getting worked up and glowing with that indescribable heat, but I touched her only little and gently, as if I were much more cautious than I felt. Then she came up to my ear to whisper so that her hair brushed against my cheek to fire me yet more, and said:

“Isn't it time we found somewhere to make love?”

I said yes, and slowly got myself together to move. We got up and walked down the stairs. After endless flights we appeared to be nearly leaving the building and how thankful I was. But just before leaving she had to go to the bathroom. I waited in the landing. “She won't be long,” I was thinking to myself when who should appear but the first woman I had been with, the one who had gone to find her husband. I glanced at the female lavatory door before talking to her.

“Hello again,” she said with a lovely smile, cocking her head slightly to one side. I melted again.

“So what are you doing?” I asked, not seeing a husband with her.

“Oh, he went home,” she said shrugging her shoulders, putting her hand up to touch her lip and grinning. “So we can go off together after all!” she threw in, coming a little closer.

I agreed, and told her to wait while I spoke to the other girl. I hated the idea of letting go of the other girl but when she came out of the lavatory I told her that I had met someone I had been with earlier in the party but from whom I got separated. I wanted to go with this woman now but hoped I could have her (the second woman's) address so that we could meet another time. I tried to put across to her that I really had wanted to be with the first girl but that now I liked her too – but please, could she understand that I wanted to be with them both but that as it had been a mistake that the first girl and I had not stayed together, I felt I should go with the first woman now and meet her another time.

Amazingly she understood and agreed. I went off to find the first, dark-haired woman. I found her where she had said she would wait, and I asked where we should go to be alone. She said we would find a place in the building which would be much quicker than going out and finding somewhere there. But after ascending and descending several flights of stairs and checking many rooms, we still hadn't found an empty one. Several rooms did have beds which gave me hope, but all that we tried were already in use.

Eventually we found a vacant room – and it had a bed. We exchanged happy, naughty, relieved glances and I came to her to kiss her. Behind her the door opened shudderingly and three

cleaning-women burst in with flattering mops and pails and loud chatter and filled the room with the smell of disinfectants and cleansers.

“Oo I’m sorry,” said one, “but you lovebirds’ll ‘ave to find somewhere else ‘cos we’ve gotta clean in ‘ere!”

They were aimiable ladies so we left with smiles and comments and laughter. We tried a few more rooms but having no luck we decided to go out the building after all. We clip-clopped down all the stairs again, at very slow speed because of the throngs of people which constantly made us stop, wait, and weedle our way through. Outside the building we headed straight for some trees fairly close-by. Once there we found a grassy bank with no one in sight. For some reason the softness of the grass underfoot and its damp smell plunged me into an eery gloominess. Without words we started to undress. She undid some buttons and lay on her back before taking her dress off. I wanted to have a piss by this time, so I decide to do it now before we started getting to excited. I told her I was going round the bank for a second.

I did what I needed to do, and was just about to bound back to my woman when a blurry drained feeling came over me and I couldn’t move. Standing still and looking in front o me I saw an old man silently before me. His expression was completely enigmatic – I had no indication whether he was friend or foe, whether he was surprised to see me or had been watching me for some time. Neither of us spoke, but then his ear detached itself from his face and began to float slowly around it, touching his chin, then his nose. I looked away from him as soon as I could, to find that all around him there were very old people, grey-haired men and women in old-fashioned uniforms like those of small-town bands or boys’ and girls’ brigades. They seemed to be moving towards me, and although their faces did not exactly show hostility their presence was suddenly horrifying to me. I thought I needed to defend myself and although I knew at the time it was ridiculous I found myself taking my pen like a robot from my jacket pocket and trying to use it as a poisonous pea-shooter. I blew it frantically at the people in uniform, aiming at one at a time. Before I had a chance to see whether it was working, whether they were doubling and crumpling up from my improvised shooting or not they all disappeared!

I looked around me for a little to ensure that I really wasn’t seeing any more people, then I made my may back as fast as I could around the bank. What would she be thinking! When I got to her I found she was dressing again. I asked her why and she said the thought I wasn’t interested. I quickly tried to put her right about that but she carried on pulling a stocking on.

“Are you nervous then?” she asked. I said I was not; I had just felt giddy on the other side of the bank and I had had to rest there a while.

“Never mind,” she answered, “it’s cold out here and anyway I’ll have to get home soon. Some other time, eh?”

I tried to persuade her to change her mind, but she wouldn’t. I had to fight hard to conceal my exasperation. We went back to the building. She got a taxi I think and I went back into the building. When I entered it all those people whom I had never known and whom I had not even communicated with seemed to be aware of me. Some gave me friendly knowing looks, others somewhat envious ones, and others still gave me disapproving or contemptuous glances. So they

assumed we had done what we wanted to do! I didn't respond to the unfriendly looks, and didn't know how to reply to the friendly ones since a return smile would imply: "Yes, we did! It was fun!" I tried to get away from people who were aware of my identity and movements to where I would be ignored again, but it seemed impossible. I soon gave up trying and decided to find the second girl if she was still there. I asked a few people whom I thought I remembered seeing in the room where she had earlier come to sit next to me, whether they had recently seen her. Either they didn't know her or they had no idea where she was, until at last a girl with perfectly set black hair and long dark eyelashes and beautifully green-tinted eyelids put her face very close to mine and with a sparkle in her eye and her arm linked in her boyfriend's she said:

"Oh, I'm afraid she's gone! She went for a drive with some people because she got bored with the party."

TRAPPED

A friend of mine called Malcolm decided to write a short story about an Englishman who went to visit the small town of La Feria near Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. The Englishman, whose

name was Matthew, arrived in La Feria with his beautiful Colombian girlfriend Sandra one Saturday afternoon. They went to stay in the house of a cousin of Sandra's, and were immediately confronted with the extraordinary news that Sandra's cousin's daughter of seventeen years old was pregnant, and was soon to have a baby girl, though she did not have any kind of stable relationship with the baby-to-be's father. The father-to-be had apparently admitted his role in the girl's pregnancy, and had promised to help financially once the baby was born. However, although he worked, his income was low, labouring as he did in construction. Nevertheless, as he was only eighteen years old, and was planning to go to College soon, there was a good chance, Sandra's cousin felt, that in due time he might earn a reasonable amount of money.

Matthew felt it was a shame for this daughter, called Andrea, to become a single mother at such a young age. But he did not think it was a huge tragedy, as in Colombia families tend to rally around a girl in such a situation as this; so by no means need her life be completely ruined. But Matthew's relaxed attitude to this story about Andrea was somewhat shaken when Sandra's cousin, named Martha, proceeded to narrate how her son, called Wilmar, who was eighteen years old like the father of Andrea's baby-to-be, had also got a girl of seventeen years old pregnant, without having any kind of serious relationship with her either. This seemed to Matthew to be more than just a bit of bad luck; daughter and son getting pregnant and impregnating a girl, respectively, both at the same time? It was all very odd, Matthew thought.

The whole thing could be partly explained, Matthew imagined, by the fact that Martha, a very attractive woman, had had each of her many children by different men, and was not at the time of Matthew's visit attached to any particular man. The father of her last child – a lovely, pretty little girl called Angelina – had never properly lived with Martha, sleeping normally in his mother's *finca* just outside La Feria, only occasionally staying with Martha in the latter's house. But latterly, not even this was still occurring, as Martha had become fed up with the man because of his constant drinking and philandering. Yet he still came round to Martha's house sometimes, mainly to kiss and hug and play with Angelina; but when Matthew and Sandra arrived at Martha's house in La Feria, Martha had only hours before been arguing with him because his mother had just telephoned Martha to blame her for her son's returning to her *finca* the night before extremely drunk, as if it were *Martha's* fault!

No more of this said Martha, and Matthew was inclined to agree with her.

One day, while Malcolm was in the middle of writing this short story about Matthew and Sandra in La Feria, he told me he had had a dream the night before, in which he was sitting at a large table with a number of friends, some of which (including myself) were real people in waking life, whilst others were inventions from within his dream, including some men with faces like birds or lizards, and some women with faces like kangaroos or ferrets. An argument had broken out among the group sitting around the table, and somehow, when everything had erupted into an unseemly, furious row, all the people in this group, with the exception of Malcolm, turned into characters from Wagner's *Ring*: Fafner, Haagen, Siegfried, Sigmund, Sieglinde, Brünhilde, Wotan, and Weltraute, and all of them got out of their finely carved wooden chairs and started to rush around in a crazy furore, only just avoiding bumping one into another, until everything and everyone, including Malcolm, evaporated into smoke and wisped away into a very strange sky –

coloured pink and black and harbouring pin-pricks that sparked periodically in electric-like lights and made sounds like giant moths stamping on clouds and bellowing from their yellow antennae.

I asked Malcolm whether he thought this traumatic-sounding dream had been in some way related to the challenges involved in his creatively attempting to work out the story he was writing about La Feria. Malcolm was simply unable to make a judgement on that, he said. One would have to ask Freud, he added. No matter what the reasons were for Malcolm's extraordinary dream, it did not stop him from wrestling further with his story about Matthew. It transpired that two days after their arrival, Matthew and Sandra were walking down a steep hill on the outskirts of La Feria, only a little below the dark mists that lick around the dark green vegetation of the *paramos*, chilly plateaus in the Colombian Andes where marvelous orchids and bromelids, and wild native grasses grow, and where sometimes long and thin humming-birds browse, like huge bees with amazing translucent colours and buzzing wings.

As they struggled with their extremely steep descent, fighting against both gravity and the slipperiness of the damp clay earth, Matthew and Sandra came to the stump of a felled tree, on which sat a girl, her face turned away from them. They circled round the tree stump, until they could see the face of the girl clearly: it was Andrea's, and Matthew shuddered as he realized that this poor pregnant girl had a harsh black eye on her right side. "How ghastly," he thought to himself, while Sandra piped up cheerily with: "Hello Andrea, what are you doing here?"

The three of them walked together now down to the town and to Martha's house. Malcolm had arrived at this point in his story, at the end of an afternoon's writing at his desk, and after that he went out to meet some friends. He met up with a former University colleague called Richard, and two women, one the girlfriend of Richard and the other his sister. Richard suggested they go to a new bar he had recently discovered, so they all piled into his comfortable car.

While they were driving along a typical motorway at night, around a curved stretch surrounded by the sizzling lights of a vast city, Richard turned on the car radio and immediately Malcolm recognized the music of Puccini's *La Bohème*: the beautiful, searing, insane, glorious music of love and misery, solitary heroism, struggle against destiny; isolation and lostness. The music's searing beauty wrenched his mind, and as he soared in wonder he knew, as on many occasions before, that he, like Puccini, did not really belong on this earth, but dwelt in some other reality or dimension. Puccini was already dead, as he – Malcolm – would later be: extinguished, soaked back into the eternal nothingness of death, non-existence, silence and unconsciousness. He could speak no more with Richard and the two girls during the journey, though he managed to perk up when they arrived at their destination, where they sat down together at a comfortable table in order to drink beer and cocktails.

Malcolm only returned to his story a couple of days later, in order to relate that now Wilmar had begun to deny that he was responsible for the pregnancy of the seventeen-year-old girl. Matthew was indignant about this, but refused to get embroiled in the matter, and did not speak to Wilmar about it. As usual, the whole business flowed over Sandra like water off a duck's back. Matthew and Sandra had now been about five days in La Feria, and Malcolm was intensely, if not at times feverishly, drawn into their experience. As if gazing into an invisible crystal ball, he tried to discern – without forcing destiny – gently, what would happen to them all in La Feria.

During the night after Malcolm had arrived at this point in his story, he had another remarkable dream which he told me about a few days later. He dreamt he had been reborn, as himself, into the nineteen twenties in Suburban England. He had all the same faculties, and knowledge, that he had now, in real life. So he knew what was going to happen – he knew Hitler was going to take power in Germany, and that the world was going to descend into an insane war. But he could not stop the movement of history, could not influence anything significant at all. His position in life was very minor – growing up in a lower middle-class family in Leicester – so that, whereas if he had been able to become a major political leader he might have been able to affect events, to change the direction that he knew history was going to take, in fact he was as powerless to change Destiny as would a tiny jelly-fish be able to influence the ocean it was bobbing about in, in a violent storm. The only things he could influence or change were trivial, like how many pints of milk his family would take in on any particular day, or what presents his parents would give to his cousins on their birthdays. Malcolm`s predicament in this dream was dreadful.

I honestly don`t know whether Malcolm continued with his story about Sandra and Matthew in La Feria after having this last dream. If he did continue with it, he has not told me how it further unfolded; nor has he said he has stopped writing the story, either because he is unable to continue it or because he has deliberately decided to let it end at the moment Wilmar decides to deny his responsibility for the girl`s pregnancy. Perhaps Malcolm has simply not yet made up his mind about what to do with the story, although quite some time has now passed since he last spoke to me about it.

FOREST TALE

It was in deep night-time that I saw a group of men and a woman in a wooden hut, lit up by a kerosene lamp that made the scene look almost cosy. We were deep in the Amazonian jungle,

days away from any village or town, whether by foot or by canoe. The men seemed to be huddled around an old beaten-up table, sitting on stools, oil-drums, and boxes, while the woman was somehow moving around them all and talking occasionally into one or the other's ear, as if whispering secrets to be kept from the others.

I had crawled several hundred metres to where I was now, and looked from perhaps five metres distance from the hut, through a large rectangular window, at the scene I have just described. I had with me, besides my clothes – thick protective trousers, a kakhi shirt hard buttoned up at the neck and wrists against mosquitoes, big socks and also tough but worn-out boots – only an arm-bag in which rested my last can of Peruvian tuna fish and a plastic bottle with some water, recently taken from the river.

The reason I had been crawling was that I had so many insect bites on my legs that something had simply seized up in them, and I could not stand for more than a few seconds and could hardly move my wretched, agonized legs at all.

I did not think it was a good idea to go up to the hut or let the people there know I was here. Were they bandits, guerrillas, rubber-tappers, or what? They might even have been a group of research scientists who had 'gone native' in a rather decisive way, but I could not know, and so I could not take the risk of letting them know of my presence. They might invite me in, give me some food, and let me sleep in one of their hammocks; or they might kill me, or do something even worse.

I crouched, or lay, in utter silence for a long time, watching the men and the woman (whom for an instant I wondered if I recognized) in the hut, until after a while one of the men stood up and went out of the hut with the woman to a sort of outside pantry-kitchen, where they picked up some metal plates and put rice and yucca on them, then carried them back into the inside of the hut. The whole group started to eat the food, and one man snatched a bottle of something like rum or *caña* or *aguardiente* from the corner of the room and poured it into a couple of white plastic cups, which were swiftly passed around for one and all to drink from.

I started to think, I know not why, about how the Amazon rainforest has only existed in its present form for about ten thousand years – at least, according to some theories – and that this is really not a very long time in relation to the millions and billions of years involved in the history of the world, still less in relation to the history of the universe. But nevertheless, how timeless, extraordinary, and either beautiful or horrible – depending on what is happening to you and how you are feeling – the South American jungle is: so enormous, mysterious, and fascinating.

Next my thoughts turned to the dreadful process of divorce I had gone through some years before – a vile, undignified battle through solicitors - 'my own' solicitor being quite as foul and dishonest as that of my ex-wife who was trying to screw every penny she could out of me, even though she knew that I was in fact hopelessly in debt.

But my irrelevant thoughts were suddenly shaken out of me by a hard crashing noise emanating from the river bank some metres away from where I lay. I turned my head, and saw reflections of the moon and the stars rippling in the water as something gigantic lunged out from the water, and

thumped up towards the hut, bellowing monstrous noises. I could not see what it was, petrified as I was with fear, my blood seeming to drain out of me, and I unable to get up and run away – but that was perhaps fortunate as the thing might have seen me then, whereas as it was he stormed towards the lighted hut, from which burst out the men and the woman, shouting and shrieking, and ran wildly in all directions.

As the monstrous thing – it was impossible to make out whether it was a huge man or some kind of animal (but what? a bear for example, in the *Amazon*?) – bashed into the hut, the lamp fell immediately and went out, leaving everything shrouded in darkness. I felt I was immersed in the deepest darkness I had ever known, even though the beautiful moon and stars shone and twinkled above me, and even though I could still just about make out things moving around near me. I was soaking wet, and weighed down with mud caked into my clothes, hair, and boots, as I discerned the enormous man or animal crash into the hut and make a part of it collapse. There was no sound any more from the group of men and the woman – it was as if they had evaporated into the air or flown up to the celestial spheres above. I lay quietly, waiting for something new to happen, trying not to move or make any sound.

“Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!” shouted the ghastly being, and after a few seconds of terrified bewilderment I realized it was Alfredo, who had bashed his way out of the river and broken the flimsy hut with his nasty, clumsy strength. Alfredo was a man – well, I think that description is valid, though I often wondered if he was something else! – that I had spent several weeks with, traveling up the river to the makeshift encampment where we had been staying for some days, until he disappeared suddenly and I found myself virtually immobile due to the insect bites on my legs. I did not like Alfredo – he was rough, gruff, greedy, unpleasant, selfish, and loud, but I had been obliged to stay with him for those purgatorial weeks simply to survive – it needed more than one person to negotiate the rapids on the river in a canoe. So now Alfredo had ruptured back into the world, and obviously he knew I was there, as otherwise he would not have shouted “Ha! ha! ha! ha!” in that horrible, scornful manner as he caused the hut to disintegrate.

If my legs had not made me immobile, I would have got up and rushed away. But I could not do that, so, knowing Alfredo realized I was there, I said in a sullen, subdued tone:

“What’s the matter with you, you fool? Why did you have to turn up like that?”

“Come on you idiot,” he replied. “I’ve got another canoe down there in the romantically evanescent and exquisitely shimmering river – I’ll have to drag you down to it unless you can crawl faster. We need to get going fast, as some people or other – God knows who they are – are after us!”

I did not want to be “dragged down to the river” by Alfredo, so I half crawled, half rolled, down the muddy bank to the river’s edge, where I saw – in the light of the moon and stars and their reflections in the water – the canoe he was talking about. I somehow clambered into it, miraculously, without sinking it, and Alfredo got into it too and started to paddle us off and away.

AN ATTEMPTED REALIST CHRONICLE

I imagined how it would have been to have written a novel about the world of my adolescence, shared between boarding-school, going to pubs and live-music clubs in Kingston, Surrey, and visiting my uncle and aunt at Christmas time in Port Sudan each year. But of course it would have been outside of legitimate literary bounds, even if I had been capable of writing two consecutive paragraphs of realist narrative at the time, to have made an imaginary world out of such experience. Even more would that have been so, had I tried to write about the year in which I left boarding-school, first found girls to go to bed with in South Kensington basement flats, and then went to University to study Philosophy and English Literature; after which I got a job teaching the Sociology of Literature at a Polytechnic in Glasgow. “Unreal experience, bourgeois escapist nonsense, pretentious rubbish, irrelevant vacuity”, would have proclaimed a commentator and down-putter at any such attempt. For that was not nineteenth century St. Petersburg nor turn-of-the-twentieth century Paris, nor the worlds of peasant revolution in Malaya, Kenya, or New Guinea; nor more critically was it the real real world of northern English nor central Scottish working class reality; and so it would have had no meaning at all, as for such a commentator there was no ultimate truth of human existence against and through which any specific micro-world of living might explore the absolutes: there was only the class struggle – seen of course “in the broadest terms” – that constituted real reality.

And so I didn't.

Later, as I got older, I started to feel my youth melt away, and exactly at the time when some photograph albums of my childhood and youth were flooded in a heavy rain that caused the photos to fade, and I sensed the ticking-past-progress of life in time from the beginning of one's life through to its end, then I realized how ridiculous had been the condemnations that had kept me silent throughout most of my life. Around that time in a dream I felt my soul had been split into a hundred Dorian Grays, each one of which had a weird individual history, each one of whose portraits had altered variously: one had decayed unto a ghastly state of eternal hell, another had stayed in perpetual youth, another had retreated in time, taking me back to my womb and even beyond, whilst another had blossomed into myriad spiking eternities in snow and tears, convulsions and infinite deaths, all of which more than drained the life-juices out of me and dragged me onto the shuddering anxieties of cosmic coral reefs, from which I knew, with utter certainty, that there was no escape, even in the billions of years that stretched before and after the tiny span of my actual life.

Next it was that I remembered Jeanine, a lovely girl who wore deliciously short skirts, whom I had met on the steps of a fountain-square in Boston, reading a book of William Blake's poems, with whom I had stayed stuck for a couple of seemingly interminable years; and I remembered my earlier bizarre trip in a Volkswagen van to Afghanistan, from where I had smuggled, with two other rather unrealistic, crazy young men, antique guns and hashish back to Europe. At the Bulgarian border, huge foul tracker dogs had tried to detect our contraband, but very fortunately they were fooled by the smell from strips of cotton soaked in petrol that we had wound around it all.

And then, that is now, I am sipping a glass of rum and sugar-free coca-cola, i.e. *cuba libre*, feeling extremely real, and suddenly realizing that there is only one present moment – now, and

that all other moments – past real and future real, and also the potentially infinite number of actually unreal alternative present moments – are not really real at all.

There is really only one real moment, and that is now.

J only had to walk a few metres from where he had slept to enter a kind of forest grove, where the trees were thinned out, and long blades of grass seemed to play games with the glorious light from the sun, that broke the gloom of the forest all around. Under his feet, clad only in failing sandals, he could feel pebbles occasionally nestled into the humus top-soil; soft, with the exception of the hard but not sharp stones.

Once inside the clearing that J was already feeling was a miraculous grove, he felt he was beginning to float upwards, as if mysteriously the air became solid beneath his feet whenever he moved upwards. Insects of all kinds buzzed around his legs and arms: fireflies, cicadas, crickets, huge beetles, yet more enormous moths, and praying mantises.

MYRIAD INVENTIONS

How inadequate words are to describe a phenomenon like Russia at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. An intellectual analysis alone could never do justice to its painfully addictive power of Destiny which clutches at the stomach, or to the turmoil of its melancholic psyche. What a country, what a slice of humanity! You have to smell the sweat, the superstition, the rumblings of the ragged-clothed peasant; the samovar, the icon and the ripples from the wind over endless yellow flatness. You are made drunk by the breath of hope and freedom, whilst workers are slaughtered in icy city streets. Dostoyevsky, Tchaikovsky, Bakunin and Trotsky – irresistibly you take in the air they breathed.

* * * * *

What if an orange lying on a kitchen table were an exact replica of the planet Jupiter, on a minute scale? If you could change your state of being to its dimensions, you would find yourself in an atmosphere of poisonous gases, hundreds of degrees below freezing point, flattened against the ground unable to overcome the huge gravitational pull. Totally different colours and shades would present a new, previously unknown vista.

And what if the whole of the Milky Way was a constellation of atoms and molecules making up a single drop of sap, in the stem of a plant existing on a larger scale of reality? This drop might be taking newly synthesized nutriment from the leaves to the roots. Our planet would be an atomic particle in a chemical compound soon to be utilized by a growing root-hair.

* * * * *

I feel the wind on me, alive like the lick of an invisible being, brushing through the arms of the trees. The breathing earth, brown underfoot, becomes me and I become it. Branches, leaves, organic life dance, writhe in absolute movement that I do not see but which I become as I watch. Feverish clouds float overhead; exquisite, wanting to be touched, licked. Unthinkingly I rub my cheek against a fluffy piece of orange cloud. I stop thinking, so that I can know.

* * * * *

Jazz is subversion. It sears and cuts at the pillars of Western Civilization. It is music from the slaves of European tyrants, the soul of exploited Africa incubated in North American captivity. It is the sound of tribal African solidarity, continued and transformed under oppression. Jazz sings of freedom and human comradeship, it is the expression of ecstasy and revelation in which the sensual and the sublime are unseparated. In the quagmire of modern civilization, it is the Art which heralds a new world of instinctual being.

* * * * *

In childhood, you have an optimism that all things work themselves out. If there is a lack of communication with someone close, this is seen as transitory – a breakthrough will come in the Future. If a certain love affair goes wrong, another in the Future will go right. If you miss an experience or an opportunity, you can always take it next time around.

But then it dawns on you that sometimes no breakthrough comes for that unsatisfactory relationship; that some people say “no” to loving man or woman and end up sad and alone in their old age. You realize that if someone says: “I’m going to live in England”, that means he has excluded living in all the other countries on the Earth. The infinite possibilities shut out by any choice in life seem significant as well as the single experience, person, or thing affirmed by it.

In childhood, you believe in Cosmic Justice ensuring that everyone ultimately finds himself. It seems then that all people can experience every possible variation of sensation, emotion, or thought. Something unknown is either genuinely wrong for a person who voluntarily refuses it, or else he will take it at another point in his seemingly eternal life.

When older, you feel you can escape the finite and limited nature of your existence by perceiving the world through every kind of consciousness: as a materialist and a mystic, as a romanticist and a stoic. Perhaps you can make up for the fact that you are only one person among hundreds of millions, in one epoch out of many, by experiencing (through knowledge and imagination) the life of a nineteenth century Cossack peasant, a fifth century Mayan priest, a fifteenth century Florentine artist and a twentieth century Chinese revolutionary.

But that is really deception; you cannot live yourself through re-experiencing the emotions and thoughts of others. In fact, you might come closer to understanding the Total Picture through doing one thing thoroughly. A Mexican who has never left his village may have come closest to the Whole by living completely under his sky, in his fields and with his cows. BY living in the immediate, he may know the universal through the particular, like a Zen master who prefers to mingle with the Absolute by gazing upon a single, tiny leaf.

* * * * *

Looking virtually like a cross between Edmund Burke and the unevenness of a ruffled blanket, I dived into the end of a locust and scratched them, three pig. As if tarnished pinkly by failure, squashing a palpitating conscience between two grimy forefingers, I hoped to attention. Its uneasiness (for it was number fourteen in devil`s cramp), jerked the very notion of an obstacle race that year, interrupting the communication between the hole in the dolphin-rider`s breeches and a quite nauseous turn-over. The only quirk forthcoming, was a slithey, semi egg-shaped foam: “Lend a groat! Please wail a bone of oysters and spit!”

* * * * *

Taking all the known facts into account, we can see that acorns are dangerous animals.

And since the salivary glands of acorns are hypersensitive to ground-glass lemon drops, an overdose of these would eliminate the threat.

Since acorns with salivary glands that have dried up from over-use are innocuous.

Well, relatively so, certainly.

It`s true that some could survive and still be aggressive. But they would be a minority.

If any survived, we would be forced to use our apple-vision telescopes to minimize them.

Salivary glands shaped like acorns are insensitive to over-used ground-glass. Aggressive lemon drops will be purged.

Innocuous animals shall survive all minimization, given hypersensitive apples. Telescope drops will be applied to the point of total elimination.

So, don`t forget how relative the shape is.

Forced account of facts takes all dried-up lemons.

The ground, in a certain minority, is hyper-aggressive to still vision. It would be dangerously eliminated.

And since dried threats are over-used by acorns, all animals are dangerous up to the point of an eliminating fact (which is given to true saliva in drops of known relativity). Still, we could purge lemon-acorns into account, since innocuous telescopes are truly minimal.

We must apply all the known facts in order to be dangerous.

* * * * *

One day the devils in Hell stopped tormenting damned souls, and the damned souls stopped thinking they were sin-diseased. They stood up straight, and linking arms they said:

“This is only Hell because the privileged ones in Heaven want us to believe it is. No longer shall we torture one another and make ourselves ugly in order to help the elect feel secure and self-righteous. But nor shall we storm the gates of Heaven and plunder it; we shall create and define our own realm here. We shall ignore the commands and propaganda of the elect, and in building our reality, Heaven will collapse, since it only stays up high because of the continuation of Hell”.

And they saw the fires of Hell no longer as furnaces of eternal punishment, but as warm glimmers of celestial light.

* * * * *

In a Chinese pavilion of a thousand vestibules, its walls made of baked dung studded with emeralds, there flowed a green viscous soup – sweet to the taste, warm, heavy and unsticky to the touch like mercury. Through this fluid reverberated the bellowing sounds of ancient oxen that gnashed their teeth and whipped their tails like circus leaders. Sliding along the ceilings were translucent eels that chewed unceasingly at apricots which appeared in sudden flashes from nowhere.

“Ah, I know all about that”, he said, and continued to sip green tea from his plate.

* * * * *

When I climbed to the top of a tree and stretched my arm up as far as I could, I found I could touch the sky. It was a flat surface, painted in whites and blues which formed moving patches. So the sky was two-dimensional as I had always thought as a child! At the top of the next tree sat a demon with a forked tail of fire; he tapped at the sky with an acorn and cracks darted from the place he tapped – the sky cracked silently like an eggshell. Black splintery cracks. I peeped through a crack that had come to me. I saw rippling waves of dark transparent blue, watery but

weightless. They rolled like wisps of smoke out of the crack and around me – to my touch, they were hard and smooth like marble. They encrusted me, but I could breathe the substance in and out like air, and it was pliable if I moved a limb. Yet if I grabbed at it, it was again like marble. From the cracks appeared long-necked Swans, sacred and white, with the heads of beautiful serene women. Gentle and smiling, they blew silver trumpets. Notes of silent green and turquoise spun out of the instruments, shaped like six-pointed stars.

* * * * *

“Now you have the chance to see yourself for the first time”, spoke the voice of the air in the sky in which I was floating and soaring like the many larks I was among. I looked down over a forest of conifer trees, sharp and piercing, and desolation drained my heart and stomach. Above the horizon silver and orange wisps of cloud splayed out from a point as if some giant had thrown them at a vast canvas.

Sullenly the top of a red sun pushed above the horizon made jagged by tree-tops and tinted the sky pink as if it sent electrifying arteries to each remotest point. “This is the ecstatic sight that greets two desperate lovers after their first night”, said the same voice. But to me now the trees and the rising sun were part of my dry throat and isolation. To an unknowable Other Person they might be part of his or her love. But *I* knew the sun had risen, red and shimmering, over these trees every day for millions of years.

I was caught by a wind, and felt as if I were being rolled into the consuming power of Fate in Tchaikovsky’s “Pathetique” Symphony. A feeling came over me, a clutching at the insides that accompanies going near someone you have fallen in love with. I felt then as if I were enshrined in a Russian novel about people who wait in vain, through spring, summer, autumn, winter and again through spring, summer, autumn, winter, for their loves to come – in the sad, flat Russian steppes.

* * * * *

The roots of the soul must be nurtured, that they can pass unobstructed from the Earth the nutrients for the life of the soul. Only when there flows clear and full the laughter of sap, the silence of earth-clods, the chubby full bodiness of solid mountains, can the soul flower openly and up, furl its arms back and glisten to the moon. Only then can the stillness of the stars’ light wax into the petals, rifle through the stem and enwrap itself with the fibres of the roots.

* * * * *

“Don Giovanni!”

Cold this white statue call from the graveyard blackness. In instant spinal pring, a tingle, a pang for the end of time.

* * * * *

The clouds move over us like a blanket of glowing silk, spun by an invisible hum. Like ripples of eternal ether they flow at a changeless speed, in ever-varying formations of colour, shape, and texture. You gaze until the myriad of unique instants burs into a timeless constancy; the dance of Shiva’s infinite arms gives way to the still-point, where exquisite wholeness is sewn through with strands of every thought and feeling.

You can never know every cloud from every position in every instant of time in the infinite past and infinite future, therefore there is sadness. But in life’s finite gaze your being is pulled into the clouds and like a boat in an infinite sea it rocks, it rocks back and forth, and it rolls; when this movement is in phase with the natural oscillation of your being, when the metabolism of the tiny seed is in harmony with the rumblings of the ocean in which it is pitched, pushed, and squashed, then the soul is sparked with the divine.

The flames stretch and lick before us, and crack from their roots in the black coal. They enfurl you and take you in to their secret heat, and in strained stare you behold what is beyond you, a pattern you will never know. Before the burning interstices your soul is pared and bared to the infinite; an unprotected flower in its instant of unfurling blossom is grasped by the iron claw of eternity, and its petals fall crumpled to the mud.

* * * * *

Another “Book Of The Dead”

I ascend the steps to heaven, my feet taking soft, effortless steps, my mind a melting flake spreading from a point of agglomeration to lie even and unadulterated over a cosmic entirety. During an even step upward, my foot is caught by a dark, unrecognizable force, is sucked, stretched outward, pulled into a long, narrow string like melted cheese. It is painless, but a dank, fluid gloom immerses my whole being. Is this the corruption and selfishness of my earthly existence, straining to leave its mark on my soul before it is dissipated into Eternity?

On a rampart lying in the middle architecture of my mind, appears a bird, uttering strident piercing cries. It sings to me of my fears, my isolation; its sounds echo through every labyrinthine corridor of my psyche, reverberating a strangeness beyond darkness and light. It attempts to conjure up, like the ectoplasm of a medium, the form of a Woman never known or loved; the phantom of an eternal dream, interrupted so often by worldly days. Into this pours my unformulated spirit, a nostalgia beyond hope or understanding.

The fingers of my psyche, left dormant so long, spread into the tinsel-thin realm between breath and death. Like liquid they feel every contour of infinite matter, merge into the unwavering sounds that seem to construct boundaries within the Totality. Their muscles, driven by galactic powers, quiver in inestimable flashes of electric brightness, illuminating love and sadness.

I am admitted to a paper-chase after Ignorance, seduced to flow in an unreal maze. I am dared to seek the point of highest entropy, the pinnacle of non-being, the point in a five-dimensional matrix in which the loudest, most terrifying scream is a vacuous silence.

* * * * *

Reflections In A Shop Window

Behind a shop window a cardboard man smiles a thirty-eight pence smile and points at a consumer's bargain. With the Imaginary Holiday Brochure (showing on each page a most sensual prize open to him who has a secret life-long yearning and a capacity for obedience, self-negating work and routine) comes absolutely free a sample-bottle of purifying mouthwash, perfect for any blossoming secretary wishing to ensure favours from her boss.

Look! The cardboard man's other hand points far away to a place where men in uniform shoot primitive (now nearly extinct!) animals and humans. The music of the guns makes sweet late-night entertainment for proud mums and dads at home. And there! Is that not a ghoulish lunatic thumping the walls of a silent, white, padlocked cell?

Among the crocuses you are beyond the dualities of chaos and order, freedom and determination. Here the individual, unique yet a part of the whole, plays in anarchic spontaneity; his special, incomparable joy blending with those of others, to make a harmony.

* * * * *

Art is distinguishable from other efflorescences of human activity according to intellectually attainable categories; for example, the characteristic of art to hold in a state of tension a concatenation of disparate symbolic elements, in such a way that profound generalities are conveyed by specific particularities, and such that complex totalities of meanings are mediated through the reverberations from the infinite implications of particular elements. Even though these distinctive characteristics of art are unique to it, so that the “aesthetic” entails an avenue to truth qualitatively different from those of science, philosophy, religion, etc. etc., even so these characteristics are formulateable in terms of contemporary “rationalistic” vocabulary. But other vital features of art are not – for example, the propensity of art to make reality gleam with the Ideal, to touch with a magic wand all that is ordinary, to transport and transpose it, to transfuse it with the divine; and to do this so that the transcendence is no escape from reality but a confrontation with it more powerful, more uncompromising than any other kind. All truth, all sorrow, is felt in its rude nakedness yet at the same time it rings with the rhythmic glow of poetry. The universe is understood anew, and the soul is replenished.

* * * * *

WIND: Look to me for constancy in change; sometimes I howl, sometimes I whistle Gently, one minute I swirl and the next I’m still. I guide ships to safety or destroy them; I disperse the seeds of plants or I uproot whole forests. But I am always the wind, incorrigible, unpersuadable, faceless and free.

DRUNKARD: I am inconstancy in changelessness. My self undergoes continual disintegration and reshuffling; my reality is sometimes concrete sometimes symbolic, sometimes glorious sometimes threatening. But my appearance is always sodden, hopeless, drunken and aggressive. Mine is an ugly freedom.

* * * * *

A monk left his monastery one day to seek out an old hermit who lived in a cave in a nearby mountain. He had heard that the man was a great sage.

When he entered the cave the monk noticed some medicine bottles and was deeply astonished. After greeting the hermit he said to him:

“Honest hermit, I have heard that you are one who has understood his soul, that from you I can learn about nature and existence, about love and man. But if you have penetrated the secret of purity, how is it that you concern yourself with your bodily ailments? Are not the spirit, the feelings, and the intellect elevated far above the flesh?”

“My good friend”, answered the sage. “Friend, just as a flower needs water and good earth so it is with all things. If your body is allowed to wither your spirit will end. And it is the same for all mankind as it is for an individual. For men to live in peace and fulfillment, their labour, their dealing in the world in all the basic concerns of economy must be healthy in order to feed their community’s soul.”

* * * * *

Ivan`s Love

When the rain sleets and saddens the cobble streets and the little houses huddle in their rows, damp cold and lonely, then Ivan could know the strangeness of love. Hidden in the shade of an old black archway his mind would wisp up and away with the coils of smoke which flicked from the silent chimneys, spattering from hearths which are looked to for solace in the pervading blackness. Into the cold sky he could fly, speckled with stars and an icy moon to the realm where his thoughts, dissipated and unboundaried, could float lightly in evanescent intensity. There he could feel as if through the length of his spine, the possibility of love – whole but unattainable, burning but tragically melancholy. This vision, somehow lost even while still perceived, would be like a sharp hammer driven with a pure and sudden scream into his skull, elevating him to the heights of hopelessness, knowledge of all, insanity. A pure, blazing insanity; a fatal timeless theme.

* * * * *

Gustav Mahler

What is this, that rumbles in the abyss of the soul? There is groaning as the very bottom is reached, and disintegration seems total. Then comes recovery; the boat rocks evenly again on the waves of well-being. Pain no longer engulfs all – though it is never wholly purged.

* * * * *

“Je suis celui au cœur vestu de noir.”

“Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit!
Will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!”

* * * * *

There was a green hill dimmed by rain, rain. The sky was wet and white and came right to the earth. Long tussocky grass and trees were rocked and ruffled by the empty sky.

A woman of black, black all over clasped her aged hands in front of her and shook. Rain spattered her black-veiled face and her eyes implored them to answer her.

Arose the woman's twin sister. Black-hooded, she approached through rain and white sky. “Tell me the meaning of all this,” begged a cracked, rainy face with deep fearful eyes. Head turned, forehead furrowed, in consternation came a reply: “I know no more nor less than you. You must search the hill, the sky, the rain, the trees, until you find the meaning.”

* * * * *

“To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Jonny Floater was someone who thought about human society a great deal of the time, and he thought about it from all sorts of angles – over the long-term, since the origins of humanity; as a global society in the contemporary world; and as so many different kinds of society that have existed (and do exist) over the whole of human history.

So really he was a kind of sociologist; but as a highly *historical* kind of sociologist he was obviously interested in pre-history. In that respect he was drawn to both paleontology and archaeology, and due to this latter he decided to found an archaeological society at his local university. This he called The Archaeological Society, and organized a formal inauguration of it for Tuesday the twenty-ninth of August nineteen ninety nine.

By goodness that inauguration was a party! Many of the girls that attended it were extremely sexy, and many wore short skirts and danced about in a way that made everyone there very excited. Once the Society was truly founded, a whole section of the University Library was taken over and laid out with exhibits (Jonny Floater could be an extremely persuasive person), with exact models of archaeological sites from all around the world, tables with information for membership on them and piles of archaeological reviews, as well as movable shelves containing some of the classics of world archaeology – Chinese, Russian, Polish, German, British, American, African and Latin American. It was an extremely exciting part of the Library and some of the library staff had to admit in private that they were worried lest it draw all attention of the library-users away from the rest of the collection.

Sometimes Floater would spend all the hours that the Library was open poring over the display cabinets and the shelves and tables brimming over with publications, until at times the librarians were inclined to think he must be an obsessive personality (if not actually mad).

On the whole The Archaeological Society was quite successful: within two years its membership had soared to fifty-seven. But Jonny Floater was beset by a nagging doubt, a worrying frustration

about the Society that he could not resolve, even though he sometimes spent quite a few hours of the night thinking about it, in horizontal insomnia.

Floater could not exactly identify the cause of his concern; but he felt sure there was something definite that he must do to alter the direction of his brainchild's development, giving it some impetus and some flare of publicity. One night, at three o'clock in the morning, he decided what to do.

He must undertake a robbery of The Archaeological Society. Immediately as he hit upon his solution to the problem, the plan and strategy of the robbery unfolded in front of his mind without him needing hardly at all to direct them. He would burst into the Library in dramatic fashion, brandishing revolvers in both hands that he would point at Librarians who seemed to approach him or threaten to block his path. This he did, on Wednesday the third of September two thousand and one. The stunned Librarians staged no serious counter-attack, nor sought to obstruct his ambitions. Floater rushed to the area of the Library where The Archaeological Society was situated, and pointing his guns at the antique grandfather clock that presided over it, threatened in a loud, yelling voice to shoot it into a wreck if the Librarians did not immediately and obediently open up all the cabinets and put everything inside them into some large cardboard boxes that were piled up against one of the walls.

This the terrified Librarians did, and after some time nine of the boxes had been filled. Jonny Floater could not, obviously, take all these huge, filled boxes with him. So he decided to leave them against the wall, all closed up and appropriately labeled, ready therefore to be picked up later, then ran out of the Library yelling and screaming and still brandishing his guns. He came out into the bright, crisp, autumn air full of delight at the success of his mission.

But it was not long before the police came to his room, knocked on his door, and invited him down to the police station. And it was not much longer after that that charges were preferred against Floater. At the end of the hearing of his case Jonny Floater was sentenced to two years in prison, for armed robbery and for the putting into mortal danger nine University Librarians. But just before he was about to be delivered to gaol Floater alighted, again in the middle of a sleepless, desperately anxious night, upon another plan.

He would not go to prison, he decided. Instead he would return to the Library, but cleverly *avoid* the area in which The Archaeological Society had previously been housed. And the first attractive girl he saw he would approach, chat her up, and enter with her – if she was responsive – into an amorous and sexy relationship straightaway.

This Jonny did, and meeting according to his hopes and plans a gorgeous young girl in a red miniskirt looking at a medieval Burgundian illustrated manuscript, he immediately embarked upon flirtatious approaches to the lovely girl, which turned out to be one hundred percent successful. So instead of going to prison for two years, Jonny Floater began a long series of amorous, erotic affairs, which seemed to him to be a much better way of passing his time, now that The Archaeological Society no longer existed.

THE CONDITION OF KNOB RULE

It was quite extraordinary the way Knob Rule ended up with his neck stuck inside a kind of box affair; in such a way that his head bounced up and down between two wooden slats, one above and one below, which hurt him very much, though he found he could not keep still between them, the positioning ensuring that his head forever went down to bash his forehead or up to hit the back of his head on the hard slats of wood below or above.

“Why hasn’t anyone put a sign on this display giving the name of the victim and information about the type of punishment it represents?” queried one viewer.

“But it isn’t a kind of punishment at all, it’s simply an example of the human predicament!” retorted another.

“But it should still be properly labelled, whatever it is,” piped up a third. “Visitors have the right to be informed as to what exactly they are looking at,” he added, dourly.

Then a fourth viewer presumed to enlighten the debate with the following comment:

“This is very foolish!” he averred. “The human predicament *is* a kind of punishment, just as punishment defines and describes what the human predicament really is.”

“That’s only true if you believe in Original Sin, and all that kind of religious stuff,” shouted a woman viewer, quite angrily.

Meanwhile Knob Rule banged up and down mercilessly in his quaint and curious contraption. Sometimes it seemed as if he was going to faint with pain, but at others he seemed to be adapting to his situation quite well! For a moment he actually appeared to smile, which brought out from the five viewers – one woman and four men – a loud “haugh..... haugh.....” and a guffaw sort

of sound. It was as if four bachelors and their bride had found themselves able to pronounce in unison at last.

“Marcel Duchamp and Jim Morrison would like that,” thought Knob Rule’s wife, who was also watching.

THERE WAS A DREAMING WORM

There was a worm who lived under the ground near a village called San Gabriel del Corazon. This worm dreamt one night that it was a kind of dog, an unusual kind that made noises like large frogs and had feet like those of pigs. This unusual dog was trapped in a collapsed shed-like wreck, belly upwards, head twisted backwards, and it had to pay every ten breaths to be allowed to breathe again. It did not know to whom it paid, thousands of times each day, for the right to be able to continue to breathe and live. It paid in an invisible fluid, that the dog-like creature extracted from its blood constantly, and threw in a spinning motion around three hundred and sixty degrees, which made its body writhe though it was unable to move the entire circle because it was so pressed down into its humiliating, painful position. The worm recognized in its dream that this mockery of a dog was a metaphor of itself, and hated every moment that the dream lasted, which was forever.

A CONQUISTADOR OF NOTHING

He had arrived at the shore of a foreign land, but after so much yearning, dreaming, and anticipation, he felt remarkably numb at the sight he beheld. Yes, certainly the skies were blue and bright, hallucinogenically so, while superb birds of different sizes and distinct colours wended their flight-patterns within it. And the sun was so powerful one could feel that all the happiness, hope, and wonder that a whole lifetime can offer was contained in an instant of its ecstatic joy, its glorious heat; and the marvelous sounds of birds and insects that such solar bliss engenders.

But now he was here, he felt a terrible sense that perhaps he did not really know why he was here. As if in a tiny instant, his mind had broken its thoughts, from excitement, hope, and the certainty of burning faith, into doubt and dread, fear of failure and disappointment. Suddenly, the incredible cliffs from the top of which he viewed a glistening, slightly rippling sea, as blue and azure as its elemental essence, became shrouded by an involuntary unconscious curse, which turned the sight into a dark and desperate abyss, a chilling knowledge that this was where he would die, whether after a shorter or a longer period of time.

He had arrived at the Newer World, after years and decades of striving, self-abnegation and fantasy. It was not to be as his hopes and dreams had anticipated.

The solitary drifter that had traveled to the Newer World found that it was uninhabited by people, in spite of all the myths and legends he had heard about it. He was destined to live a life like Robinson Crusoe, although he would never be rescued.

THE VISITOR FROM HENDON

I had been staying in various places in North London for some time, when one evening a friend of mine took me to a pub somewhere near Hendon to have a drink, and then afterwards said he had a friend who lived in the same building in which the pub was. He invited me to visit this friend's room, that was situated on the second floor of the large, rather ordinary-looking 1930s grey-brick house, not immediately above the pub, but rather a bit to one side, over a side street, while the pub itself was located on the corner of this side street and a rather larger road.

I was surprised to find, after we had gone up the stairs, knocked on a cream-coloured painted door which was at length opened, that the friend of my friend was quite old, perhaps seventy, with a rather gloomy face and a distinctly tired, stooping body. Not that he looked unhealthy as he invited us into his very simply-furnished room, which had only an old metal hospital-type bed covered by a brown blanket, an old wooden wardrobe and an undistinguished table, two upright chairs, and one rather old and tattered armchair. He bid us enter, had us sit down, I in the armchair, my friend in one of the upright chairs, while he sat down on his bed.

“Why weren't you in the pub this evening?” my friend asked the man.

“Oh, I don't go down there every night,” he answered.

Some conversation struck up, not of a very inspiring kind about one thing or another, but at one point the man whose room it was spoke about a son of his who had gone to live in Colombia many years before. The man had been married to a woman with whom he had had a son, but the

marriage had long-since been dissolved. His son had gone to live in Medellín in Colombia, and was married to a Colombian woman.

This was not a particularly remarkable fact but it was the only part of the conversation that I later remembered, when about eighteen months after this encounter I went to Medellín myself, as I was offered a six-month temporary professorship at the Universidad Nacional. Several weeks after my arrival, I was sitting in a bar with some of my University colleagues, when by chance we started to talk with a British man who happened to be there on his own. As the evening wore on, he happened to mention that his name was Frank Chapman, and I instantly remembered that this was the name of the son of that man in Hendon that I had met nearly two years earlier. This Frank Chapman had lived some ten years in Medellín with his Colombian wife, and invited me to visit their apartment a couple of days later.

When I went to the apartment, I was introduced to his wife Ligia and to a Colombian man called Martin. I spent quite a pleasant evening with them, and we all exchanged mobile telephone numbers. Some days later Ligia phoned me around midday and asked if I would meet her to talk about something that she wanted to ask my opinion about. So I agreed to meet her in one of Medellín's parks next to a statue. The arrangement was for 8 o'clock in the evening. A little after talking to Ligia, Martin called me and invited me to his apartment that evening. When I told him I was meeting Ligia at 8.00 pm he suggested I come round earlier, about 6.00 pm, which I did. I left his apartment a little before 8 o'clock to meet Ligia in the park that was nearby.

When I met Ligia we sat down on a bench near the bust of an ex-mayor, and she told me what she was worried about. A man she had been doing some business transactions with had cheated her, she explained, and wondered whether I agreed that the best thing to do was to kill the man. I told her I did not think that was the right solution to any problem, and also asked her what her husband Frank thought about the matter.

“Oh, he doesn't know about it! I don't want to tell him, and please don't either,” she exclaimed.

Finally we agree to go to the building in which this cheating man had an apartment, and I promised to try to help straighten things out. After we got there, rang the bell, and the man opened the door for us to enter, the three of us stood in the centre of the main room and started to talk. We had not yet got very far however when Ligia started to speak in a loud, ferocious voice, and raised her fists as if she was going to hit the man (who was called Alberto), so that he retreated backwards in shock towards an open window. When he was right up against the window Ligia charged at him, and in his surprise and fear he backed still further and fell out of the open window. Ligia and I rushed to the open window and looked out: Alberto had fallen a good distance but was evidently still alive, as he was still moving. We ran out of the apartment, down the stairs and into the small patio and garden onto which Alberto had fallen. Alberto had evidently badly hurt his legs and back, and was groaning on the ground. But when I tried to look and see how badly hurt he was, he jumped up and grabbed my left arm while Ligia grabbed my right one. They started to tell me that I was going to have to give them money if I wanted to survive. Very surprisingly I found I was stronger than I or they obviously thought, and with a burst of sudden energy I broke loose from them, dashed to the stone wall surrounding the patio, climbed up it and jumped down on the other side. I ran for a long time, then slowed down, and

once on a busy road got a taxi to the University lodgings where I stayed. Once there, I went into my rooms, locked the door, and sat down to collect again my peace and calm.

A few hours later, perhaps at about one or two in the morning, there was a knocking at the door. The police had arrived, and they arrested me, saying that Frank Chapman was dead and that I must have killed him. I was taken to a police cell and locked up.

I was so dazed and astonished that I was not yet able to be anxious or depressed. Only about six hours later, in the morning, did I start to feel worried, but at that moment the door of my cell was opened and Martin was there, with some policemen, and they explained that I was to be set free, as Martin had stated that I was with him in his apartment at the time that Frank Chapman had died. The latter apparently, must have died between 6.00 pm and 12.00 pm, and Martin had bent the truth a bit by saying I had been with him all that time.

So I was free, thanks to Martin. I went back to my University rooms and spent the rest of my six month stay in Medellín without experiencing any further strange occurrences like the one described. I did not see Martin, Ligia, or Albert again, and did not hear where Frank Chapman was buried. And when I returned to the UK I did not try to make contact with Frank Chapman's father in Hendon.

THOSE STRANGE BEINGS

Those strange beings lived just below a rusty metal bar, from under which they emerged from time to time to look at the blood-red sky in a furious heat filled with ultra-violet rays, or at night to peer through the freezing darkness at the moons and stars. They did not know what they were called, either collectively or as individuals, as they never had to explain to any other beings who they were, whilst between themselves they communicated without words, let alone names, and indeed had no idea what a name was even.

Yet they did not think of themselves as nameless either. Their intelligence was of a kind that did not require such definitions. They were extremely lucky – and of this they knew – that their physical integuments allowed them to live and breathe in such extreme conditions of day and night, though the fact that they could survive through such intense alternations did not at all mean that they did not suffer from them. On the contrary, they suffered dreadfully from their predicament, even though they knew of no other kind of existence and had never experienced anything other than the world they lived in.

But this did not make them sad or angry. On the contrary, they were temperamentally cold and unfeeling towards almost everything else besides their own physical discomfort. When they came up from beneath their rusting metal bar they viewed the scene – in the heat of day or the coldness of night – with a taciturn, insensitive unconcern. What existed, existed. Nothing could be done about it and nothing mattered anyway. In a certain sense they were actually partially dead, if life is defined – though they did not so define it – as something that is responsive to the

entire environment around a living thing. They were not such; their senses only took in information from certain directions, even though in fact they were capable of absorbing and interpreting a great deal more. But they did not.

DEEP THOUGHTS

“Perhaps he won’t,” said Louis.

“Won’t what?” replied Goodrot.

“Won’t kill us after all.”

Goodrot realized suddenly that Louis had been speaking aloud in his dreams, so he turned over in his bed. But he was unable to go back to sleep quite as easily as he would have liked to. Earlier that day, Louis had knocked at the door of his uncle’s house in Leticia, Colombia, and after being admitted to the house that he had not visited for nearly fifteen years, he shook hands with numerous male relatives and kissed on both cheeks an equal number of female relations. He started to think about his cousin, who at the age of seventeen years had been shot dead in a warehouse just outside of town, by whom, and exactly why, no one had ever been able to ascertain with certainty.

After a few more hours, during which Goodrot managed to sleep in a drifting kind of way, rather like a Nukak shaman who flies up to the realm of the moon and stars, then to the underground pools where deer, jaguar, and tapir spirits swim around, coming up to the surface of the earth only to lick salt from the drying-out salty water; and then to the ‘third spirit’ of *nemep*, a realm of darkness where a person is only alive as a shadow, which travels in the ‘world of below’ only in dreams, terrified that his or her soul will be trapped there, for all eternity.

Later, a cousin of Louis, who also was a friend of Goodrot, walked down one of the central streets of Leticia. It had been raining, but although the rain had stopped there was thunder and lightning in the air, which latter flashed down and burst the semi-darkness of dusk, lightening up the strange sky in a weird blue brightness. This cousin, called Pochero, had been sleeping on the floor of a married friend’s house for weeks now, but had not slept well, as every night he was woken up by this friend and his wife’s making noisy love, or else fighting violently and loudly. Pochero was really at the end of his tether, but he did not know what to do, having at his disposal no other place where could stay.

Pochero consoled himself by thinking about literature. He love the poetry of José Asunción Silva, and a Spanish translation he had of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. "Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" he often remembered; how simple, pure, beautiful, and kind were these words of Horatio's, Hamlet's good friend, although actually Horatio did not really understand Hamlet very well at all. "Well, that's life," thought Pochero, and continued walking along Calle 11, glancing at girls from time to time on either side of the street, and looking out for an ice-cream shop that would sell delicious ice-creams at reasonable prices, and for a bar where he could drink a beer, also at an uninflated price.

"No they don't," he found himself saying to himself as he sat down at a table in a modest bar, to which remark his alter-ego responded: "Who don't?"

"Those poor relatives of Goodrot and Louis," answered Pochero within himself, "who really have never meant any great harm to anyone, but have simply found it difficult to remain calm when people lie to them and cheat them. Also, some of them have come to the conclusion that Christianity is a strange religion based on one crucial myth and various legends. The central myth is that Jesus Christ was the Son of God – born to a Virgin, human woman – who was murdered at His Crucifixion. An obsession with this thirty-three year old's horrible death had taken hold of a large proportion of humanity for two thousand years. One could consider Sir James Frazer's theories about human sacrifice as a basic need of humanity, in order to secure the benevolence of its gods or God; one could think about the perennial tendency of human beings to imagine human beings turning into supernatural beings and supernatural beings turning into human beings. Greek myths, not to mention the life of Alexander the Great, were full of such archetypal fantasies, which were later transferred to so-called Christianity.

As for Free Will and Predetermined Destiny: did poor old Judas *choose* to betray Christ if it was preordained that he would do so? He obviously had to do it, as in any case Jesus was determined to die in order to "Save Mankind."

"How little our thoughts, fantasies, and ideas often have to do with the reality of our actual, everyday lives," thought Pochero, as he sipped from his glass of cold beer. And he remembered how a dear old monk had once told about the Essenes, among whom some scholars believe Jesus may have grown up, in a desert community far away from Jerusalem and the religious orthodoxy of mainstream Judaism. There was evidence – this monk told Pochero – that the Essenes had developed ideas of universal love that should transcend the limits of any particular human group. Jesus might have left this community when he was about thirty, and wandered around with his followers – the "Disciples", as well as Mary Magdalene, and others – for three years until Jesus provoked his own Martyrdom by causing a rumpus in the Temple by violently throwing out the money-lenders.

And this theory was rendered more credible, the old monk whom Pochero now suddenly remembered had been known as Tatus, had told him, by the fact that the Gospels speak of the brothers and sisters of Christ, in particular James, which could be well explained if Jesus (later Jesus Christ) had left the community with a large group of other "proto-Christians", some of whom may either have really been brothers or sisters, or companions which were spoken of as brothers and sisters, as might be expected in a group of people dedicated to a new idea, a new

message, an uncompromising creed of universal love and equality, and a conviction in the Divine basis of their faith, which was not meant then to be yet another mere religion to replace other, older religions.

So Pochero took another sip from his glass of beer.

FINDING A COMB

He was walking, trying to find some water to wet his nose with. When he found a tank full of clean, cool water, suddenly a sausage appeared and became stuck to the tip of his nose. So he knelt down in front of the tank of water, and let the sausage touch the water's surface. Then he dipped down, slowly, until the sausage was completely submerged and water just about touched the tip of his nose.

He did not feel like going down any further, as he found that having the water simply touch the end of his nose was extremely refreshing and peaceful. Soon he found that his legs had been strapped to those of an ostrich, so that he was waddling along in a form and speed dictated by this ostrich-character. By now the sausage was no longer attached to his nose any more. After a while he wished to comb his hair, and so he put his hand to the back of his trousers as usual, but found that instead of the usual two pockets on either side there was now simply one pocket, situated in the very middle of the back of his trousers! But he found his comb in this pocket without problems, and used it to straighten out his hair.

It was only hours later, or perhaps years, or even perhaps eons, that he realized a tail was growing out from the base of his spine. What was most extraordinary, was that when he felt this tail growing through his hand ringed like a hose, it was growing extremely fast – indeed shooting, spurting along and out. But he had not noticed that it was growing at all before, so that if this had been going on for a cosmically long time it must mean that his tail was now very long indeed – imagine, perhaps long enough to reach other solar systems, even other galaxies!

DAVID AND JOANNA (A ROMANTIC TALE)

When David walked down the street, he wondered why his life was what it was. He was thirty-nine years old, and this was Streatham, in South London, though he was due to fly the following Tuesday to Iquitos, in Peru, in order to meet his girlfriend, although the status of his relationship with her was far from certain.

He stopped in a hi-fi shop for a while, to buy a connection for his iPod, which he intended to take with him to South America, in order to listen to music varying from Mozart and Wagner, to the Rolling Stones and Cold Play.

Streatham seemed very boring to him, though later, when he found himself stranded and unable to return to Great Britain, he began to feel – perhaps a little nostalgically – that it had not been such a bad place after all. It was part of London surely, with good shops, pubs, restaurants, and a very cosmopolitan society; what more could one desire?

David's girlfriend was Colombian, a very sweet girl that he had met in Bogotá a few years before, and had instantly fallen in love with. She was called Joanna, and had trained for a while as a nurse, though she had not completed her training for various reasons towards which David felt sympathetic, though he did not completely understand them. He himself had studied Architecture, then the History of Art; neither had particularly helped him to find a career, though somehow or other he had wound up as a kind of free-lance journalistic writer on matters of urban development and new buildings.

But it never occurred to him to wonder why *he* had some kind of vague career, while Joanna had none; partly perhaps because he had a slightly left-over macho-chivalric attitude, and partly because he took it for granted that life was generally easier in the "First World" than in the "Third World". He later came to feel this was a grave error of judgement – a generalization completely inappropriate to his own particular case.

It was only when David had spent some four months with Joanna in Iquitos – that superb Amazonian tropical town right in the middle of the jungle – that things began to turn a little more complicated. They had not been living together all the time, as Joanna was staying, when David first arrived in Iquitos, in a wooden contraption of a house close to the river, the home of her uncle, while David stayed in a strange kind of bolt-hole belonging to a friend of a friend, sleeping in a patio amid huge palms, ferns, and cactuses, on a very old worn-out sofa-bed which he had to desert when it rained very hard, and the raindrops trickled down the stems and trunks of the plants and trees.

The problems began, from David's point of view, when Joanna wanted to buy lots of presents to send to her relatives in Colombia; David simply could not afford them, but Joanna did not seem to understand his financial situation. David had a modest income from the rent of a small cottage he owned in Wales; otherwise he usually earned an erratic income from his journalism, which was very variable, and in the months after coming to South America to be with Joanna, had fallen almost to nothing. But Joanna seemed not to understand any of this at all. She seemed to assume that obviously David must have *dinero*, as he was, after all, *inglés*. David tried to explain to her that actually he was no more than an impoverished *writer*, though this did not apparently penetrate into Joanna's mind in the way David intended, and the whole matter was compounded by Joanna's mother, who came to visit them and stayed with the two of them for an apparently interminable time in Iquitos, for whose accommodation, eating, drinking, transport and entertainment David found himself obliged to pay, even though he himself was now sinking into ever-deeper bank overdrafts and debts. David felt he would not have minded so much if Joanna's mother had shown him at least some gratitude; this she did not from his point of view, and he felt evermore aggrieved at the way she spent most of her time just lying horizontally on one another bed or sofa in the apartment whose rent David paid, gossiping on the one hand and complaining about every kind of thing on the other hand, seeming to him to expect that he should both provide for her, as well as in some way be responsible for her difficulties and frustrations; she also had the audacity, his blood raged red with fire when he heard it, to suggest that his presence had made both Joanna's life and hers *actually more difficult* than they had been before!

David came in time to feel grievously sick of all this, and started eventually to sense a deep, visceral rejection of the obligation, anxiety, and sense of inadequacy that this mother-in-law seemed to be imposing upon him, unasked for, and began even to feel a deep physical revulsion towards her, which did not in any way help in his loving relationship with his adored Joanna.

But the most terrible moment arrived when one evening, after David and Joanna had been out dancing in a bar in Iquitos, the two of them fell to foolish arguing. The argument grew evermore furious, With Joanna threatening to denounce David to the *Fiscalia*, such that he would be thrown out of the country while Joanna would be able to claim money from him through the courts. At length Joanna, in a fit of Latin anger and nervousness, telephoned the police and claimed that David was being violent with her. Of course this was not the case, according to David's definition of the word, though it was perfectly true that David was in a state of intense anger, so that when the police arrived, he must have appeared wildly aggressive. He was taken, and pulled into a police van, driven to a police station, and then thrown into a horrible cell – so small, stinking, with no window – where he had to spend his last four days alive. The only thing

with which David was preoccupied in this time was how to kill himself. The solution to this dilemma he discovered in due course, and he managed to perform his suicide quite effectively; though how he did so must be the subject of another story.

AN AUSTRALIAN IN IQUITOS

When Jock Lane arrived in Iquitos he was of an extremely optimistic disposition; it was only after some years that he understandably developed a severe condition of DISILLUSIONMENT. He had come there with about US\$ 100,000, full of ideas of setting up a small business, such as a restaurant or bar in which unusual music would be played. But he had trusted someone who was supposed to be acting as his advisor and consultant, and this man had managed to get control of all Jock Lane's money, so that the latter, at a tragic seventy years of age, was now living in a small rented room, knowing he was unlikely ever to be able to return to Australia, still less ever to own again his own house or apartment, there or anywhere else.

Now Jock Lane remembered his grandmother's words very well, about the need for patience in life, and reminding the young Jock that Rome had not been built in one day. But Jock Lane had sold his modest apartment in a small town near Darwin, in Australia, and had put all his hopes upon building a new life among the palm trees and perfumed smells of the jungle at Iquitos, full in his mind of the exotic wonder of this unique town, with its glorious vistas of red-orange and pink-yellow sunsets lurching and streaking across the skies at dusk when one sat down in a bar among the palm trees on the Malecon to drink a beer at about 5.00 or 6.00pm on any day.

At least, these are the facts about Jock Lane as Mike Leech told them to me; Mike was a Yorkshireman who had lived in Iquitos for a good many years, editing an English-language newspaper called The Iquitos International News Sheet. Mike felt what had happened to Jock Lane was very sad, though he did also feel the whole saga was partly Jock's fault. Mike found parallels between Jock Lane's story and the legend of Yacuruna. "Yacu" in Quechua means water and "runa" means man. According to Mike Leech's version of the myth, Yacuruna lived underwater and had a frog-face, an alligator body and fish feet. He liked to kidnap young girls when they were washing clothes along the river's edge.

Both Yacuruna and Jock Lane had overstretched themselves, Mike felt, though in different ways. Yacuruna caused the girls he grabbed to become pregnant, but in a sense did them a favour as when they told their mothers about their pregnant condition their mothers did not hold their daughters responsible for what had happened. It was not their fault, and after a short period in which their mothers were rather shocked, they soon regained their composure and very much looked forward to their daughters' babies' arrivals.

Jock Lane on the other hand, in a slightly different way, had overstretched himself yet also had helped the man who stole his US \$100,000 to embark on a new career. Mike told me very distinctly one night that he thought the two stories – one real, one an Amazonian legend born from hallucinogenic ayahuasca and the fantastic visions of sunsets and night-skies which shamans, poets, and artists have always been able to experience in the jungle in and around Iquitos – formed together an explanatory schema of understanding that was distinctly and uniquely Iqiteñan. This schema could not have arisen in quite the form it had, anywhere but in Iquitos.

Now it was over the period of a few days during which Mike Leech was telling me the story about Jock Lane on the one hand and the legend of Yacuruna on the other, that terrible things became of me. I was walking back one evening to the house where I was staying, when a girl jumped out from a bar where she was sitting, and standing fully in my path, asked me to join her for a drink. At first I resisted, but after a few minutes of silly conversation with her I began to feel: “Why not? This is Iquitos. Why not just enjoy things a little bit without being too up-tight?”

And so I went to sit down at the girl's table, where she apparently had been alone, and accepted a glass of a jungle liquor called “La Jungla de Diez Raices”, or “The Jungle of Ten Roots”, as the name translates into English.

It seems in retrospect that either the drink was spiked with something weird, or that I was rather tired and simply turned upside down by the powerful potion; at any rate I entered a dizzy, disorientated state for some time, and when I came back to a reasonably normal, sober state, I quickly got up and strode off in the direction of the address where I was staying. Only when I arrived at the door of the house, did I suddenly and shockingly realize that I did not have my arm-bag with me, in which there were nearly all of the most important things that I had with me there in Iquitos. Neither my passport nor much money were in the bag; but, in it was my camera full of photos taken during my travels through the Colombian and Peruvian jungles, and a wonderful book on the archaeology and anthropology of indigenous peoples, as well as a notebook in which I had written some poetry and the first version of a story called “An Australian in Iquitos”, all in the last few days before this misfortune befell me.

The next day, sober but hung-over, and in a grizzly, depressed, and guilty state of mind, I went to the central police station to report my loss, but immediately realized it was completely hopeless, because I was not sure whether my bag had been stolen or if I had simply left it behind in my absent-minded, foolish state. So I quickly rushed off in a motor-taxi – one of those crazy surrealistic dodgem-like three-wheeled car-things that criss-cross and roar through and across the streets of Iquitos, to the bar in which I had evidently left behind or lost my bag; but the waitresses that had been extremely friendly to me the night before, and on other occasions on

which I had visited the bar, wore grim expressions on their faces indeed, and were scarcely prepared even to talk to me about my dilemma, though they did manage to blurt out that it was my fault if I had lost my bag as I was a big man, and that they were only running a business, and were not detectives nor my protectors. Of course I had to agree with them entirely about the latter points, and to a large extent about their first point – though I did manage to retort that the victim of a theft or even a mere misfortune might deserve some pity, and was surely not a criminal. But I had to accept to myself, that if I had simply left my bag behind, and someone had found it and taken it, I could hardly consider that to be a theft, though if the person had been a decent, honest person – as I liked to think I was – he or she would have taken it to the manager of the bar, or to a police station. But could one expect that in Iquitos, or for that matter in London, New York, or Perth?

I nevertheless spoke to a policeman in a Malecon bar one night who assured me that he could find the thief or the person that had found my bag, through his close knowledge of the street-world. I would have to give him some money however. I managed to reduce the amount he demanded of me and gave it to him – the equivalent of about US\$100 – so extreme and desperate was my desire to retrieve my lost things. But although the man did track down the street-delinquent who had somehow ended up with my arm-bag, my things had already been sold or thrown away; and although the adolescent admitted to having had the things in his possession, the policeman just let him free.

I went to a thieves' market at the outskirts of Iquitos to see if I could see, by a fluke of good luck, my camera on sale at a thieves' store. But no such luck; dripping with sweat, exhausted, and sick with myself for my stupidity, I took another wasp (as I had come to think of the buzzing, noisy motor-taxis), and rushed off to Malecon, to talk to someone that Mike Leech called a "goffer", a man who tracked down lost or stolen possessions for a fee.

But my days at that time were badly fated. My motor-taxi hit a large stone with one wheel while another pitched into a pot-hole, and was instantly turned over several times in a ghastly series of bumping somersaults. The poor driver was killed instantly, and I emerged from the wreckage with a broken wrist, hellishly painful bruises on my head and face, and a right thumb from which the nail had somehow been strangely and mysteriously wrenched, leaving it soft and bleeding.

I was pulled out of the wreckage by gog-knows-whom, and found myself in due course in a police hospital. While lying in a dirty bed, with a noisy bedlam going on outside the window which opened out above my bed, I tried to collect my thoughts and suppress sentiments of utter despair and self-hatred. But I did not succeed in achieving this psychological self-transformation; instead I found myself staring at a dilapidated ceiling, trying to convince myself that my life was not necessarily completely over yet; until shortly two policemen came up to my bed, and standing on either side of it as if I might be inclined to make a getaway, they gruffly informed me that I would be charged with various nefarious actions, and that once recovered from my wounds I would be taken to a prison cell.

They also questioned me about the money I had given to one of their colleagues in order to track down my possessions, but I kept my answers vague, and would not discuss how much I had given him.

I tried to think of Shelley's "A Defense Of Poetry", and of the disappearance of the veil of familiarity that obscures from us the wonder and miracle of existence; only to be re-found by Poetry, as the sleeping, naked forms of beauty reappear in nature and in all reality.

ARION AND CELESTIANA

Arion remembered how after they had first met, he and Celestiana had set about looking for a cave to live in, and a nostalgic melancholic emotion came over him whenever he thought of those times – of how much they had been in love with one another, how that had seemed the most important thing not only in their life, but in the whole cosmos. Everything could and would flow out from that glorious and gorgeous truth, there was no longer anything dire to worry about. The warm strength and determination in the way Celestiana had taken note of what other people in the area said about the best cliff-sides in which to look for empty caves, and the way she had made a mental list of the various caves that were at present unoccupied in some of the best cliffs – those that faced the sun at the most comfortable times of the day, and were nearest to running water, and which had the nicest and most convenient shapes and spaces inside – brought imaginary tears to his eyes – he could no longer afford real tears – as he was compelled to recall that Celestiana had really loved him at that time, and had been prepared to put her back fully into making a success of their union, and finding happiness together and in one another, as the central axis and apex of their existence.

Some years later Arion and Celestiana were living in a cave that bordered a river called Pachitero; a cave that lay only a few metres from the bank of the river and only a few metres above the level of the river's flow. This valley was a good long way from the area in which Arion and Celestiana had first met and where they had first lived together, in union – it was at least twenty days walk from there, and involved two trips by raft over long stretches of water. It was better favoured as a place with food provided by animals and plants, as well as cool, clear water, but when Arion reflected on the other place he felt both a sadness of regret and a loving

warmth for it, as the memory allowed him to think about how loving and committed Celestiana had seemed to be then – not that she could not sometimes be exactly thus nowadays as well.

Celestiana would also at times reflect on the period Arion and she had spent in that earlier place – before the strange, aggressive people who wore blue feathers around their heads had arrived – and sometimes she talked of those days with real tears in her eyes, when she and Arion were drinking a fermented maize brew called *chachora* by a fire at night, at the entrance of their cave overlooking the River Pachitero. Sometimes on these occasions they would also talk about those people who wore blue feathers in their hair, and who had driven them out of their earlier homeplace by the River Pachitero. Nevertheless it seemed now like a place that was mythical and blessed in their minds, and sometimes they thought of building a kind of shrine to the memory of that place out of good, strong, big stones which Arion could round out with his flint tools, and then after piling them up according to the scheme suggested by Celestiana, she would put branches of special trees, flowers, fruits, and beautiful strips of woven textile that she had made, over the stone shrine. One day, they would do this they sometimes agreed, and they would call it “The Dream of Paradise”.

ARTHUR'S AUNT

It was on a Thursday afternoon shortly after his arrival in Glasgow that Arthur Cotrage telephoned his aunt. Arthur's aunt was now in her nineties, and had almost completely lost her memory. It had splintered into a thousand fragments, some completely gone, others almost completely disappeared, others that came and went, but also others that were firm and unyielding. So long as one was speaking about things that pertained to that surviving splinter of memory, one was on firm ground, and the conversation could go quite well, even entering levels of subtlety and sophistication. Within this splinter Arthur's aunt could focus on quite complicated issues, if at that moment certain other parts of her mind and brain were functioning reasonably well.

Arthur was going to say, if his aunt answered his call, that he was here in Glasgow, just returned from Peru, probably for a few weeks, after which he would come to Norwich, where his aunt lived, and mentioning this, he would sensitively and cautiously wait and see how she reacted. If she spontaneously and genuinely suggested he stay with her, he would respond favourably and suggest he came for a few days after which they would see how things were going. But if not, if she did not respond with any suggestion that Arthur could stay at her house, or if she spoke of it in other than warm terms, such as if she were to say: “I *suppose* you could stay here” in a whiney, peevish sort of voice, then he would not pursue the point any further.

But none of this happened. The moment his aunt answered the phone it was: “Is that you, George?” “No,” replied Arthur, it's me, *Arthur*.” “Oh, I was expecting George to call,” said

Arthur's aunt. "Where are you," she continued, "in Iceland still?" "No, I'm back in Glasgow now....." Arthur replied. "Oh, Arthur," his aunt quickly broke in. "I want to know if Gladys is still going to marry that man in Iceland, called.....called....." she faded out.

"I didn't know she was ever going to marry a man in Iceland," Arthur said.

"Oh well, perhaps it was India or that other place, Pamanonia..... Paraglossia..... what was it then?"

"Patagonia perhaps?" answered Arthur.

"Oh no, nothing like that – it was on the other side of the world!" said Arthur's aunt.

"Yes, Argentina is on the other side of the Atlantic," interjected Arthur, with a hint of urgency now in his voice.

"Now do be calm George..... er, Arthur.....please..... Remember my age dear boy."

Arthur, who was sixty-one years old, tried calmly now to say:

"Dear Aunt, I'm on a mobile phone, and it's rather expensive, I mean I'm running out of minutes. How are you.....?"

"Oh well, I wish I knew what was happening to George. Have you seen him?"

"I don't know George at all. I've heard about him from you in the past but I've never met him. Aunt..... "

At that moment the phonecall was cut, why it was not clear. Arthur tried to call his aunt's number again, but could not get through. So he went to buy a bottle of whiskey, returned to his room, and started to drink it slowly, meanwhile thinking of his married daughter, who he knew now lived in Norwich, though he had no idea of her address, nor of her married surname.....

TERROR IN THE NIGHT: REDEMPTION LATER?

Although as he descended into the Underground Station down an escalator shrouded in mist he felt he was sinking into the deepest existential and spiritual gloom, at the same time something lifted him up with a strange faith that ultimately he was going to triumph after all. But once down in there, all was so busy in a flurry of fleeting figures and criss-crossing passengers, each one going about his or her own particular business, that the pattern of alienated reified existence drained his emotions of any sense of meaning, purpose, or any hope of individual or collective transcendence.

Yet as he walked towards his designated platform he found he was re-gathering his strength, his orientation; the slightly giddy, weak, frightened feeling was passing away; anxiety was flowering into relief, darkness into light.

He heard around him many voices: “Women! O God, women!” one shouted. Another complained that thousands of immigrants were pouring into the city, all believing they could make good money here, but that it was impossible. There were too many people, here as everywhere else on this overcrowded planet. “But most people are more honest here than in many places abroad,” someone else said.

As soon as he found his correct platform, there was an announcement through the Station's sound system. It said, boomingly:

“All trains from this platform for the rest of this evening are cancelled, due to a person under the train at the next Station. Passengers are recommended to take alternative forms of transport to get home.”

“What?” he thought. “There are no alternative forms of transport for where I've got to go! And what the hell does “person under the train mean”? An accident, a suicide, what in God's name are we supposed to make of it?”

He was furious, but even more worried. He had paid his ticket, and was assuming his return journey would be completed without problems. And yet, when he looked up at the electric notice-board, in flickering yellow lights the times were floating past of trains going to where he was supposed to get to, as if nothing were out of order. So he went out of the platform, up on the ascending escalator, right back to the entrance of the Underground Station, and asked the only attendant at this enormous Station whether he should believe the verbal announcement or the information on the flickering notice-board of lights.

“I really don't know, sir”, answered the attendant, lugubriously and sadly. So the protagonist of our story felt sorry for him, and did not want to make him feel worse. He decided just to go back to his correct platform and see how things unfolded.

He waited for more than ten minutes, until the time had passed when the first train on the electric notice-board of floating lights was supposed to have come and gone. By now a good number of other passengers had gathered on the platform: some Asians, some eastern Europeans, some Latin-looking-and-sounding women, and a “white” man wearing a freaky, crazy kind of hat and obviously listening to an ipod through earphones. He felt reassured: if all this lot were here, surely there must be trains still.

Reassured until he heard a Chinese girl say to her companion:

“If there are no more trains, we'll lose the money on our tickets. If we have to leave this Station, we won't be refunded, and unless we can find a bus or above-ground train to where we're going, we'll have to walk, as we haven't got enough money to pay for a mini-cab.”

“Also we'll be fined if we're still in the Station after the last trains have gone,” retorted her companion.

“Oh God,” thought our protagonist, to whom we may as well give the name Joseph Bleeper, as there is no clear record of what his name really was. “This is a disaster, I feel as if my heart is sinking once again into a new abyss. How much more can I take of endless problems; misfortunes on greater or lesser levels, that can only reinforce either a philosophy of the hopelessness of existence for human beings, or a recognition that I have played my cards wrongly in life, and that I am at last and finally doomed. Nothing I do seems ever able to rescue me from chaos and disorder, redemption after a whole lifetime of mistakes, a giant web of efforts

to attain something transcendent, not merely normal and conforming, something greater than the chugging-along with the ordinary flow, something that might actually help humanity if not in anything as great and grand as redemption, then at least in a contribution to people's perception of beauty – jewels within the darkness – or as a small metaphysical illumination, or at least some kind of criticism of how the world, society, the human mind, human culture, are going, so horribly and destructively, or some little encouragement to whomsoever should chance to read or listen to me or bother a tiny jot about the speck in the space-time universe which I happen to have inhabited and still do occupy.”

DREAMING OF PARADISE

Shortly after he entered what at first he thought was a kind of natural paradise, a palace of beauty constructed out of the colours of the air – blue, white, grey, red, yellow – he came to feel that in fact he had entered a kind of prison, a state of entrapment of the soul, something from which, though not restricted by physical fences or wires, it was impossible to escape. Instead, one merely scooped and dipped around, changing direction like the proverbial headless chicken, one's mind unable to focus, decide upon something, and control one's actions clearly – because there was no good move, since sometimes one thing to reason but another to the heart; at other times another thing conformed to spirit but contradicted practical reality. What had seemed at first like a bold escape into a beautiful dream, now became clear as a collapse into a gutter of lies, hellish anxiety, daily humiliation, and a kind of agony of guilt and inability to redeem his situation.

His complete isolation in this dreadful world into which he had rushed, like a fool into a lion's mouth, of course only made everything a million times more intense, as he could speak to no one who was remotely sympathetic, let alone supportive, of his situation. His

solitariness made him feel mad, yet at the same time he tried mentally to rebel against the accusations of those around him – mere specters and ghouls of dishonesty and lies – that *he* was mad. Their barking attacks and insults, which they pretended were kind, polite approaches, concealed their unending efforts at drawing something out of him – the remaining coins from his pocket (all indebted), his confidence that was ever disintegrating, his being that he felt was ever disappearing.

At length even the beautiful flowers that burned their wonderful flames and colours in this cave of darkness, that at first seemed like kissing the rainbows and plasmas of the skies in happiness, started to look like ugly grimacing masks and nightmarish howling grins, hateful mocking signs that followed the ambush, soul-robbery, and willful destruction of his voluntary spirit. Lost of his capacities to think clearly, act, react, reject injustice in clear forms, reduced to a mouldering, feeble, oscillation between acceptance of abuse on the one hand, and a ranting, frantic, screeching rebellion against it on the other, he knew he was simply dribbling down lower and lower in the rungs of hell, never to escape; even if he could, he knew as time passed that there was no one for him to meet on the outside. He had been too long within, and had lost the vital spark necessary to walk alone in a clear direction, after the distortions he had had to make of his mind, after the disgraces and debasements he had not only had to endure, but had had to justify to his internal, personal world, and even apologize about within himself, to those in his remaining wider imagining mind who condemned and scorned him for his falsity at entering this cave of disaster at all.

ETERNITY AND TIME

Someone was dreaming like a surrealist poet, creating worlds that perished, again and again, in dreadful dissolutions. At the end of every cycle, there was a terrible time, when every single atom dissolved into the primal, pure waters of eternity, from whence all had originally arisen. Everything then went back into the fathomless, wild infinity of the ocean, which is covered with utter darkness and is empty of every sign of animate being. Who could count the universes that had passed away, or the creations that had risen again and again from the formless abysses of the vast waters? Who could number the passing ages of the world, as they followed each other endlessly? Who would search through the wide infinities of space to count the universes side by side?

It is not known who this dreamer was, but it could be anyone. No-one who had dreamt this dream could possibly imagine that no-one else could dream it too, whilst anyone who had never dreamt it could not imagine that anyone else might dream it either. Thus is the nature of Individuality, and the assumptions that individuals have about other individuals. This is the

nature of dream, that if one individual dreams a dream, he will think thus about others dreaming it, whilst if an individual never dreams a dream he will assume no other individual possibly could.

When this person who was dreaming like a surrealist poet woke up, she had forgotten the dream, but when he fell asleep again, she dreamt the same dream all over again. The countless universes welled up from the darkness of the infinite ocean, in an endless sequence of fathomless, infinite dreams; side by side the beautiful worlds and their terrible destructions lay in his wondrous dream, which was repeated every time she fell asleep, no matter how long he had been awake beforehand. The endless cycle could never stop, no matter how many times he did or did not sleep and dream again.

THE OLD COUPLE IN LANARKSHIRE

There was an old couple who lived in an old stone cottage in the countryside of Lanarkshire. Often it was raining, and on one particularly pelting day, the sky covered in grey-white clouds, windy and at times almost howling, the couple needed to bring in two things from outside the cottage into their house. They needed some coal to put on the fire to keep warm and to cook their supper, and they needed the two pint bottles of milk that had stood at their stone gateway since early in the morning when the milkman had put them there.

The old woman suggested that her husband go out to the coal-shed with the metal poke and fill it with coal. The old man agreed, and similarly suggested his wife tip-toed out to pick up the two pints of milk from their gate.

So they both went out, first the old man and then the old woman, the first in his dungarees and the second in her old, rather tattered, long dress, into the windy, rainy, dark late Lanarkshire afternoon.

It was surprising how beautiful it was outside, in spite of the weather, and the two commented one to another on this fact, having both previously thought it would be something of an ordeal to go outside into the rain and wind, and enclosing darkness after having spent all day inside taking refuge, though they had known they would eventually have to get some coal and bring in the milk. The clouds had a definite, dreadful, awesome beauty to them, like something out of a revelatory, or apocalyptic, or Heathcliff-like vision.

The pelting rain was bracing, and seemed more refreshing surprisingly, than it was horrible, perhaps because both the old woman and the old man had somewhat dreaded going out into it.

The old man filled the poke with furnacite, while the old lady picked up the two bottles of milk, looking at the two silver tops to them, in order to check that birds had not pierced them during the day.

Both having accomplished their missions, they turned around, and walked, very wet, back towards the door of their grey stone cottage. As they glanced at one another, something very strange happened. The old woman saw her husband's nose break up, disintegrate, while some kind of nose-snot flew out of it towards her, but did not hit her, flying past her merely, in a most curious, disturbing way. Almost immediately, something equally peculiar happened to her right ear-lobe; it detached itself from the rest of her ear and flew up high into the rainy, cloudy, darkening sky then sank back downwards, nearly hitting her husband's shoulder; though it missed it, and landed on top of a stone in a muddy puddle right next to where he stood.

Both of them opened their mouths as if they were about to shriek; but they did not; each retained their self-control, and continued back to the door of their cottage, and entered it. They then shut the door, and whether they discussed the distressing matter of what had occurred outside is impossible to know, as there was no-one inside the cottage to witness what occurred.

TWO STOLEN CHICKENS

It was deep in the countryside of Santander that the happenings here narrated occurred. There in the beautiful *Cordillera Oriente*, near the small market town of Lebrija, a young couple of Burmangese origins had a moderate-sized *finca*, in which they had a number of ducks, chickens, turkeys, and guinea-fowl.

One day they decided to leave their chickens with the neighbouring *campesinos* in the next *finca* to theirs, while they went away for a few days to Bucaramanga. Two days later when they telephoned Doña Nelly of the neighbouring *finca*, they learnt that two of the chickens had been passed on to the couple who lived on another *finca*, called Don Juan and Doña Hilda.

Juan and Hilda managed a quite large *finca* on a steep slope of a glorious mountain, overlooking stupendous views of the valleys and hills around it, basked in multi-coloured sunrises and sunsets, blessed by fantastic colours of the sun by day, and cosseted by nocturnal blue-black wonder at night, sparkled and sprinkled with stars and the moving moon, in and out of occasional clouds, where hordes of marvelous moths and butterflies fluttered their way toward any night-light or candle, so many species that seemed gowned in stupendous velvet or silk wings, minutely beautiful in such an intensity that each one deserved the attention of a night-watcher for hours and hours, in order to soak in the miraculous details even spiritually and aesthetically, let alone with a rational, scientific eye. And so, Señora Nidia called Doña Hilda to ask how the two chickens were getting on. Hilda told Nidia that the two chickens had been delivered to her in a bag used normally to collect mandarines, cacao, or yucca, and that when she had opened the bag, the two wretched chickens had run away, escaped, and shortly flown away completely.

And so, that meant that the young couple had lost the two chickens, for which they were much disappointed; but also they were more than a little bit suspicious lest the story were wholly true. After all, *campesinos* could surely chase after an escaping chicken and capture it; and not often will a chicken fly far away without returning to where it flew from, in order to eat and sleep with other chickens and domesticated birds.

Doña Hilda suggested on her mobile telephone that perhaps the two chickens had flown into the grounds of yet another *finca*, that of Don Martin and his newly wedded wife, whose house was perched on the superbly beautiful edge of a rambling hill, deep in shrubs and woods, though other parts of their *finca* were cleared, with cows lowing and wandering around, and some pigs congregated in wooden shacks. Eagles, swifts, and vultures circled around in the sublimely blue air in the day, whilst at night the sounds of frogs and cicadas and other insects filled the air of various perfumes from trees and flowers, with an orchestral night-symphony of intense musical sophistication, whose composer was simply “Colombian Nature”.

It was then that Doña Nidia thought of phoning Don Martin to ask whether he or his new wife had seen the two chickens yet; the latter averred that he had not, but would look out for them. But very strangely, about two hours later, Doña Nelly phoned Doña Nidia on her mobile phone to say she had just visited Don Martin’s *finca* and had seen the very two chickens about which the whole fuss was about.

Doña Nidia and her husband began to suspect foul play. Something was not clear, nor honest. But they decided to leave the whole issue alone, loving the green slopes and wooded coverings of the mountain-slopes, and the ever-changing light around the valleys and hills; purple, green, grey, orange, yellow, sun-light and pure; and did nothing more, until when they returned to their *finca* some weeks later, they were amazed to find the two disappeared chickens happily hopping around and pecking the ground in their *finca*, once again.

COLOMBIAN NOVELS AND NOVELISTS

I dreamt one night about a Colombian novelist who had written a novel about a village in the 1950s, during a period of oppressive rule in Colombian history. There was a carpenter, a sacristan, and a campesino: they were the main characters, as well as the wife of a shop-keeper, and a female labourer called Marcia – who worked on the hacienda of Don Julio, and eventually married and had children, but ended up alone again, working on Don Julio's land, until she became a bit old and weak, but Don Julio allowed her to live on in a small house on his land, in which she seemed to be fairly happy, until she died at length, with only an old black Bible and a broken radio among her possessions. But she was not entirely ignored by others; the nephews of

a family that she had long known, frequently came to visit her, and to these she told some extraordinary stories.

One story was about her grandfather, a man who had chopped down a good deal of forest to create a farm; he had worked very hard, had married a woman called Maria, and had planted *aguacate* and *yucca* on his land. His grandchildren loved him very much, which is an indication of his success as a human being in his temporary span upon this earth. And he had a machete with a very fine sheath in which it was put when not in use. This was of leather, in places brightly coloured, and very beautiful.

But a grandson of this Colombian novelist was not convinced about Marcia's true existence. He felt that Marcia had never lived, rather as someone might conclude that Saint Mark or Saint Luke were not real people. After all, what was the evidence of her having lived? It was all too flimsy – and though people might like to believe in Marcia, this was probably because she fulfilled some kind of sentimental or visionary desire of theirs.

But as far as the novelist himself was concerned – his name was Marcos Palo Prabo – Marcia was utterly real, and he remembered her; but even more real for him, was his own actual brother, named Juan Manuel Gonzalez, whom he greatly admired, although the latter had never written anything like a novel. However, Juan Manuel did tell a lot of stories, though nobody could discern which were true or which were fantasy. One such story was about another Colombian novelist, born in Libano, Tolima, who ended up living in the jungle town of Leticia. There he wrote three novels: one was about an Italian priest who had come in the nineteenth century as a missionary among the Huitoto and the Tikuna. This priest, called Antonio Bolubia, recorded some remarkable myths and legends told him by indigenous natives with whom he had struck up a genuine kind of honest relationship. One was the story of how the Indians of one beautiful, peaceful, wonderful place on the banks of the Amazon had originated from a crocodile (or caiman, as they are better called in South America). This caiman had swum up and down the River Amazon for an eternally long time, and without knowing it, had gathered a huge number of flies on its head and around its mouth; these fed on left-over bits and pieces of the caiman's meals, especially those stuck in the gaps between his huge teeth, but only when the caiman (whose name was Paicatu) dived down into the water, were the flies forced to flee from Paicatu's mouth and head. These escaping flies became the first human beings, and the original community of the ethnic group whose myth this was.

However, a relative of Antonio Bolubia never went to the New World at all. His name was Giorgio Bolubia, and he studied theology at a seminary in Napoli for a long time, though he never became an ordained priest. Instead he became a cheese-monger – quite a successful one over time, and sent cheeses to Nueva Granada (Colombia) from Cadiz, which were much delighted upon by the more affluent citizens of Bogotá, even though others, like Juan Manuel Gonzalez's friend Alejandro Poveda, believed that Nueva Granadian (Colombian) cheese was quite as good as, if not better than, that from Spain. This was part of the irritation that led people like Alejandro Poveda to wish for the complete independence of Colombia from Imperial Spain.

Later on, I had an unexpected dream that a cousin of Marcus Palo Prabo had lived for many years in a London suburb; this surprised me very much, for why should he have preferred

London's rainy weather and London's dreariness to the bright sun and colourful women of Santander, with their lovely brown eyes and pleasantly-shaped lips? Apparently he had preferred the greater cosmopolitanism of London, and the relative lack of interference from neighbours, to the more traditional, warm, but sometimes suffocating family culture of Santander in Colombia. I could respect this, though I must admit that I was surprised; I had struggled to escape in exactly the opposite direction, from England, though after some years in Colombia, far away from Great Britain, I had begun to see some characteristics of life in the latter that I preferred to those of the former, though in general I never deeply regretted the shift from windy, cold, rainy Britain, to sunny Colombia with its lovely, smiling girls.

A FLY AND A WORM

It was a strange fact that when Madame Lafoucrière went to a market near Lyons one day she heard that a nearby neighbour had turned into a fly. Well, he was not entirely turned into a fly; actually his head had become that of a fly, whilst his own real, human head had shrunk to the size of a normal fly, and was screaming for attention in the garden, buzzing from branch to branch, squeaking: "Help me, Help me!"

This was in accord with a horrific short story called “The Fly”, that was also turned into a film or two. But this time it was real; Madame Lafoucrière’s neighbour really had lost his head to a fly, while his own body now had the fly’s wretched head instead of its own.

The question that remained after this transformation was: which was the being with intelligence? The huge human body with a foul and terrifying head (and presumably only the brain of a fly, albeit enlarged), or the tiny fly with a truly human, but miniscule head, replete with all the characteristics of a human brain, although now so tiny?

The small part – the fly with the human head, flew off into a gold and silver-smith’s workshop, and watched while the Russian master Mikhail Vassiliev was perfecting, in Moscow, a most extraordinary and beautiful seventeenth-century jewel-studded cover to a Bible; and he watched, unnoticed, from a window-sill the progress of Mikhail Vassiliev’s work with a tinily-proportioned human mind, though mostly he was simply a buzzing, small fly, more driven by electrical, nervously connected instincts than any kind of thought – that which is called by humans *intelligence*, who perhaps rather arrogantly think they are the only organisms in the universe who have consciousness, though no human being has so far managed to define clearly of what this consciousness consists, either from a scientific, or philosophical, or theological point of view.

Very surprisingly, the small part of the fly with the human head tried to watch the sunset after considering the work of Mikhail Vassiliev; whether he could *enjoy* this sunset – the streaking colours of the dying, slain sun that evoke profound and even desperate emotions among some human beings (not always, but on certain occasions) is open to debate of course, for his compound eyes in the past were unlikely to have recognized the subtleties of the dusk, and such a tiny head, even if now human, would hardly be able to apprehend the dusk like a normal-sized human one, but it would have been able to receive more of the light experience than would, for example, a simple earthworm, which can only discriminate between general lightness and general darkness through the receptors in its skin – and obviously cannot even *begin* to see the things that humans (or even flies) can observe.

But this should not be regarded as a disadvantage for the simple earthworm. It would be worth remembering these lines of Shelley in his poem *Epipsychidion*:

“The spirit of the worm beneath the sod
In love and worship, blends itself with God.”

THE INTERVIEW

It was terrifying to climb down the stairs and find that all the people there had completely changed. When I went up the stairs about an hour earlier the people I left behind, although I did not personally know them, seemed a polite, pleasant bunch, smiling and friendly, and making one feel welcome and at ease.

But when I returned down the stairs after the interview, the people seemed taciturn and slightly hostile, or at least, cold and bored at the sight of me. (Not that they could have had the faintest idea of who I was, nor why I was there, nor what had happened to me after I climbed the stairs.)

I was not sure whether they were all the same people, or whether some of them had changed, as happens in a waiting-room for doctors, dentists, bureaucrats or solicitors. I recognized a middle-aged man from earlier, with grey hair and brown sandals, and also a woman who had been obliged to leave her dog outside (quite rightly I thought), tied up to a post in the street. Her face looked most perturbed, as it had indeed already seemed before – but now it had a really rather nasty, unkind hue.

I had not properly understood from the outset why I had been called to this interview: if it was to inform me of something, why could they not have telephoned me or sent me an email? If it was to find something out from me, why could they not have invited me to meet them over a cup of coffee or a drink, pleasantly to discuss things together? When I arrived at the top of the stairs, I saw nowhere to sit, no-one to ask what I should do or where I should wait, and this made me feel nervous, tired, and a little annoyed. Was I so unimportant as this? Could no-one at least receive me or tell me what I was supposed to do? But I stiffened myself, forced myself to calm down, and walked into one office after another until I met someone – at last a secretary – and asked her if I might sit down and wait in her office.

The lady agreed, politely but not at all in a friendly way, and I wondered whether I should simply go away. But I resisted that internal suggestion, took out a book (about Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on Latin American writers and academic thinkers), and started to read it again.

Hardly had I started to concentrate and fly away from the reality that I found rather unpleasant – thinking about Nietzsche and the overcoming of metaphysics, his notions of subjectivity, his conception of art as a necessary transcendence and defeat of the unsatisfactory and mediocre nature of life – though life should always nevertheless be affirmed – and how thinkers in Latin America had taken on Nietzsche's extraordinary ideas in very particular ways, distinct from their counterparts in Europe and North America, and indeed elsewhere in the world: as in all spheres Latin America has been saturated with European power, ideas, art, and “being” from the first moment of the Iberian Conquests, though always inventing something different in a dialectical, imaginative process (consider in particular José Asunción Silva) – when a rather dowdy lady walked into the office where I was sitting and reading and ordered me into her room across the corridor.

When the interview was over, I walked out of her office, in something of a daze, and climbed back down the stairs. Whether the change I thought I beheld among the people there was actually what I imagined it to be, or whether I was imposing my subjective state upon the situation, I

don't know for sure; that is, whether as for Hamlet there is nothing in this world that does not seem either Heaven or Hell, but for the perceiving mind, or whether as for Jim Morrison, when you're strange, women seem wicked – it is difficult to say for certain; but anyway I headed out from this place into the street, and walked away as fast as I could. It had been weird in there.

I came after a while to a stall where I drank a glass of juice. There I thought of Bob Dylan's song *Joanna*, visions of whom kept him up way past the dawn, and began to feel something similar although it was not yet quite dawn, rather something like the early hours of the morning, in between midnight and dawn. I thought of Louise, and the things she always says, and began to think perhaps I should now sleep. But where? At home of course! So I got a taxi, though I was not sure if I had enough money to pay for the journey (frankly I did not even think about that, I just waved one down). Fortunately I did have just enough to pay the driver with a few coins and bits and pieces, so I got out and then unlocked Fort Knox in order to enter my house.

I lay down upon my bed and thought about the interview. The whole memory made me sick, and I wished I had never gone to it in the first place. But I had, and so it sank into my dreams when I fell asleep.

My first dream seemed to be a kind of mix-up of a yearning for a girl that I did not recognize from normal waking life – a shapely slender beauty that looked at me with a beautiful red-lipped mouth and a kind of sweetening and speaking face of eyes and nose (very attractive) and ears. I felt such a desire to penetrate her, but did not quite realize where; I suddenly woke up and found I was quite alone. All was illusion! Where was she, who was she? Just the product of my unconscious imagination when asleep!

That dream melted away (in retrospect), once my erotic, penetrating motions had died down, my having realized it was all mad and not real. The girl did not exist, although I felt not merely extreme desire but deep, sad, wonderful love for her!

Then my dreams moved, like those of Dante Alighieri, into other truths: I remembered the interview earlier and felt such disgust for all involved, including myself, that I punished all of us in a lake of boiling oil, our bodies burning in agony whilst our voices screeched in eternal misery, at times wearying but never terminating; rather, continuously regenerating their ghastly sounds of endless suffering.

I saw Dante's extraordinary hat, that symbolized for me his amazing poetic mind (though perhaps he never wore such a thing – it being part of an apocryphal-legendary after-image. There are no real portraits of Dante.) And I realized how much I loved Dante, like Shelley, for reasons quite beyond easy expression. Ah, only poetry can express the truth of poetry!

Anyway, to return to the interview. Fortunately by now I had forgotten the details of it; I had no gorgeous woman in my bed, as I would have liked (if there was one there, she was not very kind nor responsive when I tried to touch her). And so, I fell asleep again, though my following dreams were even more extraordinary.

I thought I had arrived on another planet, somewhere in our solar system, but perhaps not. Perhaps it was a planet or moon in another sun-system, even in a different galaxy. Here, I found all emotions were different; when I was sad, the sadness was much deeper than on earth, but clearer; when I felt cheerful I found I did not fear death and did not feel anxiety nor anguish about the things that caused these emotions on earth. I felt I could be happy and honest generally, and explain myself very simply to anyone who might wish to hear what I had to say. Sometimes of course I might be terribly sad, but if the spectrum of emotions were understood, and if it was clearly understood and accepted that we are all moving in a steady drift from our births unto our deaths, then we could be sort of Siddhartha-like, calmly watching the river flow, and stop getting all wound up about nothing.

And so I began to see the horrible interview in a new perspective. Of course, if I had been younger, facing the open and unknown demands of THE FUTURE, I could not have afforded the luxury of thinking this way about the interview; but I was no longer very young (though not very old either – I had it in mind to live a bit longer thank you – and narrate this account of my interview!)

The interview melted into pure Mozartian music in the celestial spheres, and so I could sleep quietly at last, in a beautiful state, for many hours.

THE TALE OF OTTO THE BIG

Otto the Big had an enormous head, and wanted to conquer the world, or at least, as much of it as he could. He made deals with Popes, even resisted the Huns and the Mongols for a long time, but at last fell foul of his Destiny.

He ended up in a Baltic prison, eating only oats, but drinking vodka, until at last the Duke that held him, offered him an alternative to this terrible fate.

“Will you consent to my taking over your lands?” demanded the Duke.

“No, not unless you allow me to marry your daughter!” shouted Otto the Big.

But the Duke would not agree unless Otto the Big took off his clothes, and nakedly, did penance and begged for his forgiveness.

“I agree!” screeched Otto, “but to whom must I beg my forgiveness? You are even worse than me, you evil Duke, and I will not pay homage to you.”

“No one is perfect,” replied the Duke. “The point is, my friend, that I have more power than you at this particular moment, and unless you want to die, you have to bend your knee to me.”

“Soon the wheels of Fortune will turn, and you will be beneath my feet, your mouth plugged, your head strapped, your ugly feet stretched out beyond this window, so that if I hate to hear one more foul word from your expanding mouth, I will only need to kick your head upwards to make you fall outside the castle walls onto the stone ramparts where your brains will be dashed and smashed until tomorrow my many serfs will clean up the mess, and no one will know what happened to you.”

“So may it be,” replied the Duke, “but when that moment comes, you will bleed, not red blood, but yellow pus, and will enter the history books uglily.”

So they temporarily made up their differences, Otto and the Duke, and drank a little wine, until they were both asleep, when they were both killed by MacBeth`s men, with sharp knives.

Actually, a little later things changed. Although Otto and the Duke were firmly dead, yet certain aspects from their mutual agreements survived. Especially important for the future, was that Otto had promised that for every ear of barley grown on his estates he would drink at least ten drops of ale, while the Duke promised that every lovely young maiden that he fancied on his estates he would present visually to Otto or his descendants.

Wonderful churches were built in honour of these two great men; the towers of each seemed to reach the stars, in honour and love and the deepest respect of and for Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

THREE PIECES IN HIS DREAM

In his dream there seemed to be three pieces; the first very colourful, and breaking into three – blue, yellow, and red. The next was totally grey, at least for a while, until it began to split into different hues of sleeping black, beige, and a kind of dirty light, white colour. The third had no colour at all; although he realized – even in his dream – that it was impossible to see anything if it had no colour whatsoever! And so, with time he came to understand that he would have to choose for himself what word to give to the “colour” he perceived, or did not perceive, in the block square with which he was confronted in front of his internal eye in his dream. He decided – after some moments’ deliberation – to call it “drog”, or “dragnet”, or even perhaps “droogniten”, but in the end he settled on “drog”, though shortly he changed his decision to “dranget”.

It was a big decision; he could hear the explosion that this decision caused in his internal ears, and half regretted it, but at the same time he welcomed it. After all, a decision is a decision, and without decisions at times, there is no history at all.

WHO CAN KNOW?

Who can ever know the value of the outcome of their activities in life? One might try to achieve distinct ends, like medieval kings, to conquer territories for their imagined dynasties; or one might be a lazy bastard, horizontal as a stiff, doing as little as possible, and living off the state. One might try to beat Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sydney, and Christopher Marlowe, as William Shakespeare assuredly did; and then die, without clear heirs, and without any clear news about himself for all astonished future peoples (unlike even Plato, or Aristotle, - let alone Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart who managed at least to leave behind him a large number of letters).

Ah, but Mozart! Who knows what he meant with his soft, sweet, gentle letters! Sometimes of course they were strong, occasionally fierce, but generally, I think Hildesheimer is correct in supposing that Mozart did not expose much about himself, even in his letters to his father or his wife: he was responding to need (and love), but his being was utterly transcendent to what he wrote down in these letters – the latter often opportunistic and wishing to please the interlocutor. We will never know him, as Hildesheimer demonstrates, very strongly.

Ah, sweet wonderful Mozart! How could anyone give of his soul, his heart, his blood, as Amadeus did! I once wrote a short soliloquy, imagining I was at Mozart's deathbed; but I think I lost it somehow, like so much else, though later I read that Pushkin had written an extremely short play about Mozart, which entered (via Peter Shaffer) into the arena of modern Hollywood (and I must confess I was deeply affected by that film).

It is quite impossible to encompass Mozart, though this is of course a terrible cliché. I am now getting to be twice as old as he was when he died. *Ay, por favor!*

Mozart seems to have been, as a personality, a rather generous young man, also a little irritable, and critical sometimes of certain others – but none of this matters very much in comparison with that greatest output of the human spirit yet recorded by any individual human being, in my

humble opinion. Why did he annoy so many people in his short lifetime? I think, because he was fast, abrupt, sharp, quick-witted; not because he was particularly ideologically orientated. There is also of course the “genius persecuted by mediocrity” aspect, which is central to the film “Amadeus”, and what *The Mozart Companion* called “the irritation of contemporaries at the difficulty and emotional intensity of Mozart’s music”.

I think he was influenced by, and indeed part of, the ideas and events of the French Revolution, but I do not believe he was an ideologue (and there is no evidence of this in spite of the opinions of certain historians of music). He certainly did not like the enforced inequality of the status quo of his time – the letter to his father in which he explains why he, like other ordinary men, must marry for love, not for money or status, as the aristocrats did, could not be a better expression of something essential about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. So is that other famous letter in which he describes the position he must sit to eat at the table of some Prince or other, above or below the cook or the ostler, I remember not the details.

But he was not, I don’t think, a revolutionary - he was, as best he could be, a survivor. His capacity for judgement was perhaps too profound to be grabbed by short-term enthusiasms. But he died so soon – was this due simply to Nature, or was it some kind of cosmic or supernatural design – the World-Spirit knowing it had achieved all it could through this greatest of all great geniuses; knowing therefore, that Wolfgang must now die, at the age of 35, having achieved all he could achieve, in one fast but enormous arc, now complete, in the greatest perfection of beauty and truth ever yet accumulated into one person’s corpus of sound and thought?

It is of course quite impossible to answer this question; in fact, is it a question at all? At times one looks around the increasing masses of people in the world, and wonders, where would Mozart have been here, and how did he survive even such a short time in the Salzburg and Vienna of his time, anyway?

But, as I was saying, I looked out of my window just as I was listening to the Overture to Don Giovanni, and wondered, as I had done so many times before, how anyone could have imagined, let alone written down, such music.

SPIRIT OF THE ROCKS, ANIMALS, AND DREAMS

Someone was amused by the trickling down of a liquid from high up on a cliff, down to a little pool where some frogs bathed, in the sun, though after dusk they croaked, sometimes as if in an orchestra, at other times as soloists, like Tubby the Tuba, the hero of a story narrated a long time ago by Danny Kaye.

But this character, Joopah by name, changed his tune when an enormously pelting rainstorm made derelict and full of despair a certain community in the tropical countryside of South America. Actually it was not so unusual, this onslaught of rain – the peasants here were quite used to it, but on this occasion they felt it was a particular act of punishment from their Lord, due to the fact that they had not buried a particular man quickly enough, who had died rather suddenly and left the community somewhat frightened.

When a priest arrived from the nearest small town, he assured the villagers that they had no reason to fear God's wrath; now, simply they should bury the dead man, offer up prayers to God, the Virgen, and the Lord, for the celestial peace of the man's soul in heaven, and then he would rest in a glorious peace because the Lord would ensure that the dead man would now feel a very kind sense of jovial and happy well-being, as had Jesus Christ himself after the suffering of his Crucifixion, two thousand years before.

But actually, there was a Spirit in the rocks, called Jorupape, who leapt about among the waters as they flew and jumped, the water springing and bouncing and reflecting or refracting the lights from the sun in the day, or from the moon and stars at night, boomeranging about in a crazy, mystical, and extraordinary way.

But all – or nearly everyone in the community came to accept the priest’s point of view. However some were not entirely convinced; there was one elderly lady called Parieta who very much doubted the judgement of the priest – whose name was Padre Lobo – and said on many occasions that Padre Lobo had had babies with several women in the indigenous community.

But not too much was made of this: generally the anxiety about the unburied man died down, and people considered – if indeed they thought about it any more at all – that the Padre had been right.

Doubts among them began to grow again when in an *ayahuasca* session – drinking the sacred vine of the forest, the stars brought down to earth by the ancient shamans of their community long ago – all the people present saw the man who had been buried too long after his death according to the community’s tradition - as they heard and sang the sacred music and words of the community; that unity of word and sound, poetry and music after which Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche yearned, in the nineteenth century when few others really thought much about these things – except for the native Indians themselves of course, who had never forgotten about them, living simply from generation to generation, loving and admiring their parents and their children, continuing in a sense of flowing purpose and total miracle, which only became smashed with the ugly influence of that wider thing, called “Civilization”.

But those who survived, were evermore kind and gentle, strangely; perhaps because they knew they could not defeat the outsiders by force any longer – even though their bows and arrows could inflict a considerable penalty upon infiltrators into their territory. Yet, in general, their “emotional intelligence” told them it was better to make friends with intruders, so long as they were friendly; and gang up with those who seemed really sympathetic to them – anthropologists in particular – so as to aggressively resist those who wanted to invade their lands, turn them into servants, open up their earth for oil and minerals, and kill them when it seemed to them necessary (many were anyway dying from infections that came from these invaders, against which they had no antibodies).

One day, the shaman of this community was relaxing in his hammock, having worked very hard in his *chakra* (field), near his house, all morning. As he gazed up to the sky, he remembered the shamanistic flight he had taken the night before: “A yaha, ho-he, a yaha, ho-ha”, he had chanted, drawing in the Mother of Ayahuasca, the Spirit of the Supernatural, in which with the orchestral choir of the jungle all around - of frogs, insects, and birds, and others in the human community who were in this intense and lovely grouping – he helped all to enter the other side of reality – forgotten by “Civilization”, except in the idea of “dreams” (which is better than nothing) and respected as such by Sigmund Freud and the Surrealists;- and he felt well, deep inside; a sense of deep responsibility fulfilled, for his group, although he realized there were many problems, weird and terrible encroachments into his community and family. Nevertheless he felt he had done his duty, done what he could for his indigenous community that many now simply regarded as “peasants”, as by now so many of the traditional customs and costumes of the community had been abandoned – wishing into it all the strength of his visions and mental forces, for their benefit, trying to fight off bad nightmares and bad influences, whether totally human, or social, or animal, or of weather, and accepting at the same time, like a Taoist hermit, that what is, is the Tao, and all must flow with it, and yet also at the same time resist Evil.

And thus fell Chorro, the grand *curandero* of the Yaminahua, into a deep, rich sleep.

VOLUME THREE

GUDRANO'S ADVENTURE

When Gudrano went to the new city, he was full of optimism, and he loved the beautiful lights that shone like swans all over the central square, with its wonderful ancient buildings from past civilizations, so difficult to distinguish in style for someone who was not an expert. For one thing, throughout the history of this city – which had lasted for several thousands of years – great efforts had been made by successive rulers and architects to maintain a continuity of spirit, although for someone who knew this, the transitions and sutures from one phase to another could easily be discerned. Gudrano thought that if he were to stay long enough in this city, he would learn the sophistications in its history and architecture, and might become quite knowledgeable about it all.

But he did not stay long enough, because even on the first night in which he was admiring the city's beauty, something terrible befell him. He was walking across the central square when three ghoulish women accosted him, saying:

“Now is the time of gender equality, do you agree?”

“Yes of course,” answered Gudrano.

“In that case give us your money, for we, as women, are disadvantaged in comparison with you, as a man!”

“But how do I know that?” answered Gudrano.

“Don’t you understand the discrimination and prejudices that we, as women, have always had to face?” they retorted.

“Well it depends on your particular circumstances, and I am certainly not a wealthy man!” Gudrano said emphatically.

“But you have to compensate for centuries of women’s oppression,” bawled out the three women.

Only a few centuries?” replied Gudrano. “I thought there had always been oppression of women in some way or other.”

“Just give us your money, you clever cock, or we shall assault you,” they yelled.

“Well, if you do that I shall shout until the Police come!” spake Gudrano.

“The Police are on our side, don’t you know that, you creep?”

“But some of them might not agree that I should be mugged by you hags, as I stroll across the square!”

“Try it then”, bellowed the women, but Gudrano’s voice was not loud enough for his reply to be heard very far away, now so late into the night.

At this point things changed, and Gudrano found he was plodding across a kind of moon landscape, crunching soft dust that was so dry it must have been desiccating for centuries, if not millennia, if not for millions of years - so evenly soft and in miniscule particles that probably it had all resulted from rocks broken up and burnt for millions, if not billions, of years that had turned it into such even, flowing powder, so that it was almost like liquid.

“Thank god no one is here,” thought Gudrano, “especially not those three harridans,” although he realized that soon he would feel lonely, and regret not being in the beautiful city into which he had entered, and from which he had been so suddenly and extraordinarily transported.

After a while he sat down, and enjoyed letting the powdery sand fall between his fingers, so pure and gentle, and he thought for a moment, that he preferred this to the ever-variegated earth’s soil, though he also realized that without rain or any water – which in this planet or wherever he was, obviously did not exist, there could be no life, of plants or animals, and he would soon become extremely thirsty – although at this moment he did not feel a desire to eat or drink. Rather he enjoyed the flowing, crunching ash-dust-powder under his feet, or around his hands whenever he chose to pick some of it up.

Looking upwards, he saw an enormous orb that seemed like a sun – yellow, blue, orange and red, that moved very quickly through the sky (“this moon or planet where I am must revolve very quickly”, he thought), that was black between beautiful stars, crisply twinkling, shining, occasionally shooting around, iridescent and sparkling, as in a fantasy of a Tchaikovsky ballet.

“Why did I come to be here?” thought Gudrano, though he knew it was a stupid question he was asking himself, for he had long recognized that Science only explains the “How” of the Universe, not the “Why”, nor the “For What Purpose”.

And so he tried to relax, and breathe deeply, amazed as he was that there was air to breathe, rather more pure than in the central square of the beautiful city across which he had been wandering not very long before, although that was soon beginning to feel a long time ago, although he knew he had not slept since then, and so surely, unless he had changed enormously, it could not be a very long time ago.

“I wonder if the whole of this planet, or moon, or whatever this place is, is the same,” Gudrano began to think. “So that, however far I walk it will be identical.” But then it occurred to him, “but the view of the Heavens may change, depending on where I am.”

And so he began to walk with deliberate step, crunching on this lovely powder, for days (or nights – he did not know which) until indeed he began to find the skies did indeed change. The sun-like orb stayed much the same – though now green, purple, yellow, violet – but without changing shape or size (so far as he could tell), but the stars became much more numerous, became much larger and more mobile, many of them flying around crazily, always more beautiful but, gradually, more ominous. They seemed in time to be threatening, though Gudrano wondered if that was only because he was alone and had been walking for quite a long time – though he knew not how long – so that he was beginning to feel a kind of stress, or if not that, some kind of fear.

But fear, he thought, was quite pointless. “Did I not feel some fear when I met those three witches?” he thought to himself. “And had I not often felt fear before, during my life’s adventure?” Fear, he acknowledged, was not life’s chief emotion, unless one seriously feared death, which is an inevitability for all living things. And so, he walked a bit more, then sat down, enjoyed the dust, and looked up towards the amazing, extraordinary celestial bodies.

I love the sound of crunching powder
Under the treading foot;
I wonder if changes in the Heavens
Can keep us ever afloat.

MISHTUKI NEGORA

A young man called Mishtuki Negora went to the United States in the late nineteen fifties to write a post-graduate thesis on a naturalistic school of American novelists who had been active during the 1930s and 1940s. Mishtuki was born in the late 1930s, in China, where his father had been a military engineer with the Japanese invasion of that country. Mishtuki therefore experienced the defeat of Japan, and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a child, but realized very early on that the whole Japanese imperialistic escapade had been a disastrous error, and in his teens developed a strong interest in English-language literature. He loved Shakespeare and Wordsworth; but when he went to one of the finest universities in Tokyo he came to be especially fascinated by Edgar Allen Poe and Ernest Hemingway, so that when he graduated very successfully in 1958, he found himself in a position to accept a grant to study at a university in Oregon.

As an only son, dutifully respectful of his parents, who both died when he was about twenty years old, he had been deeply traumatised by his childhood – he always thereafter retained one memory in particular, that of waiting in long queues for rice with his father, in the streets of his home town, under American occupation.

Why he had been drawn to American literature was always a bit of a mystery for him, for he did not particularly adulate Americans, nor the United States. He simply found much American literature very interesting, and liked the English language. It was certainly an unusual and bold move for a Japanese student to go to a rural town in Oregon to study in 1959; but still more

adventurous was it of him to strike up a relationship with a Colombian female student there called Claudia, and then go with her, after she and he had both finished their studies in Oregon, to Bucaramanga, the provincial capital of the Department of Santander in Colombia, which was Claudia's home and family town.

Once in Bucaramanga, the two soon got married, and Mishtuki quite easily found a job as a teacher of literature in the English language at one of Bucaramanga's universities. They had a family, and all went moderately well for about twenty years – excusing any of the normal kinds of difficulties between any married couple anywhere, especially with such cultural differences as existed between them, and the complex processes of adjustment that Mishtuki inevitably experienced.

But the relative calmness of their life was set on fire one day, some twenty years after their arrival and marriage in Bucaramanga, in 1983, when Mishtuki was walking along a palm tree-lined street that took him from his university to his family's modest house. He was walking near to a high wall, when suddenly a boy that Mishtuki had not seen, jumped on him from above. It was probably more an act of stupidity on the part of the boy than a deliberately planned act of violence, or an attempt to steal something from the Japanese professor. But the suddenness of it, and the spasms of fear, internal disorder, and instinctual defensiveness that it aroused in Mishtuki, overcame his usual self-control, and he found himself lashing out at the boy so hard that in a few moments the latter was spread-eagled on the ground, and Mishtuki could see that he had killed him.

At the trial there was little sympathy for Mishtuki's actions. All the stress was on how young the boy had been – thirteen years old – though to Mishtuki at the moment of the attack the assailant could have been of any age: he had certainly felt big and strong as he crashed down on Mishtuki's shoulders. Mishtuki Negora was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison, and his wife Claudia deserted him – though she had already said she would do that even before the sentencing.

In prison Mishtuki was allowed to read books, so he continued to study literature, though now he switched his gaze to Latin American literature, especially Colombian, as it was difficult for him to get hold of foreign books. Really, he would have liked to study his native Japanese literature, following these terrible events, but that was impossible. And so he started to study lesser-known Colombian novelists like Jose Rivera and Valderrama.

The discovery of these authors was the only good thing that came out of Mishtuki's awful fate – it would most probably never have happened otherwise. His son and daughter came to visit him quite often at first, but then they both went away to Bogota, and later emigrated to the United States.

Mishtuki now encountered a solitude even more severe than in his childhood, when at least he had been with his parents amid the chaos of war and the hell of its aftermath. He tried to remember his childhood faith – traditional Japanese religion – but that was very difficult after so many years of adjustment and partial accommodation to Western and Latin American values, ideas, and spiritual orientations. He tried to kill himself once, with an overdose of medicines

that he received for various ailments he began to suffer from in prison, but unsuccessfully. But his absolute despair passed; in a mood of courageous calm he continued to study whatever literature he could get hold of, and even managed to publish some articles in various academic journals in Colombia, the United States, and Japan.

Then, after seven years in prison, something remarkable happened. Mishtuki was out of his cell, in an exercise area, when suddenly the huge high wall separating it from the outside world crashed in with a terrible noise. An enormous truck outside had lost control and smashed into the wall, and through the smoke and fumes, Mishtuki could see the road outside, and the houses alongside it, so he ran. He had no more than a few seconds to do so – the prison guards rushed up to hold back the prisoners very fast – he just managed to escape them, and with a Zen-like concentration zig-zagged his way out of the prison compound and along the street like a streaking Kamikazi pilot – he was probably seen by one or two guards, but they were busily trying to constrain the other prisoners - so he went, and burst into freedom, ran and flew like the wind down the street, and after about a hundred metres jumped behind a large pile of rubbish, and hid.

Amazingly no one caught up on him. He stayed cowed down where he was until nightfall, then stealthily and on tip-toe crept along the street until he saw a night-bus, which he crouchingly climbed into. The conductor asked him for his fare after a short while, and he was prepared to pretend to look for some money in his pockets, but then get off when it became clear that he had none. However the conductor waved his arm as if to say “Never mind,” so Mishtuki stayed a while longer on the bus before suddenly deciding to get off.

In due course he found his way to a small Chinese community in this town where his prison had been. They introduced him to the only Japanese family that lived there, who helped him get across the border into Venezuela. There he met some more Japanese people, in whose houses he worked for several years until he had saved enough money to buy an air-flight to Japan and a fake Japanese passport. And so he left, and arrived penniless but apparently legally, in Japan.

What happened then to Mishtuki, is another story entirely. He worked for some years as a grave-digger – the only job he could find with a regular income – and then, once he was settled in a small apartment in a town not far from Tokyo, he began to give English language lessons to school and university students in his home. He then embarked on the writing of his own novel, which he called “Gulls Swooping Down To The Sea For Fish,” and although it has not yet been formally published, it has been received with considerable regard in certain literary circles. He has subsequently been writing a second novel, provisionally entitled “The Pillow”, which he has not yet finished.

ON THE MOON (AS RECENTLY DISCOVERED BY AMERICA)

Suddenly Jock Clockface found himself on the Moon. He was immediately asked to stand for President, which he did, but he lost. Instead he became an advisor to the man who did succeed, one Twit-of-the-Gangrene, who believed (or so he said) in Free Enterprise.

Jock Clockface advised Twit-of-the-Gangrene that he should be consistent in his policies, and ensure they followed from his Philosophy; but the latter did not do so, for in the end he favoured his own pocket more than his Philosophy. He was a very religious man, and found that his God told him in prayer that “Chastity Begins At Home” – *his* home.

Anyway, he discovered, if Government has no role to play in the Economy (as Adam Smith, his hero, had said (though in truth Twit had always found Adam Smith too difficult to actually read), what was the point in running a Government? Better to spend money on his Third Wife, and buy her untold jewellery, with the money accumulated from the “insider advice” he gave to giant Finance Companies.

At length the Moon-dwellers became fed up with Twit-of-the-Gangrene, and voted him out. Then they elected Nitbill Romeo-Reilly O’, who was just the same, in spite of being psychologically schizophrenic.

J.C.

At the Inn, the service was very bad, we were kept waiting for ages before being served even a cup of wine, but when a plate of food eventually arrived it was delicious. I felt like saying that the service was lousy, slow, and rude, although the food was good; in other words, I thought: “Congratulations to the chef, but not to anyone else in this establishment.”

There were no available rooms in the Inn, and so we went to sleep with the baby in a stable. This was reasonably comfortable, and all was quite friendly when shepherds, “wise men,” and others started to arrive to see our baby. As the reader will have guessed by now, I am Joseph, and the only thing I feel unhappy about is the fact that I was deprived of the normal fatherly satisfaction of having been responsible for Mary’s pregnancy, since the Conception of our Son was the result of Divine Intervention.

Our baby grew up quite normally, although at the age of twelve He disappeared for some days and worried us greatly, until we discovered He was in a temple, telling the priests and everyone else there that His Father was God in Heaven, and pontificating about every kind of theological matter, about which he considered He was some kind of prodigious genius, which impressed some of them but infuriated others. We took Him home.

Here I must hand over the story to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, who take up the account of our Son Jesus, from the age of about thirty, when He started to wander around the Sea of Galilee preaching to whomsoever would listen to His extraordinary ideas. However, these four men never actually knew Jesus themselves, but listened to accounts from others who had known Him, about forty years after Jesus had been executed. The details of their stories do not match, but the general idea is the same in each of their narrations.

He, Jesus, according to some of these four Evangelists, was the Son of Man, but at times this seemed to mean the Son of God. Jesus wavered between the two claims, as although the first was certainly highly eccentric, the second was enough to have Him executed for blasphemy. He said everyone should love everyone else, whomsoever he was, without exception, even if the other person was an enemy. No one should ever kill another human being, for any reason at all. And if anyone was in need, one should give to him or her anything one could.

He said that as He was speaking for His Father in Heaven, only through Him could anyone gain salvation and Eternal Life, and certainly not through the Pharisees who were hypocrites, nor through the myriad false prophets who trumpeted their holiness. Yet John the Baptist He did seem to respect as a holy man, whilst the latter seemed thoroughly to believe in Jesus's claims. Sometimes Jesus said that the Day of the Lord was coming soon, and that then all would be of perfect peace and harmony, with the lamb lying down with the lion; at others He spoke of a terrible Apocalypse, in which God would separate the sheep from the goats, and in this Day of Judgement there would be fire and hellish retributions. Latterly, when He had become convinced that He would have to be martyred as the Lamb of God, He spoke of His later return to the earth, after His physical death. This would happen after He was dead in the mortal, human sense.

After about three years of wandering around, prophesying and speaking of His ideals, to which a number of people paid attention, and even followed Him around, He evidently became frustrated, as the sky had not broken open, God did not appear and transform everything on earth, and the majority of people did not greatly change their natures and behaviours.

And so Jesus went to Jerusalem, where not many people knew anything about Him. He was not famous there, as is obvious from the fact that He entered the city on a donkey. After a couple of days He did something dramatic, and very provocative. He went into a temple where merchants and money-lenders were going about their normal, customary business, and turned over their tables, shouting that they should not be engaged in commercial transactions in God's House. He made an enormous scene, which resulted in the priests at the temple sending for the authorities. Roman soldiers came, who were in effect police with responsibility to deal with disturbances.

Evidently Jesus left the temple before the soldiers appeared, and went with some of His followers to a garden called Gethsemane, where He waited around until after nightfall. Thus He did not try to escape His fate, as He seems to have known that thuggish Roman soldiers would find Him there, with the help of one of His followers called Judas, who had become a traitor. By now He was saying His death was inevitable and predestined, so He waited quietly and patiently, though not at all in peace. He was in a state of agonized anxiety it appears, and could not sleep; He begged His friends to stay awake with Him. But they could not, though they woke up abruptly when some Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus, one of them cutting off an ear of one of the soldiers with a sword, though Jesus miraculously replaced the cut-off ear of the soldier.

Jesus went through a strange and horrible kind of “trial” which lasted most of the night, and was tortured in frightful ways; He was executed the next day by crucifixion in what was the normal procedure in Roman occupied Palestine at that time, along with some others regarded as criminals. It seems that He hoped God would intervene at the last minute to save Him, as he declared on the cross: “Eli, eli, lama sabachtani?” (“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”)

But He was not saved, though after His death, His followers continued to maintain that He was the Son of God, which gradually more and more other people came to believe.

Although Jesus had made it fairly clear that He did not want to found a new “Religion”, or “Church”, but rather to go beyond sects and religions to inspire all humanity to believe in a Universal Truth, that of Love, a new religion did come into being, which became known as “Christianity”, from a Greek word meaning “The Anointed.”

Some people have come to think, two millennia later, that Jesus actually grew up in a dissident Jewish community in the desert, such as that of the Essenes, which it appears held ideas similar to those of Jesus. According to this theory, He left the community at about the age of thirty in order to proclaim these ideas more widely. If that is the case, He did not grow up with Mary and myself, a carpenter, at all, but in a community such as that! This view certainly carries some conviction, as at least one of the four Evangelists refers to Jesus’s brothers and sisters; it would make sense that He would leave His community accompanied by these brothers and sisters – whether that was meant literally or just in terms of people very close to Him – in order to wander around preaching their ideas to anyone who would listen to them.

THE ENEMY STRIKES

Why, I don't know. But it certainly seemed as if my grandmother's nose was in some way responsible for this strange event. It appeared that when her nose fell onto the dog lying at her feet – in more senses than one – because of its extreme hairiness, no one could find that nose buried in the dog's hairs!

I didn't really understand what was going on; I was only six years old, and couldn't even reach the top button in the lift to go back up! Also, the soup was very frightening; I could not understand frogs and newts and dragonfly larvae flopping about like that at that time in history; it did not seem to be an appropriate moment in evolution for this to be occurring.

Dead dogs were obviously being resurrected every moment: some became pigs and wild boars, others cocks, armadillos, and cows. The only person that I could talk to at the time was completely obsessed with angels, which she insisted were flapping about in the church's belfry, which was also quite near to us. In spite of being quite attractive, this lady was extremely devious, as I later found out.

Oscar Wilde and Al Capone both agreed with much that Hitler's reincarnation said: but the phantasm was not the same as the original Adolf Hitler at all. The reincarnation was quite peaceful and kind, though extremely neurotic, but, however, as he appeared to me, a very selfish person. That is to say, when he wanted to eat his favourite dish – potato soup – he was inclined to spit into the soup of others dining with him, especially if *their* soup was not potato – for example, if General Saupzerthalmeinschactelsbehaufendorf was dining with him and eating a rather delicious seafood soup, the reincarnated Adolf delighted in spitting several times into his bowl; about which of course the General could not complain.

I always wondered why Adolf was so mad and horrible: was he really a reincarnation of the man responsible for the deaths of so many millions of people? When I could not figure out how to get back to my grandparents' flat in Putney, as I could not reach the top button – I just don't know why I left their flat and got into the lift to go down in the first place – this was certainly the first experience I remember of being completely lost, and then ridiculed and blamed for it.

I think now that I must have been a rather cheeky little boy: these were the 1950s, the years of austerity, though of course I knew nothing of all that in an “historically conscious” sense. Any small child – unless he or she is some kind of prodigal genius – knows nothing of where he or she is in time or space, only where the post-box is, the music he or she loves, and what makes his or her father angry. And even these things he or she understands only in a vague and approximate way. Thoughts like these are like hopping fish – especially sticklebacks – that flip around when you drag them in, in a small net, from a small Surrey stream that is not yet polluted. And I launched a boat – a heavy, water-absorbent log – into such a stream one day, announcing that: “I name this ship HMS Celubria”; then it quickly sank. What was nice, I now remember, was that a lady nearby, I think with her children, laughed loudly. That pleased me, in some primordial way, in a form that no modern feminist theory can completely explain. Such phenomena can also be the origins of some men's ruin of course, however “successful” due to the “advantages” of their “male gender”. And partly of course, because the laws keep changing, so unfairly and unexpectedly, men can collapse into unexpected morasses. But you only learn these things later.

But let there be no confusion about my grandmother, she was very kind and sweet to us. The fantasy about her nose seems to have been something from a Surrealistic dream – I have always been inclined to this kind of irrationality. My dreams are sometimes very strong – are yours not also? Sleep is for me much more than the nightly restoration of energy for working tomorrow. In sleep, I feel lovely sensations, especially if I hold my beloved in my arms, and seem to float around the mountains of the Cordillera Oriental that surround Bucaramanga, where I now live.

A STRANGE MAN

There was a strange man, many years ago, who took delight in cutting off the heads of snakes, wherever he could find them. He ate the heads it seems, gobbled them down, and left the long withering bodies as if dripping down from forest branches of trees that grew all around his house.

His house was extremely unusual, a strange affair like a hut with flowers blossoming in its roof, though actually the walls were made of a mixture of gold and mahogany, according to a formula that the man had invented for himself when still quite young, as a chemistry student. The flowers that adorned the hut, especially on and through its roof, were of red, blue, brilliant azure and silver colours, which impressed even the frogs and toads that hopped and croaked around it, all night long, and sometimes during the day also.

No one knew why the man liked to behead snakes, nor he in truth understood the reasons for this attraction, this obsession. His grandmother once asked him:

“Why do you do this, grandson?” and the man answered: “Because I must, grandmother.”

One day the Angel Gabriel came down to the front door of the glistening, superbly endowed, flowery hut, and hovered outside until the man heard the flapping of his wings and heavenly, almost inaudible sounds that were emitted from his glorious, melodious, mellifluous mouth.

“What do you want?” uttered the strange man.

“I want to know why you behead so regularly one of God’s fine creatures,” answered the Angel.

“Because I want to,” replied the man, “and it’s none of your business anyway.”

“At which the Angel Gabriel flapped his luminous and luminescent wings, buzzed into flight, and as he removed himself from the scene, screeched out:

“A curse be upon you, very strange man, and may you be sick in many parts of your body forever hereafter!”

After this, the strange man started simply to wait for his death; like an already-existent ghost of his being, he seemed only concerned to arrange his own funeral. He became like an un-dead man nailing his own coffin in anticipation of the inevitable.

The strange man began to recollect certain things from his youth. For example, he remembered that when he was very young he had often been alone with an uncle called Bosko, who had enjoyed banging a kind of spoon made of a mixture of copper, iron, and titanium against the young strange man’s right knee-cap. This had caused the strange young man considerable pain, but the more that Uncle Bosko continued to do this, the less did the boy feel he could do anything about it. No one else was ever there when the uncle did this to him, so the boy would have had to introduce the subject to others, presumably his parents essentially, and this he did not feel he could do. And so the pain increased steadily until Uncle Bosko died; and then the young strange man started to think that he had been responsible for his uncle’s death. Later he came to realize that this was not the case, but still he never told anyone about it at all. But after the Angel Gabriel’s visit, he found himself remembering these experiences almost all the time, interrupted only by his simultaneous preoccupations about his funeral and the coffin in which he would be buried.

He almost completely forgot about the snakes he had killed, and the heads of them that he had eaten with such delight at the time.

The funny thing about this strange man was that various people he knew liked him very much, and did not at all think he was weird or bad. Women in particular, at least some of them, rather liked him, and he rarely seemed short of girlfriends that he managed to seduce. Part of that was due to the fact that he never chased them too hard; acted as if the outcome of his relationships with women did not matter that much. This attitude seemed to enthrall them, stimulate them to get the relationship secure. If he had acted in such a way that he would be heart-broken if the relationship failed, or if he had appeared emotionally “weak” in the face of the doubts, threats, and inevitable uncertainties of these “love affairs”, probably the ladies in question would have turned against him. But he never did; he could be very charming, even generous to women, but if the whole thing looked as if it was going to fall apart, he acted as if it didn’t matter a damn to him. This seemed to work wonders, as the attraction of a honey pot to bees, and none of his close female consorts ever complained about his snake-beheading and snake-head-eating activities, nor

his unreliable emotionality; they seemed to accept all, and only wanted to keep in contact with him, even if he now had another woman, and they remained as seducible as ever before.

Perhaps he made love very nicely to them; that kind of intimate detail is never available to the biographer. But this one does not think this is the ultimately relevant point about the strange man; many women have enjoyed sex with men though they have found long-term relations with them unbearable, and have broken them off. It seems to me that the essence of this strange man's "success" with women lies in his capacity to remain always "casual" in the face of ultimatums and threats, keeping cool throughout the storm, perhaps due to his obsession with snake-hunting. He was certainly mad, but many women like that.

Of course, various of his women friends wanted to have a child with him, but he had the knack of saying "Yes, why not?" though nothing ever transpired. One girl in particular, called Marie, a particularly neurotic young lady, told him that if she was not pregnant within one year she would call the police. This did not deeply offend the strange man; he continued with Marie until he got tired of her and found another woman.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, after the visit of the Angel Gabriel he started to fall apart. He could see no future, his soul disintegrated, and he had no further depth of feeling for anything: he was just waiting to die. But he did not die; the last that some acquaintances heard of him he was still plugging on in his flat in Clapton, East London, thoroughly miserable but yet unbowed, and managing not too badly.

Another thing about this strange man that we have not yet mentioned is his involvement with pigeon clubs. He loved to fly pigeons and send them with messages tied around their legs. This absorption had something to do with his obsession about the Second World War; he heard and read about the importance of pigeon communication, in what were then desperate defensive measures against the possibility of a Nazi invasion, and became very fond of pigeons in spite of his nastiness towards snakes. He even went with Ken Livingston to feed the pigeons in Trafalgar Square.

The strange man had a sister, called Mialisco, a very beautiful girl when she was young, who often complained about one or another of the strange man's eccentricities, but she never directly raised the issue of his snake-killing. She was rather peculiar too in a way, for she refused to wear underpants or knickers when she was young. Once, at a wedding party, she fell asleep on a sofa, and the wind blew her skirt up above her waist, revealing all. One of the men at the party saw her panties on the other side of the patio, and with a stick whirled them around and flew them across the room. They landed on another man's head, who was furious and tried to make a fight with the man who had flicked Mialisco's panties into his face, but others at the party managed to prevent a serious conflict. Later, Mialisco turned to an opposite extreme, refusing ever to take her panties off, even at night. When she got married, to a man called Alejo, she still would not pull them off at night, preferring rather to cut a hole in them at the appropriate place, so that her husband could make love to her, and as a result she had a daughter eventually, who was called Mariana.

At some time either before or after all this took place, it is not exactly clear which, the strange man went to live in Paraguay. There he found Guarani a very interesting language, and learnt to speak it to a certain extent, at least as much as he could speak Spanish. He married a Paraguayan woman, in a fit of rash enthusiasm, and went to live in a small village in the Chaco, the drier, western part of this beautiful and extraordinary country. But soon his obsession with snakes began to reemerge. He found himself wanting again to capture snakes, and cut off their heads. For many months he managed to resist this temptation, like a reformed alcoholic or someone who has with determination stopped smoking, but eventually he was overcome by his old desires and pressures. He would go into the countryside nearby his village on a scooter, and wait for snakes to appear, especially the most dangerously poisonous ones. Sometimes when he caught one, he beheaded it immediately, at other times he bagged the snake and put it into a strong plastic bag, returning with it to his house. His wife was a little surprised at this behavior, but did not complain about it unduly; she did however find it extremely odd that when after decapitating a snake, he guzzled down its head as if he hadn't eaten for weeks, in spite of having enjoyed a lovely meal that his wife had cooked only a short time before.

Really it is at this point that the story takes an extremely strange turn. The strange man's Paraguayan wife, who was called Chakisca, went one day to visit her mother in a town not very far away. She fell into a hole by the side of the road there, after disembarking from a bus. The hole was so big that no one saw her in it for two or three days, nor apparently did anyone hear her cries. Eventually however, a policeman wearing the kind of uniform that policemen wear in the United Kingdom, saw her and poked a ladder down her hole to let her escape. She was remarkably calm in spite of the trauma she had suffered, and the policeman notified the strange man by telephone as soon as he had been able to locate him. The strange man rushed to the spot as fast as he could, in a rare display of chivalry, but unfortunately he also fell into this wretched hole, though his wife was now in police custody. It seems that the police had come to the conclusion that it was her fault that she had fallen into this hole, and when her strange husband suffered the same misfortune, they were not sympathetic to him at all. After they had dug him out, and arrested him, he was put on trial for "hole-into-falling", a serious crime in this part of Paraguay. He was sentenced to seven years in prison, though at no point in his trial was the question of his snake-killing or snake-head-eating habits referred to, nor mentioned, at all.

In the prison of course, the strange man found no opportunity to kill snakes, still less to eat their heads. Chakisca was allowed to visit him once every seven weeks, which she loyally and consistently did, right up to the time of his release after only five years, due to "good behaviour". He resolved then to abandon his peculiar habits with respect to snakes and the eating of their heads, which up to now reports indicate he has kept to, with the help and loving support of Charisca, who actually never understood what all the fuss was about anyway in that regard and, it would seem, never did really mind this strange quirk in her husband's – our strange man's – personality.

THE HORRIBLE OLD MAN

There was a horrible old man called Ogg, who had been a bit better earlier in his life, but not that much so. When he became very old, his worst characteristics came to be expressed ever more strongly; and unfortunately for most of those around him, he still had command of certain powers that he had always had. He could wave his magic, ugly wand, and command others to do things as always, but now his commands were even more bizarre than when he was younger; indeed they became quite evil sometimes.

For example, he told all his children, now of course grown up, in fact fairly old themselves, to bend over, so he could cane them on their buttocks, as he had done when they were young.

Some of his offspring obeyed him, and bent over, but the others refused, saying:

“No you evil old man, mad as you are; no matter what you intend to do with us, we will not put up with this rubbish anymore!”

The nasty old man started to speak in a squeaky voice, and threatened hellfire upon the rebellious youths – though in fact the latter were now in middle age; but these sons would not bend over. Again he insisted, but there came the reply:

“No, old man, though you are old and feeble, we will not tolerate your vicious, cruel, stupid and nasty commands: we would rather die than put up with it! We have suffered our whole lives from you.”

No one knows exactly how the horrible old man reacted to this: it is not recorded. After his numerous sons had died, it appeared that they had left no written record whatsoever of the denouement.

One thing was however recorded, by a family friend. It seems that the horrible old man could sometimes be quite kind: for example, he sometimes gave to small children in the street near where he lived, quite generous presents. Sometimes he gave sugar mouses or dolls to the girls; at other times he gave fireworks or miniature swords to the boys. The children – boys or girls – loved these presents, and thought he was a lovely old man. But one day things went strangely.

Instead of caning one of his middle-aged sons, or giving a sugar mouse to a little girl nearby, the old man evaporated into the air. His sons felt some relief, though the children in the street were sad. No one really knew what had happened to him; everyone waited to see if he would return.

And he did, like Christ in His Resurrection. It was obvious he would never disappear finally. Why this was the case, nobody understood: it was simply that however old he got, however feeble he became, he could not die. Even as he became older and older and older, nothing would really change.

In time his sons started to die off. First one, then another, then another. But the old man never died! He just carried on. He was always visiting doctors, always saying he was on the verge of dying, but he never did. What was distressing for his sons, particularly the ones who refused to bend over in middle-age, was that he continuously spoke about medicines and doctors, even though he endlessly repeated that he wanted to die as soon as possible! And he seemed to imply that it was all the fault of his wretched sons.

The sons who finally rebelled were the saddest ones, before and after their deaths, as they had always felt that given a chance they could have loved their father, and maybe their father could have loved them. But this circumstance never arose.

However, one day an angel arrived on the earth, and tried to correct it all. She kissed everyone, then withdrew, in the sweetest possible way, so that all were set upon the next stage of their lives as best they could be.

Funnily enough, the nasty old man’s wife who had died sometime before these last occurrences, spoke from Heaven, thus:

“Husband, thou hast not done as I would have wished: it appears you have learnt little from the many years we were married: on the contrary you have become still meaner, more selfish, and more obnoxious, especially towards our sons. I do not forgive you for your self-aggrandisement, although I am now dead. I am turning in my grave, and you know perfectly well why.”

No one really knew who this horrible man really was ultimately. Some thought he was originally a sea-lion, who had become stranded on the land many years before. Others thought he was a zebra who had lost his way, and in confusion had become disorientated and therefore combined with normal, domesticated horses. But whether sea-lion or zebra, he had an unusual intelligence for an animal, and understood a great deal, sometimes more than human beings do. And he knew how to turn into a human being. But that was in a way his real problem, because often when he came up close to people, they didn't realize he had any intelligence; they thought he was just an animal, but they made a great mistake. Because in reality he had several identities, all zoological: a hydra, a mammal, and a human being (which of course is also a mammal). He could say extremely crude things, such as “why do you piss into the bucket? What is the meaning of kicking a dog? Where is the face of a hobgoblin twirp, and what is the thought behind a flying tapeworm?”

Many were they who could not understand his speech: those who could understand were always poets. Poets seemed to grasp the multivalent sounds of this creature, they had ears as large as donkeys, minds as strange as galaxies, and fingers as long as milestones. Those that could hear the hydra-hobgoblin-tapeworm-zebra knew perfectly well how well he sang the Blues.

He was not the most irascible genius of all time, but sometimes he was fired in brilliance, like a star out of control, as music and poetry must be: because Genius cannot fit into canons and their rules. The real ones know all these things already, intuitively, and blow it all apart in their ecstatic fire of greater perfection.

THE STUPIDEST MAN IN THE WORLD

This is about someone who was undoubtedly the stupidest man alive during his life, called Dorg Hedgerow-Locust. There were, before his lifetime other men even more stupid than him, and after his lifetime was over there were, and will probably continue to be, many other men even more stupid than him, but during his lifetime it seems indubitable that he was the stupidest man then alive.

In what ways was he stupid? Well, first, whenever he rode a motorbike he sat backwards on it, and steered the machine with his arms and hands bent backwards and behind him. As he could not see where he was going, he relied on sound and smell to direct his movements. He was insistent that human beings' auditory and olfactory senses were in reality better than their sight, if only they could be appropriately developed, which he considered was the case with him.

Another reason for Dorg's being judged as the stupidest man in the world while he was on the earth, was that he regularly wanted to wear a helmet when the weather was warm, and a straw hat when the weather was cold. This meant that his head was always either sweating profusely,

or was freezing or even soaked by rain. People who knew him frequently commented upon these foolish, nay stupid, habits, which could only disadvantage him in all his aspirations and efforts to achieve his ambitions and intentions.

But one example of Dorg Hedgerow-Locust's behaviour that was not stupid, though some thought it was at the time, was what he did on a certain occasion when he was pursued by a posse of police-soldiers with immense dogs, each as large as the Hound of the Baskervilles as described by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his famous novel of that name, about Sherlock Holmes, because certain authorities had decided his stupidity was a threat to public order. These vicious hounds were as large as donkeys, as ferocious as starved lions or tigers, and to escape them, Dorg found a hole in a stone wall where one stone had disintegrated, and squeezed through the hole, to escape to the other side. Either the hounds or the police-soldiers simply could not smell or hear where he had scrambled through to, or, it is possible, the wall in question was so high that even they could not scale it. The hole itself, it is quite probable, was difficult to see at the time, especially as both hounds and men were agitated and blindly furious, and it was absolutely in the middle of black-pitch dark night, with no moon or stars visible, through thick clouds, mist, and rain. And the hole must also have been too small for either man or beast to extrude themselves through. This was not an example of the most extraordinarily stupid behaviour possible!

Shortly after this incident, an attractive young lady called Masulala said to Dorg:

“Dorg, why don't you marry a nice girl and settle down, and have a lovely family?”

The stupidest man in the world replied:

“Well, I have always wanted that. But I have been married various times and it has never worked out very well. But perhaps with a girl like you, Masulala, it would be different.”

“How nice of you to say that Dorg Hedgerow-Locust! You are really quite a good-looking man, why not try it?”

“I am a horse-gun, bloo, bloo!
I am not a colourful coorie!
We're going to hang out our own washing
On the very old Siegfried Line;
Until we need to eat a pea!”

This reply amused Masulala, but she didn't really understand what it meant. She thought that really he was trying to say something different: that he preferred to climb trees and play bowls more than make romance. But she was wrong about that, as we shall see. But in the meantime, Hitler was bombing Warsaw. Though it is difficult to say whether this occurrence was before, during, or after the lifetime of Dorg Hedgerow-Locust, as his precise dates are questions of much debate among experts.

Much later on, or perhaps earlier, Dorg found a stick in a field, and used it to kill a mouse, thinking as he was of Robbie Burns' poem "To A Mouse." But that did not really resolve anything for him, as there were thousands of other mice hiding in the same beautiful field.

The Final Solution had begun, but it appears that the stupidest man in the world was against it. He tried to fly pigeons in order to warn Jews in the cattle trucks that the Nazis intended to murder them immediately on arrival at wherever they would arrive. But the pigeons died in flight, and never got to the trains.

"It's very interesting, Dorg, that whenever you think about wild boars or foxes, you think also about falling into one of their holes," said Masulala one day.

Then there was the sitting, phoney, waiting War. It lasted only a short time, but it caused Dorg's reputation to fall even lower in the hierarchy of stupidity. This was partly his fault, because one day he fell off a camel, in a zoo in South America, which he should not have done at all. He often thought of Marshal Petain, although he did not like the old man at all.

There was someone who liked to jump on a donkey and send ancient arrows into an oak tree, which from within frogs and indeed ants could see through a First World War periscope into a hornets' nest. He was a bit of a friend of Dorg, though sometimes they argued. One of the things they argued about was the importance of the Emperor Barbarossa. Dorg thought him a failure, whereas the other man thought him a great success.

"They should dig their own graves," said a friend of Dorg. Dorg did not quite agree with him, thinking as he was of one of the moons of Jupiter, with which he was very pleased. Because, when young, he had read a comic with a science fiction story in which someone had in his room, reduced in size by many millions, an exact replica of the Solar System. It was exactly exact, though so much smaller, so that when his brother was shrunk down to the same size, and was sucked into the orbit of Jupiter, he became lost there even as if he had got lost, at normal size, in the real Jupiter! This was terrible for Dorg, and he looked for weeks and months into the room in which he had the minute version of the Solar System, realizing slowly and gradually, that his brother, who was called Strope, was as lost from him as if he had really gone to the real Jupiter, and got lost there. Dorg was extremely sad, though he never gave up in his attempts to find Strope.

An elephant in a zoo knew nothing of all this. Though in captivity, he drank huge amounts of water and squirted it with his trunk all over his over-heated body. But this elephant had never experienced the Rasputin-like mud or freezing snow-ice winters on the Russian Front, and certainly not the Siberian troops, in white, and on skis. He may have felt fear and loathing, but as an animal, no matter how intelligent, he did not know about all that. And Dorg could not teach him about it, however much he tried.

"Don't pull your trousers down!" sang Marlene Dietrich.

Later of course, as we all know, Dorg with several friends tumbled over a cliff, where they found an almost heavenly grove, with a lovely beach, beautiful lemon flowers, perfumes of erotic and

delicious perfection, but most of all sweet, smiling, gorgeous women, that made them all so happy. This was all they needed, and they decided, with the full agreement of Dorg Hedgerow-Locust, that they would not concern themselves any more with the Emperor Barbarossa, nor any one else in fact, as now they felt (temporarily) so happy.

As Sonny Boy Williamson sang:

“It took me a long time to find out my mistakes,
But now I bet my bottom dollar I ain’t fattening no more frogs for snakes.”

But one of these beautiful women, a gorgeous girl called Dormienda, Dorg instantly fell in love with. Why, it is impossible to say, because she had so far said absolutely nothing; it was her especially beautiful face, her sweet countenance, her smile, and her lovely demeanour that had this effect on Dorg, rather as in an old film of “War and Peace” that we have all seen, when the hero is struck by the light around the girl, or, as in Shakespeare: “The light is not the Light that does not shine on Celia”; he was dumbstruck by this girl, but at the same moment he saw a very funny man on the other side of the narrow street that he was walking along. That weird man had a face like Hell, and a body rather like a toad, and for some reason the juxtaposition of the two encounters caused a terrible confusion in Dorg. Because although he was very stupid, he was also rather sensitive, extremely suggestible and weird, actually, in the intensity of his feelings. He was one of those men who, although perhaps “macho” in certain respects, was really more soft and emotional than all the women he ever met, or became involved with. For example, when he had children with one wife, and she deserted him, for whatever reason, just or unjust, he was far more destroyed by the separation from his kids than she would have been, if things had been the other way around.

But of course, they weren’t the other way around, and never can be. *Hombres deben sufrir*. At least, that is how it is once extreme feminist dogmas come to dictate the law, thought Dorg.

Now, when Dorg and Dormienda fell in love, they decided to change their names. Dorg changed his name to Tim Shelley, and Dormienda changed hers to Dormienda La Hermosa. They married, and had three lovely daughters, then lived happily ever afterwards.

WELCOME TO THE HOTEL PARIS

When I returned to my hotel, called The Hotel Paris, I rang the bell. The same hobgoblin came to the door, finger over his mouth, as before. Presumably he did not want me to interrupt his sleep more than necessary.

When I had first arrived, early in the morning of that same day after a whole night's travelling, after the usual endless searches in airports and multiple hassles, he had sent me off alone to search the hotel rooms with the keys, and when I chose one, I had to take my suitcase there from the Reception, alone. He had a large, bulbous face, in such contrast to the pleasant and attractive girls I had seen in a bar later, in which I drank a few beers before returning to the hotel.

In the bar I had also seen some real weirdos, faces distraught, desperate over nothing, and this had made me sad about humanity. Progress? Ideals? The struggling by, day by day was all that I could feel. Of course, these are not things one is normally permitted to speak about openly, and so I do so only in this private confession. Unfortunately, I sometimes feel something similarly negative myself, but I call it "Depression". Anyway, this ghastly fatso at The Hotel Paris only made me feel worse.

Of course, everywhere city centres are no more than festering holes of greed and survival, and this spreads out to everywhere else, along with capitalist globalization. Fantasies, art, love, or what are left of them, are merely absorbed into this hell, and everything else seems lost. The human race will probably destroy itself, and much other life on this planet as well, in the next few centuries or millennia.

But then, a kinder receptionist came on duty. So friendly and kind was she, asking me what I needed, even if she couldn't supply it. The world began to change for me: perhaps in the longer run the better aspects of human nature – moral conscience, altruism, warmth, kindness, deep intelligence, emotional control, love for knowledge, creative imagination, the wish to work for and help other human beings – these might win out in the longer run, if only they could be translated into politics and ecological realism.

A GENERAL

There was a General, who ruled over a strange regime, it is not quite clear where, now that all the physical and archaeological evidence has disappeared, who supposedly died in curious circumstances.

This General had become a particularly vicious dictator after seizing power, in his bizarrely changing moods - sometimes kneeling before a donkey clad in golden and diamond garb, at others ordering the murder of millions of the very poorest of his oppressed subjects.

There was enormous doubt about whether he really had died on the sixth day of Gemmius, Year 5709, and so his body was dug up numerous times and analysed over and over again. Each time the reports of these investigations conflicted with the earlier conclusions. Gradually however, with so many successive disinterments, different parts of the General's body broke up and fell off his corpse, making it more and more difficult to discern the details of how and when he had died.

But of course we do not have any direct evidence or record of all this, as everything concerning it, as well as all remnants of humanity, disappeared in what has become to be called “The Event”. We post-humans only have recourse to the information stored in a satellite that was sent into space some time after the general’s death, along with some music of J.S. Bach, and Albert Einstein’s equation $e=mc^2$.

One of the problems that we can now see, concerning the “psychology” of human beings, from that same “holy writ” in the satellite, which *some* human beings at least obviously believed in and sent into space, is the idea that fallen angels rebelled against someone they called “God” and descended to the earth, long before humanity had nearly destroyed it, and had certainly and totally destroyed itself; these “angels” very much desired “women”, that is human females, and because of this, they were slain by dictators long before the General had been born.

And so, we post-humans believe that those human beings extinguished themselves, and nearly destroyed the planet on which they lived, and on which we too now subsist.

One of the most amusing things that we seem to have learnt from the planetary period during which human beings lived on this earth, is that they fought one another, in huge groups called “armies”, often over only a “Word”, or the interpretation of a “Word”! Thus the “Holy Trinity”, “Communism”, or the “Eternal Values of Market Capitalism,” and other things like that, seem to have been things over which these beings were prepared to kill themselves over! To us it seems quite extraordinary, but that apparently is how it was.

Another amazing thing that these organisms believed – or some of them believed (they had developed a form of consciousness) – was that they possessed individually something they called a “soul”, which floated away after they died, and often fought amongst each other until death about where they thought these “souls” went to when their bodies had died!

This went on for a very long time it seems, and as they developed more and more effective ways to kill each other, and less and less intelligence about almost everything else, they managed to extinguish themselves *in toto*!

MONSTER

It was a young man called Grelius Saborno who went into a rather pleasant strip bar, a Club called “The Soft Furies”, one very ordinary Tuesday at about 2 o’clock in the afternoon. He was quite successful at business, and so did not lack the desired money, and his suit was very fine.

He was not normally a heavy drinker, but because he became particularly entranced by a gorgeous dancing girl, he started to drink Martinis a little faster than usual. After an hour or two of absorption into the mesmerizing eroticism of this strip-girl, the latter ceased her episode, and strode down onto the ordinary floor of the Club, clacking her high heels, otherwise almost entirely naked. As she passed by him with a warm glance, Grelius spoke to her.

“How nice you were!” he uttered and the girl stopped to talk with him. She said various things like:

“Do you like it here?”

“Yes, with a girl like you to look at!” replied the inept Grelius Saborno. But the girl did not seem to find his chat-up line so banal, and moved closer to him, but without sitting down. All seemed to be going well, but Grelius was not really an accomplished naked woman charmer. After a while he started to become a little foolish, in language and manner.

“What is it about some women?” he blurted out at last, in an utterly inappropriate kind of way. A waiter-bouncer nearby fixed his eyes on Grelius, and after a while came over to him and told him to shut up.

“You’re not doing it right,” averred the bouncer in this cool kind of joint.

Grelius Saborno started to become drunkenly confused, aggressive in his arm movements, and increasingly stupid in his naivety. He simply did not understand how to feel or behave in this kind of place!

After a while the bouncer decided it was time for Grelius to go. He grabbed Grelius, pulled him to a back entrance, kicked the door open, and once outside in a small concrete space began punching and kicking Grelius, yelling at him things like “I always wanted to bash a fancy rich punk like you in the face!”

This went on for some time, and Grelius, although he tried valiantly, could not get a proper hit back. He ended up coiled in the piles of rotting rubbish in and around several dust-bins in this small yard; every time he got up he was smashed and smacked back down yet again!

Then something amazing happened. Just as the waiter-bouncer, an extremely tough man, turned around as if to go back into the Club, Grelius Saborno jumped up and completely unexpectedly and inexplicably turned into a terrifying monster, about twice as tall as he normally was, at least twice as broad as usual, and of a terrible appearance and vile face and general bearing. The bouncer glanced around at him just as he was about to re-enter the Club and beholding this thoroughly shocking being, screeched “My God!”

Now although Grelius might have looked normally something of a suavie, a yuppie, quite handsome perhaps to some women, actually he was quite low-born, and had chanced his way strangely into the money-world he now inhabited! If anyone attended to his accent in detail, it would become clear that he came from a no higher social stratum than the bouncer who beat him up, perhaps even lower, if we apply subtle linguistic grading.

Now, extraordinarily Grelius stood viciously and angrily before his tormenter, snorting terrible noises, his face and whole body pulsing with the colour of blood. As he step-by-step approached the bouncer-man, the latter screamed and twisted, until Grelius Saborno, now transformed into this terrible monster, came right up to him, picked him up by the latter’s now relatively feeble arms, turned him upside down, and then, absolutely oblivious to the screams and yells, bashed his feet against two iron hooks that hung from the dirty wall behind where he was standing. The

man now hung like a piece of meat, his feet transfixed by the meat-hooks. His agonized noise was terrible, and this drew the attention of a young man living in a small apartment opposite – slightly to the left of the backyard of the Club, on the other side of the narrow street. This was his back window, from where he saw the monster’s assault, but not the earlier bouncer’s beating up of Grelus. He had a little earlier heard noises from the fracas, and the din of the dustbins as Grelus Saborno had been thrown into the garbage, but had not come in time to his window to see it, as he was preoccupied on the other side of the room with the Internet. By the time he did crawl irritably over to the window, what he saw was a twelve-foot Monster moving towards the terrified waiter-bouncer with arms outstretched, and then saw the victim being turned upside down like a bottle or a fly, then having his feet banged against and pierced by the two hooks from where he hung upside down most painfully, as the viewer later averred.

This conscientious neighbour ran in panic to his landline telephone, to call the police; unfortunately it was not working, simply buzzing with the “busy signal” all the time. Even more unfortunately his cell-phone had no “minutes” in it, so he could not call the police as he now decided he must do. He rushed out of the door of his small apartment, knocked or rang on various neighbours’ doors, but no one replied, until one nice young lady opened up. He explained that he really must call the police, in view of what he had seen. She kindly let him in.

It took a few minutes before he managed to get the police, and then, after the usual bureaucratic preambulatory set of questions: “Your name please, your identity number, your address, your telephone number, etc.....,” he launched into his spiel:

“I know you will find this difficult to believe, but at about 4.25 pm this afternoon I heard banging noises as if among garbage cans, with shouts and screams, yells and punches, from outside my rear window.” With his voice quaking in incredulity at himself, and fear about how his words would be taken, he continued:

“When I rose up and walked to the window, I saw a huge, twelve-foot-tall monster, hideous in sight and sound, stare at a man standing, in shaking fear, at the back-door of “The Soft Furies”. This monster walked slowly but steadily in a terrifying motion and with ghastly snorts and noises, towards the terrified man, quickly to turn the latter upside down with a vile hiss, apparently effortlessly, and bash him onto two meat-hooks that for a long time have hung on the wall to the right of the Club’s back door. I could hear the man’s screams as he was pinned by his feet onto the spikes, and then, glancing at my watch to see it was now about four-thirty, I turned around and went to telephone the police from a neighbour’s phone.”

“So you saw a twelve-foot tall monster turn a man upside down then push him onto hooks at the back of the “Soft Furies”? echoed the policeman in doubting sarcasm, street-level irony, and angry disbelief.

“Yes”, said the conscientious neighbour, “that is the case. I hope you believe me.”

“We’ll call you or visit you in due course,” said the policeman tiredly on the phone, and rang off.

This conscientious neighbour, whose name was Brad Spittall, now returned to his back-window, and saw into the back-yard space of the Club. There was no one there now, no monster, no body hanging from the meat-hooks. There was however a great deal of blood dripping from the hooks onto the old, dirty brick-wall out of which they protruded, and also on the ground.

Brad Spittall walked to his chair in front of his computer once again, where he had been when he first heard the din outside, but had then done nothing for several minutes.

Now, what had happened at the Club meanwhile, was that another waiter-bouncer had come out to the back patio a few moments after 4.30 pm to see what had happened to his colleague who was expelling the weedy young suited businessman. He found the other bouncer hanging from the spikes by his feet, groaning and bleeding, and after calling others to help, the upside-down man was taken inside. He died shortly afterwards on the carpeted floor of “The Soft Furies.”

The Manager of the Club, being a law-abiding kind of man, phoned the police. Within ten minutes a policeman arrived from the local police-station, who verified that the bouncer, whose name had been Brian Travers, was dead on the floor. The policeman tried to find out who the client had been that Travers was bustling outside to kick out: the manager of the Club could assert that it was one Grelius Saborno, who had never before come to the Club so far as anyone working there could remember, but whom they could identify because he had paid for some drinks and a snack with a Visa Card. With information from this, the cop had phoned to his station to get hold of Soborno’s address, which was very nearby; the manager had protested at first at the policeman’s request to give information about a client, saying it was private between him and the Club; but the policeman, whose name was Kampf, looked at the manager with menacing eyes, and reminded him that this was “a murder investigation”.

With the address of Grelius in his hands, Kampf set off by police-car to this address. Only moments later the content of Brad Spittall’s telephone call to the same police-station was conveyed to another investigating officer, who was immediately informed that Kampf had just left to investigate the strange death of one Brian Travers at “The Soft Furies”. This other investigating officer, with the intriguing name of Gregalo Gargantulo, drove as fast as he could to the Club, then, seeing exactly where the window was, so near, of the all-important Brad Spittall, he sped off to interrogate the latter.

When Gargantulo arrived at the door of Spittall’s meager “apartment” – more a box than anything else, he asked him to explain the details of what he had seen. Brad Spittall repeated the essence of his earlier account, after which Gregalo Gargantulo called up Kampf on his cell-phone, to find the latter was in the middle of interviewing Grelius Saborno. They agreed to meet up in ten or fifteen minutes at the Club. Before leaving, Gargantulo asked Spittall to beg his young lady neighbour not to talk to anyone about what Brad Spittall had said on the phone to the police in front of her a little earlier; unfortunately this plea came too late, for by the time Spittall spoke to his attractive neighbour about this, she had already spread the story far and wide among her large circle of friends. Gossip from friends to friends resulted in a local newspaper reporter hearing about the extraordinary story, and he published an article about Brad Spittall’s observations in “The News Echo”, along with various artists’ impressions of the Monster, which aroused considerable interest and amusement locally. One of a number of letters written into

“The News Echo” and published in it two days later, was one that was editorially given the title: “King Kong Seeks Revenge But Gorgeous Naked Girl Is Absent From Debacle.”

A number of humorous cartoons followed from this, perhaps detracting from the dreadful death of the unfortunate bouncer.

When Kampf arrived at Saborno’s fairly flashy flat, he was invited in of course, and the two had a most intriguing discussion of events that lasted nearly two hours.

“Why were you expelled from the bar?” asked Kampf.

“I don’t really know, but I think it was because I had never been there before,” quoth Grelius. “Only for that?” parried Kampf. “Well, perhaps I was getting a little bit excited with the gorgeous girl who was dancing completely naked in front of me,” retorted Saborno. “Is that the first time that this has happened for you?” questioned Kampf. “I don’t know,” answered Grelius Saborno.

“And so,” continued Kampf, “when you were pushed into the back-yard by Mr. Travers, and after you were punched around by him, what did you do?”

“Once he had stopped raging, punching, and kicking me, I got up for about the seventh time, and seeing that he seemed tired of it, and had retreated to the miserable swinging door that led back into that Club, I looked around, and after seeing that the small gate out into the narrow street was padlocked, and that it had stretching above it a very high wire-netting that made it impossible to escape easily from there, I decided to climb over the moss-covered, dirty, brick wall to get out. That I did, then ran to the left outside on the street, then left again at the next corner, until I got to where my car was parked. I got into it, and drove home, here.”

“What time was that?” asked Kampf.

“I suppose about 4.30 or so, but I wasn’t examining the time.”

Having already heard from Gregalo Gargantulo about the Monster story, Kampf finished by asking Saborno if anyone else had come into the back-patio, in particular if someone posing as an enormous monster had replaced him there as he left.

“I have no idea,” replied Grelius; “this seems an extraordinary question to ask me. I was badly beaten-up, and finally managed to run away; now you ask me about a Monster.”

“And you did not have any kind of monster’s uniform with you when you went to the bar, hidden away somehow?”

“What!?” answered Grelius.

Finally, Kampf requested that Grelius come with him to “The Soft Furies” back space, and show him how he had escaped. Saborno agreed, and so he and Kampf drove to the Club, where they then met up with Gregalo Gargantula. All three went into the back yard.

“Please show us sir, how you escaped from here when Travers stopped attacking you.”

Grelius tried to climb over the very high, crumbling wall. He skidded and fell many times, yet at length he managed to get over the wall, but this did not convince the police officers that he could do this at all easily.

In response to this objection Grelius suggested that if under enormous threat, a person can do things which normally are virtually impossible.

“My father often said that if someone was chased by a sabre-toothed tiger they could climb a tree in five seconds,” he adduced as argument. The two officers, Kampf and Gargantula, returned with Grelius Saborno to his home again.

“What clothes were you wearing when you went to the Club?” they asked.

“My suit is here,” he went to a clothes closet and brought the jacket and trousers out. “I brushed them down after I got out of the place,” he added.

The policemen took the clothes away. The dust and every other kind of residue were analysed. These forensic investigations revealed that indeed there were remains of rotting vegetables, eggs, meat, flowers, and other debris from the rubbish heaps, but absolutely no signs of dust, cement, wall plant-life etc. etc. at all. Kampf and Gargantula were perplexed. What on earth had happened; had Grelius Saborno murdered Brian Travers, or had there really appeared somehow in that patio a Monster, or someone with immense strength, perhaps dressed up as a monster?

“How could he be 12 feet tall?” asked Kampf.

“Perhaps he was wearing stilts,” answered Gargantula.

“Let’s search Saborno’s apartment for things like that, costumes and so on.” They went back, and did so, but found nothing.

“That creep could not by himself have done this crime,” they both agreed.

They did not know what to do: whether to pass on all the “facts” and reports to their seniors or not; whether to recommend charges be preferred against Grelius or not. The whole thing presented a complete quandary for them. They went for a hot-dog and a few beers together to wind down, only to see the reports, cartoons and so on over the next day few days in “The News Echo”. In the end they were obliged to report everything to their seniors. They had no alternative but to relate all that had unfolded. “Just leave the whole thing alone,” they were told. “Say nothing to anyone about it; say the case is not in your hands.”

A BUKE-DOG SNACKED TO A DOOK

The strange thing about the place was that it never ended. It spread as far as all the people there wandered and never reached an end, or fence, or control limit of any kind. As we all wandered around, or out, it was never quite clear, we saw extraordinary things: exquisite shapes that never stopped moving and changing, like logs or boats that kept generating new and fantastic forms, columns, even temples, rooms, spiral domes and concrete spaces – De Quincey-like, all in

fabulous colours, beautiful as well as frightening – bewitching, enchanting. I think we all felt a kind of pain in our stomachs, a kind of terrifying but also exhilarating pain – perhaps partly erotic as well as hallucinatory (if the stomach can hallucinate, which I think it can!) - it seemed as if we were all supposed to be playing some kind of game, but it was a very stupid, incomprehensible game, whereby each and everyone was due to collect things and people together and bundle them up into one tied-up knot or entity: every once in a while a man shouted “Now I’ve got them into this fold,” and as I looked around in complete bewilderment and deep dread, I saw and heard first one woman say “But this is all so insubstantial!”, while another said: “All is completely immaterial!”

And it all was exactly so. Yet we kept wandering and spreading around this apparently expanding and never-ending space – like some kind of savanna or space of a common or a moon-landscape, God knew what, and as I examined those forms that seemed partly like wood or plastic shapes munching with strange mouths and recreating as fast as they created the weird Kafka-like forms in the first place, jiggeringly, suddenly, all kept altering like a Meccano railway-set from my childhood, whilst rubber rabbits hopped about, generating all the time shuddering colours and moving lights in extreme curves, threatening to knock things over, though in fact they did not do so very often. Whilst all the time we came no nearer to any edge beyond sophisticated, ever-changing, delightful miniscule forms of towers and curious wire-like dancing shapes which were playing around; and we wandered, in melancholy – I was actually trying to get out of there without saying so – but we came no nearer to any edge in any shape or form! Many men, but sometimes women too, seemed to say ridiculous things in absolutely horrible voices, like “We must get a grip on this, perhaps this is the right way,” or “No, this seems more like an appropriately slimy solution to the dilemma!” I did not like these remarks at all, nor the voices in which they were uttered, or rather screeched or rasped, and every once in a while I ended up in fighting fracas with others, without having intended to start that. I found myself kicking, groaning and trying to run to get the hell out of various and many a melée – it was atrocious.

“But it’s very beautiful,” said a couple of female poets among the group, at length. Is it, I thought? To be beautiful I would want to know what the Hell’s going on, and for how long we have to be here. But I had to agree with them, that it was in a way very beautiful, and also erotic, as were the women who made those remarks.

But then I thought that perhaps we could make a diversion, and get away from the majority of the “group” – now nearly all men; perhaps these women and I could lie down and get into a kind of sexual thing; whenever I got that idea, some very tall, irritating man in a mackintosh coat evidently understood our intentions and came to try and break it up. I would have persisted, even punched the bastard, but the women, as always, gave in, and accepted we could not do what we had obviously wanted to do. (For a moment or two it was extremely obvious that these women would have certainly liked my idea. I did not want any other man around, and they agreed. But there is no solution if the women give up in this kind of case).

Then as we had continued to expand and spread, the trees grew even faster, and the gnawing jaws and the chopping insects’ mouths grew ever bigger and started to become really noisy. To right and left there were crocodile-like creatures, snorting, snapping, and threatening to bite up

any one of us. Their skins were interminable in their rolling around and they kept changing colours like chameleons. They never stopped inter-sliding one with another, in motions resembling devastating, dreadful music.

Usually they didn't bite any of us up, and we continued our advance, evermore yellow and otherwise rainbow-coloured as if from the caimans' flapping tails that seemed to try to poke into our bodies and spiritual beings.

"This is never going to end!" I suddenly said, and no one disagreed. But they all kept meandering, so I shut my mouth, I didn't after all want to seem the weakest and most feeble of the gang!

We went on and on, the people became stranger and stranger – saying things like "the Abstract will never take over the individual soul, and so we had better eat whatever birds or insects we can find here!" "Otherwise," said another, "these rolling planes will eat us up, and perhaps all the theories will be proved false!" Another quoth, in an extremely sinister voice, "We will get beaten up here by vampires, and women will look on at us and laugh, as has happened to me before when I was nearly kicked to death by thugs, while women smiled. Have you no hearts nor souls, you women? I asked, prostrate on the ground, my head and body being kicked and beaten into a pulp of bruises. The women just stared at me then, dead-faced, immobile."

The landscape grew in its absurd beauty, Scriabin-like efflorescence, its Nietzschean-psychedelic more-than-Hendrix gorgeous craziness; expanding, chomping and reinventing incredible details of flowers, trains, babies, beetles, cockroaches, pseudo-butterflies, giant prehistoric dragonflies, but also rather big pigs trying to bite me.

Then it ended.

A WALK ON THE MOON, ALONE

Well, it was true, I really was walking on the Moon, alone. The strange light dust got kicked up with every step, and it was never clear whether it was night or day, if indeed either. It seemed as

if I could see the planet Earth above me sometimes, but on the Moon one's mind functions in a different mode, and so I was never quite sure whether the blue colours of the Earth were real, or merely illusory. That is, perhaps they were the product of an hallucination, accompanied by naked dancing nymphs, bare-breasted, free as those mountains called The Sacred Nipples, named after an indigenous myth about birth, rebirth, erotic love and sacrifice.

I watched a kind of alligator-canoe that was launched into thin air (there is no water on the Moon), full of eggs that hatched after a little while into strange giant molecules of air and empty hope, or, sometimes into lizards, grey herons, boot-fists, can-ditches, or pteradactyls, which flew ominously and frighteningly across the blackness of the weird upward sea flapping fear from every year of their ears, their thumbs, their dubious wings that erased every sight of life from any weird fish or being, even in an extreme trough of darkness miles beneath the surface of the sea, not only on the Earth, but on any planet, including Jupiter, or indeed one from another Solar System.

There was lightning sometimes, ripping through the non-atmospheric fabrics from the stars through to the dry craters of the Moon, like crazy crabs from infernal high-up depths of agony down to the psychic nightmares of Bad Dream. Thunder followed, as Death after Life, Despair after Hope, Winter after Spring; but the Moon never became sad, as far as I could see. Evidently She was Eternal. It was only at that realization that I really became frightened. I imagine it must have been the same when the skies became dark after Christ had died on the Cross, according to the Bible.

It certainly did seem a bit unfair, to Little Gob, that when he gave his best badge to a girl at school, to marry her, afterwards she claimed to the Headmistress that because he had given her this badge he should also give her all his stamps, coins, and toys; Little Gob could not believe that Headmistress Strimeeker agreed with the little girl, called Drooner, that Little Gob should do this, but of course he had to do so, because that was the Law. Naturally he could not tell his Mummy or Daddy about the loss and humiliation, and so he buried his pain alone and shared it with no one. Headmistress Strimbecker was thereafter extremely harsh and unkind with him, and his life was Hell. He wanted to die. He thought constantly about killing himself. "Promise me you will never do that!" insisted Matron Pearly, and Little Gob nodded in agreement, without really knowing, in his misery, what he was going to do at all.

His father always reminded him he must be tough, and not cry, as boys must not cry.

When the pent-up pain, pressure, sense of injustice, and sheer, bursting internal force came finally to a head, Little Gob, who had now come to be known as Big Gob, decided to go to the Moon. It was not easy to go there – not at all – he had no easy passport to go there – but when he did lots of people thought it was all because he had so many "advantages" on planet Earth, so that was why he had been able to walk on the Moon, alone.

When he at length became Great and Genial Gob, our friend relaxed on an asteroid between the Earth and the Moon, and started to enjoy life a little. He now had a lovely companion called Knickery Nittery, and with her he found he could actually be happy! It was an extraordinary discovery, and with this he tried to relax.

A DREAM: “FUNDACIÓN DE POESÍA EN LA VICTORIA”

Flip Garangia was a strange, but earnest character - having devoted himself to poetry, ideas, writing and so on since his early twenties, none of which earned him a penny (or later, a peso): whatever he earned was from teaching, as also was his pension which followed on from that. Circumstances led him as a Destiny by the nose to Bucaramanga, where he settled down with a beautiful girl from another part of Colombia - Tolima - and lived with her very happily for many years.

The poet Flip Garangia wrote the following short testament in La Victoria, Bucaramanga:

“Fundación de Poesía en La Victoria: a sincere fantasy that I would love one day to fulfil.

“This is to be a very humble Foundation, which I am determined to create. Its purpose is to help and encourage poets in La Victoria. I would also like to present my writing to those people in La Victoria who might be interested. I am determined to do this: especially the poorest young people in the *barrio* who write poetry, must be assisted. Their writing must be read and heard, and published in some form by this Foundation.

Everyone is welcome in this venture. It is ridiculous that a budding poet, a girl or a boy, or someone of whatever age, from whatever background, should not be encouraged and helped to advance their work. No poet should feel inferior to others! This is what I learnt over many years, and I beg poets of all kinds in La Victoria where I live, to respond.

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GREGORY CANDITCH

Gregory Canditch was born in 1947 in Walberswick, Suffolk. He grew up in a rather harsh environment, as his father was very strict, and although his mother was very much more indulgent than he, she was not one to resist her husband's hardness and inclination to heavily punishing their sons (their daughter was only ever spanked once). But the mother belonged equally to the "old school", and although she was certainly more imaginative in spirit and humane in outlook than Gregory's father, she was not as sympathetic to Gregory as he always yearned as a boy for her to be; all his life he felt a sadness in his very guts and bones about this, as he craved the dream of really loving his mother, but never could do so as deeply as he wanted to, either when she was alive or after she died.

Later he felt great resentment at the way his mother had been, never strongly opposing his father although later she pretended she had done her best to protect him; yet when *she* got fed up with her husband's philistine and dictatorial ways towards *her*, oh my goodness how strong in bone and marrow she could become! Younger female friends of hers, later in her life, thought her an exemplary feminist and determined female artist, but for Gregory this did not alleviate at all what had been done to him long before, and he did not finally come to agree in any case with feminist ideology (though he sympathized strongly when it was still called Women's Liberation), being a rather romantic idealist at heart, always. Notably hypocritical the whole thing was for Gregory Canditch, as his mother did not have to work for the latter part of her adult life, as her husband could not bear to lose her so he supported her tooth and nail in the artistic indulgence she favoured; whilst Gregory, an aspiring writer, received little practical or financial help from either of his parents, though his mother was less horrible than his father, who dismissed and sneered at his writing. Occasionally the mother said to Gregory that his father was "jealous of him."

After his mother died, Gregory felt a round and complex mixture of emotions, understandably. He was by then already living in Bucaramanga, the most beautiful city by far in South America. Within Bucaramanga there are large areas of really free semi-tropical forest, blazes of wonderfully coloured flowers and birds, marvelous huge trees along many streets, and deliciously attractive girls and women - both in the physical sense, but equally in their characteristically charming, pleasant, very humorous, sharply witty and warm natures. Gregory Canditch was in his element in many ways, but of course he suffered from many problems.

Gregory had got married at the age of thirty-five, after many different girlfriends with whom he had had very exciting relationships, but had not yet felt he had really fallen in love. Eventually when he did fall in love and get married, it worked out disastrously. The whole thing resulted in his losing his apartment, his money (though he had had very little - so that after the divorce he was in immense debt), and due to his illness that preceded the marriage breakdown, he lost his job also; and then he was required to give up a half of his ill-health early retirement pension to his ex-wife. All these were the results of laws passed after he had married the lady - if he had known about them he would never have stuck his head into such a lion's mouth of marriage - in which, if a woman who does not work nor has any money of her own can simply run out on a forlorn idiot, without any explanation to anyone, and he will have to give her, in utter degradation and humiliation, completely ruined emotionally, financially, and health-wise, half of everything he has worked for for years; which in Gregory's case resulted in his being in immense debts now, because he had borrowed for years to pay for the mortgage and for the family's provision.

But worst of all, he lost his beloved children forever, who apparently blamed him for the breakdown of their home - although he had been deserted by the wife who rushed out of the house one day in a fit of (very unusual, perhaps planned and staged) temper, one child in each hand, after his illness had indicated that henceforth his income would be greatly and permanently reduced; and she managed to turn his very young children against him, on various empty grounds, amid the warm reception of her parents and extended family (after all, their daughter had the dignity of having being married, the financial fluidity resulting therefrom, and was residing in an area which assured that their grandchildren, fatherless, would be able to attend decent schools! and see them very regularly); and of course there was the kind Benefits System that immediately gave her a rent-free home, an unearned income, and every kind of financial assistance.

She was a vapid and mousey type really, as a number of Gregory's friends had said to him when he first became involved with her, but at first she seemed extremely attractive to him, physically and emotionally. A very dangerous type - as she appeared to both Gregory at first and nearly always to significant others as a pleasant and calm girl, though actually she was a silent schemer, whilst lazily resting on sofas watching TV, who accumulated weird resentments without expressing them, and a kind of sociopathic incapacity to sense the sufferings of certain other people. She was intensely manipulative, and through a mixture of lies, silence, and acting vulnerable, managed to convince many people, especially public officials of various kinds, and of course all her relations, that she was a demure, sad lady, whilst Gregory was a peculiar, wild hot-head.

Some time later he had an experience whilst travelling in Brazil. He had enjoyed the company (and more than that) of some gorgeous tarts, and one evening he met at a table one of them among several, and she bothered him with stupid comments.

"Sometimes I like you, but at others I don't like you at all," he said. She let a full minute pass, and then turning directly towards him, she said:

"Me too, sometimes I like you, but at other times....." and she opened her sexy mouth, showing all the marvellous glory of it, and put her tongue out in a most vulgar but delicious way, only at the last moment turning towards him, with a cheeky, irritating, provocative smile, extremely and dangerously seductive.

Later they talked alone.

"Do you want to continue like this?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"As a whore."

"That depends."

“You seem to want many men all the time.”

“Well, you want lots of women.”

“You want to stop it?” he asked.

“It depends on you.”

“Okay, if you stop, I will.”

“I will.”

“How do you know you can?”

“I know.”

“Alright, we’ll start right now. Yes?”

“Yes,” she said.

A WRITER'S CHALLENGE

It was a kind of ABC of books and writing, into which someone strolled one night. He found he was in a kind of block-like, very large space, in which one could walk in straight lines, in verticals and parallels, so to speak. The idea, he quickly understood, was to choose from the letters and words written on the stands, either three or four or five words: these were like a kind of bounty or booty, after which one walked on, to gain more.

The first one he got was "Kings Thrive Here," and shortly afterwards he managed to conjure "Boots Boots Bomps And Breasts" from another stand. "Very avant-garde", said an observant bystander, but someone else shouted out: "No, Afro!"

So our man continued wandering up and down and sideways through what he felt was rather like the examination halls he had taken exams in at school, then University, and had vigilated at when he was a College and then a University lecturer.

But after this, things seemed to become somewhat sinister, at least slightly. Apparently, when the guy was walking past Stand 9X, in this quadrilateral place, something popped out from the front of the stand, in very bright or black letters: JO DING WOO IST BRIG. No question marks nor indeed other punctuation marks were allowed on these stands, so our guy composed very quickly BRING JOS WIG IN from the given letters and words. This seemed to cause all the lights to go off, and for the sky outside to turn into terrible darkness, the clouds becoming very threatening, dreadful sounds of thunder bursting and lightning forking in hellish fear –

provoking zig-zags of dire anxiety, as went the sky above Jesus when he gave up the Ghost on his Cross, so very long before.

But then something even worse presented itself to our friend. An old woman, who was also walking around the endless rectangular spaces, and had discovered it did not only stretch up to Z or 100, but started again as AA-ZZ and 100-2000, and this then continued to expand infinitely, told him that all cats, even the warmest, friendliest, sweetest pet cats, were actually diabolical, which truth one could see in their green round eyes, their terrifying teeth, and in their strange night-time behaviour. This really disturbed our man. She also suggested to him that we human beings emerged originally and still do emerge daily from a state of unconsciousness, like that of cats, and that we are really much more weird than we think we are. Our friend found this partly convincing, and was rather badly upset by it.

A FROG CALLED GESAMPULA

There was a frog who arrived from the Moon one day, but nobody realized that. Actually the frog who was called Gesampula, did not really realize she was a frog at all, nor that she had jumped from the Moon, nor arrived on the Earth. She just carried on as usual, in a different environment, though she was not aware of that.

To eat, Gesampula most liked small organisms, such as she had always enjoyed on the Moon. On the Earth, she found an abundance of insects to lick up with her very fast and long tongue, and was rather happy with herself.

When she rested on her hind-parts, sparkingly looking around her, and croaking, she evidently appeared extremely attractive to the male frogs of the Earth, who tried, very loudly, to court her with their earthly croaks and jumpings around that normally impressed the females.

Gesampula was fairly spoiled for choice. But the moment she started to respond in some way to a male frog, another one would interfere and spoil the fun. At length Gesampula made a huge leap from her hind legs, which took her back to the Moon.

Nobody on Earth knows how her family or sex life was or is on the Moon, so it is impossible to judge either why she hopped to the Earth in the first place, or why

she suddenly sprang back up to the Moon. She could croak, but could not speak, and so it was impossible for any human beings to know why all this had happened.

ZARATHUSTRA VISITS JAMES CROODER

Someone who looked and sounded like Zarathustra walked down the stairs, and this slightly frightened James Crooder, the man whose house this was, who had no idea there was anyone else in his home. He lived alone now, after being married twice, unsuccessfully, and now rather depleted of money, was trying to readjust to life, although he had often considered suicide, or some other form of disappearance, or instead trying to write a nihilistic existential novel. At the moment that the strange figure floated down the staircase like Duchamps' "Bride Stripped Bare", though of course he was no woman, James Crooder was typing into his pc a sample of a novel he was conjecturing about, which had elements that echoed Bulgakov's "A Dog's Heart", written shortly after Trotsky's "Literature and Revolution," in which a doctor called Preobrazhensky, and his assistant Bormenthal, perform a revolutionary operation on a stray mongrel. The resulting man-dog and his loutish antics, lampoon the idea of the Soviet "new man".

But in James Crooder's projected novel the "revolutionary operation" was performed on a female mouse, which increased her size to that of an average rhinoceros, and caused her to make extraordinarily loud noises, resembling that of huge horns blowing, intermittently and repetitively, but terrifyingly.

James Crooder had already become frightened of his creation, as had Doctor Frankenstein with his monster long before in Mary Shelley's novel, so it was most disturbing for him that just at this moment there intruded absolutely from out of the blue this Zarathustra figure, drifting down the stairs very much like Duchamps' bride, though he was a man, not a woman at all.

Yet, James felt that if the intruder wafting down the staircase had actually been a naked woman, he would not have complained at all, and might even have been quite pleased to invite her for a glass of wine, and in time to share with her the preliminary draft for his novel, to be called "Bulgakov's Mouse: A Rhinoceros Without Qualities."

But this was not a naked woman; not Marcel Duchamps' "Bride" nor any other shimmering apparition of "Hope", nor of "The Harmony of Truth". It was a strange man who had entered boringly into his domain, and tried to preach his philosophy at James Crooder, who had heard it all before. James offered him no wine, which might have simply encouraged him to dilly-dally longer in James' flat; instead he showed him the door, which thank goodness for James Crooder the intruder took to heart and departed without a tussle. Crooder banged close his front door, and returned to his computer, to reconsider what he had written before as a kind of Abstract for his novel: "Bulgakov's Mouse: A Rhinoceros Without Qualities".

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