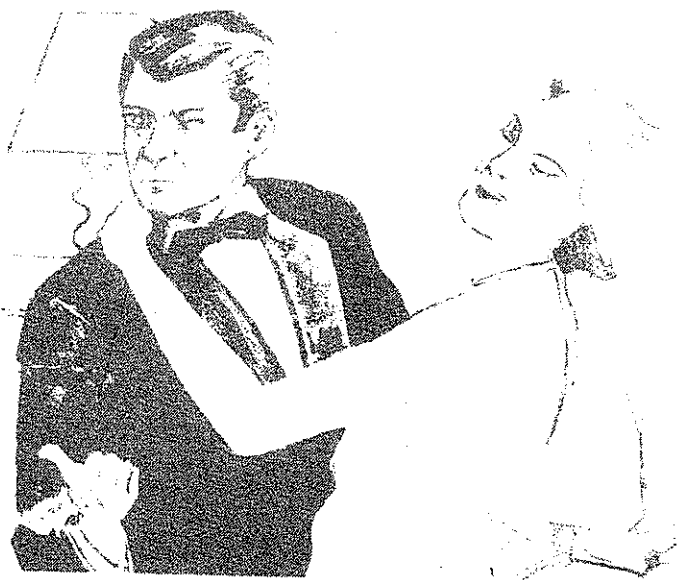


ANTLERS

IN THE

TREETOPS

RON PADGETT & TOM VEITCH



The Coach House Press

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Tom Veitch and Ron Padgett
Bristol, Pennsylvania
August 1970



Cluster was the last man in his regiment to die. The story goes that, on his knees, wounded in a dozen places, his yellow curls flying in the wind, he roared with laughter. A small Indian boy bent over the dying hero, eyes wide with wonder. We watched from a distance as the boy's steel knife flashed in the hot afternoon sun. Crimson, the flow from the scalp as it separates from the skull . . .

You must search for the loveliness of America; it is not obvious; it is scattered; but when you find it, it touches you and binds you and makes you take a great, silent oath . . .

We had taken just such an oath that afternoon 100 years ago. There were four of us. Allow us to introduce ourselves—

Louise Malaronde, ageing patroness of our little band: she put up the stakes and did the dishes. Half Mexican, half Irish. She was a magnificent woman who in her youth must have been very beautiful. She had a charming way of sitting on the edge of a table and suddenly lifting her skirt and producing from her stocking a pouch of Bull Durham and some papers and rolling herself a cigarette. She had come West on her honeymoon in a covered wagon and once, while her husband was away from camp, had stood off three desperados single-handed. Later on when she was settled in a country

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where there was only one other woman, the story goes, not liking the other woman, she had divided the country in half and given notice that, upon pain of death, the separating river was not to be crossed. The enemy's name was "Grandma Sam" and she too carried a gun and she did come straight across that river . . .

Rawson Clivedale, retired rancher and bank executive. (You already sense, perhaps, the *venerable* quality of our testy crew.) He was not much of a success as a rancher because he could not resist overfeeding his animals. They were gross creatures with bulging, pleading eyes. He had killed three or four of them in this manner. Early one summer morning Rawson was found unconscious in a stall—he had been stricken down in the act of giving a horse an extra quart of oats.

The Oriental. Let his name remain such. 179 years on this earth, mystic and Zen master, retired Samurai warrior. He was one of those rare souls who, the sleepier they are, the more graceful they are also. Unfortunately, he was a horrible murderer who had wantonly destroyed his father, mother, sister, brother, and grandma and now he lives alone in a hotel room in a not very attractive part of Philadelphia, Pa. He is probably unhappy; indeed, a sullen lethargy possesses his least movement, even the slightest suggestion of a frown, so that, all in all, he is more graceful, more like a ballerina, more like a charmed gazelle than ever. So he whiles away his hours working in a Coca Cola factory in Philadelphia, where he earns a very good salary, considering . . .

And last there is myself . . . You may call me Cassaba. I am the leader, and I answer to no man on this earth for what I do. And what I do is not pleasant, no not always pleasant, for I am a seeker of the Flesh Eaters.

* * *

It is a Spanish country, the coloring is Spanish, burnt umber and mauve when it isn't fierce orange, and violet hills that seem to put their heads together and weep softly at dusk. . . . Along with this a lilting melody like the lope of a horse toward mountains early in the morning—or late in the afternoon.

You left the shimmering miles of buffalo grass and, going up a narrow trail, rode into the cathedral-like solemnity of the evening trees until you came at last to a clearing where a little house stood and, as time went on, the dream amplified, a beautiful young woman stepped out onto the porch and laughed . . . a beautiful young woman named Ernest . . .

"Good evening," he said. "I see you have come at last, my friends."

"Yes, Savage, we have come." This was El Pinto speaking. A sudden wind makes the pines speak. El Pinto turns to look out across the mesa. I see the depth in his eye.

"Well, come in, my friends. There is food on the table. Not much, but enough. I'm sure the grandmother will help with the dishes?"

"I will help." She smiles gently at Ernest.

. . . We ate in silence. All secretly thought of the dreadful business at hand. I watched Ernest Savage carefully with my eyes, pretending interest in my cube-steak. Back of the table where he sat, a sweeping curtain of blue silk was drawn aside to show the lighter blue of a cloudless sky.

He is a strange one, I thought.

Suddenly the Oriental makes the pointed observation that it has always seemed so astonishing to see a Westerner take a lovely linen cloth, deposit excrement on it, and then carefully wrap it up like some precious object and store it away in his pocket.

Ernest blushed. Maria Malronde gives me the knowing glance. The Englishman draws a circle and then tells you to

strengthen your mind by pushing against that circle as hard as you can. What followed left me vaguely nauseous:

After he got up, Ernest slipped off his dainty night-dress, posturing elegantly before a long mirror, and made much of himself. Now he would bend forward, now lie upon the floor, now stand upright, and now rest upon one leg as if he might have been drawn by some early Italian master. Anon he would lie upon the floor with his back to the glass, and glance amorously over his shoulder.

The rest of us said a small dinner grace and left the table. Two or three went out on the porch: the sun was dripping blood in the West, sinking ball of flaming blood in the Western mountains. Unlike the others, I couldn't help watching fascinated the ritual ablutions of Ernest Savage after his narcissistic performance of a few moments before. As I discovered later, he was using an ancient Shoshonee cleansing ceremony—something the savages (sic) had performed daily during the sexual blood-baths of the 80's. . . . The normal sequence of steps is to: stand more or less erect and wet the hands; bend over and bring water to the face with cupped hands, stand erect and soap the hands, bend over and soap the face with water repeatedly brought to the face with cupped hands. The degree of bend which is assumed (and the height of the basin) is determined, on the other hand, by the maximum amount one can physically and comfortably bend, and on the other, by how little one can bend and still keep from dribbling water down the forearm and body while bringing water to the face.

"You amaze me, Ernest," I said, helping him into his simple plaid calico dress.

"You also amaze me, Svendi." His dark eyes searched mine for the clue to speak what was in his mind. I remained faceless.

Then, as if something electric had suddenly struck his brain, he drew me quickly aside, to a dingy corner of the

room. . . . Slipping his hand expressively into his bosom he drew forth a note, folded several times. Carefully he undid the folds, his fingers trembling ever so slightly.

"There," he said at last, pointing to a jagged foreign script. "What do you make of this? It came over the video this morning."

I read quickly, translating:

QUICKLY THE MAN-MADE ANIMALS RUSH TO
TURN THE FAT EIGHTS ON THEIR SIDES. REPLY
IMMEDIATELY.

I looked at Ernest. He was searching me again. This time I responded with a smile.

"This, my friend," I said, "is what I came for."

Suddenly he was grinning all over like a boy, guffawing and slapping me on the back. We went out to tell the others.

Much later we were riding down the mesa, reminiscing over pipes of fresh tobacco. The image of my Uncle Dudley suddenly flashed to mind, and of a time much earlier, when the plains Indians were ravaging every mail train and stagecoach that passed through buffalo territory. . . . It seems that one day in an overland train the porter, while cleaning out the smoking compartment, stooped over and dropped a derringer from his hind pocket. My uncle, darting upon it, had traded a ten dollar bill for the privilege of throwing the filthy thing out the window. Suddenly the painted face of terror appeared outside . . . a noble savage riding his war pony, brandishing a bloody spear. Without hesitating Uncle Dud flung the derringer with all his might. The gun struck the Indian full in the face and went off, wounding my uncle mortally in the left eye. . . . He died there, clutching the hand of the Russian lady who had been sitting next to him.



At least allow me the final satisfaction of placing my own head on the chopping block. Would you do this thing?"

Yes, we would do it. Besides, there was something horrible, if fascinating, about that head, so noble in its profile, so degenerate full face. I dare say none of us had the least desire to touch him.

We surrendered willingly to his desire and watched nervously as he took a final puff on his cigarette and flicked the burning stub into the crowd of wellwishers. There was a brief skirmish where the butt hit the ground; then the crowd subsided once again.

There was a pause during which teeth snapped like cellophane wrapped around an angry gorilla. He bowed once to us and walked toward his chromium-plated fate . . . even in death his eyes would be shining. He cleared his throat carefully of tubercular phlegm: the blade's course must not be impeded.

It is a thankless task, to be an executioner. Everytime, just before I pull the release cord I feel lost and my mind disintegrates—it shoots stringy shreds of breakfast out over the green tablecloth that I always place under the basket. Flesh grafts and virus patterns . . . am I infected? I glance up at El Pinto. He is calmly staring at the basket, almost with interest.

Suddenly, from somewhere behind the breathless crowd, a whoosh shoots upward toward the stars. From my

elevated perch I can see a young monk, his blackened arms gesturing through orange flames in an old photograph. I think it is odd that no one else has noticed him, and I angrily jerk the release cord.

The Fat Lady grasped the situation in an instant, and with what appeared but one movement, snatched a large fish from the ground and flung a newspaper round it.

Every meal she threw down quarts of milk and pounds of those slashed potatoes in mashed, fried, or scalloped form. I used to lie on my bunk, the mules kissing noisily outside, thinking about her expenditure of sweat and cursing and tears and money that went into keeping her mouth stuffed with food in the form of half-eaten steaks, untouched vegetables, nibbled-at rolls and dabbled desserts.

The hot stifling night vomited up a tight band of horsemen, their pistols blazing against the sky, their eyes rolled upwards, as if they were hunting a bird.

But they were hunting me. And I am Cassaba. I fear no one.

The Fat Lady did not know this; her fingers groped for the silver knife strapped tightly to her belly . . . one last thought pushed its way through her brain . . . "I must save him from this wickedness!"

Grunting audibly, she charged the horsemen, slashing left and right with more gusto, more agility than I had imagined her capable. I know that when I last had her sexually, she did not respond with such eagerness. And I had used a bottle on her. I want to tell you about that bottle. It was not the first time I had used something on a woman. Some of them liked it and said for me to come back and do it to them again. But I think this woman was dead . . . now this bottle it was a wine bottle . . . there might have been wine in the bottle . . . it was green.

I stuck the bottle in her vagina hole.

The suddenness of the shock caused the guns to go off. Captain Davis fell out of his hammock. The dread

expansion of several consecutive minutes was pursuant.

God uses such an indirect mode of expression that we can expect to detect Him practically everywhere. For instance, he is probably Captain Davis.

Making himself comfortable on the floor, Captain Davis resumed his monologue.

"You might say my one desire this morning is to vanish, but my eyes are heavy with an agreeable scent. Crimson, the flow from the scalp. You may all vanish but I am not alone. I have no existence in particular aside from my unappreciated presence in this room."

There was some embarrassed shuffling in the back of the room.

"One learns to stop speaking inside and to listen."

Jesus stepped forth and beat his tiny fists against his chest, which was the ritual way to express his desire to speak to us, in council.

"Pardon me señores that I espeak muy malo in Ingles pero I must to you say this words..."

He remembered something which made him feel inclined to go on: the stains, already dry, on the porcelain of the toilet . . . and suddenly his tongue was blessed.

"Ah! how sad and poignant the little city seemed to me that day! In the heat, wave after wave of which assaulted my body, a heavy silence hung over the city, the little city, and a vulture hovered over the silence. Some Hindu people came out of their temple, the one they had brought to this country at great expense. They had brought flowers, baskets and boxes of flowers packed into several thousand small carts, which lay scattered about the temple like iron fillings about a magnet. The gentle depth of their eyes, the mobility of their brows, the suffering fragility of their bodies, the slowness of their gait—all this moved me to the depths of my being, where I have remained ever since. There was no longer anything earthly in their pupils, which reflected nothing, but

rather gave out a dazzling light. This is why I cannot participate in your search for the Flesh Haters."

Breathing heavily through her mouth, the Fat Lady rose and made her way toward the pedestal. She brushed aside the tiny Jesus. Then, beating on her magnificent breasts, she also spoke.

"B-b-b-buddhists like hell!" she said bitterly. "You've got a nice bunch of ideas—you-y-y-..." Here she stammered wildly for a moment. "I didn't mean, well, that they should hang anybody, really. I wouldn't want to do that. But a definite break was made in our lives when we began to pray on our knees instead of lying on our backs on the cold floor."

"Turn it off," I said, snapping my fingers. "You're wasting our time. Tomorrow morning, we ride. And that's that."

I slammed the book closed. As I did so, my fingers brushed satin at her hip, slick and stiff and cold to the touch, like a kitchen floor in December. I suppose every man has had the desire to lie down on just such a floor, with just such a woman, and I was no exception. Tonight I gave impulse free rein, and the stuff came unstitched, protesting shrilly. There seemed to be yards of it, and, startlingly, portions of her flesh came with it. I heard her gasp as she felt her body disintegrate about her, and as I stripped her completely she grasped my head and thrust it abruptly into her groin. . . .

I must admit I was unscrupulous—I adopted the most varied disguises (sailor, financier, psychiatrist, berry-picker, etc.), through which I expended my hypnotic intelligence to control her vast and elaborate emotional organization. She began to sob quietly. I booted her skeleton out the door into the softly falling snow.



ere is Cassaba, a man inside all men. I spoke with him last night after the meeting:

"Your father's name was Tony, wasn't it?"

"His name was Antonio! And my mother's name was Arlinda! They were both from Texas! They worked in the fields! They cleaned pastures—they picked cotton and cleared fields! Three times I remember that when my father's crop was ripe, the rancher or farmer he worked for made him get out without a cent. One time he went to the judge in Hangnoose, Texas, and complained. The judge told him, "Tony don't make trouble, no law can control that man. You be quiet or you won't even get your chickens back."

I saw the sadness in his eyes, I looked away, spitting twice in the dust. "And your mother," I said, "she was a whore?"

The dead man drifted in the breeze. He drifted upright on his legs like a goat, as he had in life—nothing improper, farther beyond the reach of ideology, nationality, hardship, inspiration, than he had ever been in life. A few fat flies stayed with him, eating and breeding, although he was far from land, travelling light above the surface of the complacent South Atlantic. The tasselled fringe of his white silk trousers—he had been a rich man—were heavy with ocean spray.

He was coming out of Africa, moving steadily toward me.

"Yes, Ernest. My dear good Ernest."

A look of pity flickered in his eyes then faded.

"She was a big woman—strong, big body, big bones. I used to see her carry sacks full of cotton on her back. She had ten children and she never used a—what do you call it?—a mid-wife. Only three of the children died! I was born in the cotton field on sacks full of the cotton. . . .

"Whenever I cried, my mother, to quiet me, would take me in her arms and say 'Come now, tell your mother what you saw in heaven.' Isn't that strange? '... *Tell your mother what you saw in heaven.*'"

And the little Mexican Jesus Lafuega sits in his hotel room, breathing. The others have deserted him, gone off to do some carousing. He alone must guard the treasure, and he alone must tremble at the approaching footsteps. . . . A shadow is seen to slip quickly under the door. . . .

"Por Dios, I am afraid!"

At that instant there came a crash more terrific than any that had preceded it, and the whole world glared with intense light. Everyone was momentarily stunned, and when they recovered their senses, Ernest, looking toward the farmhouse, saw a sheet of flame coming from the farmer's head.

"Fire! Fire!" she cried. "Your head is on fire! It's been struck by lightning!"

"I'll be dadburned, so it has!" yelled the farmer. "It's ablazin' in glory like a church afire!"

He was rapidly shouting this as he ran from the barn.

The farmer's daughter came galloping pell mell from the barn clutching a full pail of milk. Frantically she hurled the foaming liquid in the direction of her father, missing his glowing face by only a yard.

A step behind her. . . . Slipping his hand around her plump arm, the orange Oriental draws her aside down a path toward a small lake that edges one side of the Kimball property.

"This man must be permitted to die," whispered Cassaba. "He is one of the largest of the landowners."

"I understand," I said. . . . How well do I understand, Cassaba . . . How well do I understand! You weep for *tu madre* with one eye, while the other eye directs traffic in a nightmare world of murderous intentions and perverse sexual designs!

I see a tall San Antonio man in a garb of the most somber black stroll by, looking for his horse. He gives Cassaba a knowing glance.

Jesus had read somewhere that to openly combat an insane person is dangerous. It is advisable to humor his delusions. Fortunately Jesus had also recently read an interesting story in which a man had avoided death at the hands of a maniac by this very means. It was a desperate chance, but the mouth of the little Mexican began to pulsate spasmodically:

"You are mistaken," he began, shaking his finger at the maniac. "The boy you are to sacrifice is under the bed."

The maniac, turning his knife slowly, paused.

"Look under the bed, you'll see," said the Mexican once again.

The bed was at the far end of the room and the room was very long. The maniac walked the length of the room and, getting down on hands and knees, peered into the darkness under the bed.

Jesus hit the floor. In a flash he was out in the hall. He opened the first door he came to—happily it was unlocked. Dashing into the room he snapped the door locked behind him, then spun about, hand on heart, and gave a long Whew! He opened his beautiful dark eyes and looked into the grinning face of the maniac. The maniac began his little dance once again, clucking and mooing.

"My little . . . friend . . . didn't I tell . . . you my purpose . . . ? Didn't I . . . convey to you . . . the reality I am . . . ?" The knife flashed dully in the moonlight streaming

through the open window. Far away the quiet crackling of a farmhouse and the faint noises of frightened animals . . .

"Me Dios! I have sinned much! Forgive me at this last hour of my life!"

"'Me Dios'..you..say? You whimpering little..fool, what do..you..know about..Los Dios? Am I not..the Inca..priest, and are you..not the..offering..chosen by..the god Chuapoctual . . . ?"

"I know. You told me."

"Then..why am I..waiting for . . . ? *Let the deed be..done!*"

Two screams rise curdling the night. Ernest and Cassaba, walking in the shadows of the forest, away from the burning wreckage that was once a farm, lift their heads momentarily to listen.

"Was that one of the animals?"

"The black man's horse, I think."

"No, it was from the direction of the town. I hope young Jesus is all right. . . . He is guarding the treasure. If our mission is to succeed, we must have the treasure."

"Listen, Cassaba," I say, taking hold of his arm. "There is something inside me I must speak to you . . . something about your mission which puzzles me terribly."

His forefinger beat like a miniature tap-hammer on the table which separated us. "Go ahead," he says, looking into the shadows around my eyes. "What is your question?"

"Just this. . . . How can you preach Jesus Christ and the Bible to your followers one day, and indulge yourself in a riot of executions, killings and sexual degradation the next?"

He looked somewhat pained. I gritted my teeth and waited for the answer. It was not long in coming. . . .

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth, is what I believe. It wasn't by chance that the Spanish people crossed the Atlantic; it was God that selected them. We hold the first written documents about title and property.

We were born as a new breed—not Mexicans, not Indians. The law in Title 2, Book 6 of Laws of the Indians was written on October 19, 1914. Marriage between Indians and Spaniards was legalized and a new breed was born. The Indians had the blood of ten lost tribes of Israel. The Spanish had Jewish and Arab blood. A new breed was born here from two great bloods. A *santa raza*, who would find justice, was created!”

“Do you feel then that you have been chosen by God?”

“Yes. Our people had not a guide, no light, no knowledge. God has chosen me.”

Below us a red streak crossed the seemingly immense field of green and came to rest, a ball. A billow of silks, Mrs Sam, approached the ball and again it went—thwock!—across the lawn, coming to rest near a white wicket. Apparently she had gone through a wicket on her first turn; either that or she is playing alone, simply practicing. Otherwise, the other players would not have allowed her to continue shooting, out of turn, skipping them entirely. Unless of course Mrs Sam has, since this morning, been taken ill again and the other players are simply too embarrassed or distraught to call it to her attention, or anyone else’s.

A blue ball arrives near hers.

“Listen, Ernie,” he said, taking me by the sleeve. “There is also something I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time.”

“What is it?” I said. I knew what was coming.

“Just this—I think you’re the most beautiful girl I have ever met.”

Suddenly we were holding hands. . . . Far away one could hear the fire engines, coming from town to put out the farmer’s head. . . .



Things were getting hot, but I decided to wait. Still, leaning in what was gradually becoming a blue-gray shadow, I was becoming impatient. Impatience itself, like a large fly, began buzzing around my hands, causing them to gesture.

I wondered what it was that made my mother so generous with her liquor all of a sudden. We talked of rain. We talked of Harlem. We talked of Harlem. We talked of rain. Soon the bottle was gone, and we opened a new one. We were about halfway through, and she began crying and shivering. Perhaps she was a narcotics addict. I asked her if I could do anything. She started taking off her uniform. Her name was Rita. She was wearing nothing else.

"Please . . . pretty please . . . hit me . . . hit me . . ." I don't know what came over me. I started hitting her and squeezing her body. She was making a noise.

I confess, you see, to being a humanist. I have shot a man while he was at his latrine. I shot a boy in Germany off a bicycle because I felt I could reach him at 200 yards. And I shot a young soldier in a beet patch camouflaged with beet leaves as he rose from a row of beets—I now realize—to surrender.

Surrender was what I would not do, ever.

Doctor Rodin began to shoot his spittle out of his mouth in a fine spray. His face was turning red. I knew he was at long last coming to the point of his uninteresting harangue.

"Never," he spewed, "will anatomy be at its last degree of perfection until an examination is made of the arteries of a live young girl. Only in this way can we get a complete analysis."

I was casually leafing through Vesalius' great treatise on anatomy. I smashed the remains of my cigarillo in the ashtray and took a sip of Spanish brandy (Fundator, of course, the best brandy in all of Spain), heavier and sweeter than French cognac. I pursed my lips and shot a stream of the stuff across the room, into the face of Doctor Rodin.

"Look, Doc . . ." But I could say no more. My new moustache bristled in the dry air. The day had been hot, but the famous breeze had come up and blown it away, to make some other place hot. I lit another cigarillo and watched the smoke curl up into the room like slow, flying flowers . . . unable to bring myself to take a really good look at the doctor.

But I didn't need to see the face; the shape of the head was enough, a cigarette, burning wildly, dangled from the puffy lips. His tiny hands were stuffed into his pockets, each of them caressing a gun. He's waiting for you, I thought; he's going to kill you, or have a fit and scare you to death. Or will he have the nerve? What did you ever do to deserve this appalling predicament?

I did not know the answers to these terrifying questions.

"This is cool by the hot room compared," he said, indicating the door through which I was to propel myself. As he spoke, the door opened. A tiny gnome-like man of about 78 emerged. Red as the cherry in a Manhattan, he clutched a towel about his bony frame. The blast of hot air curled my toes.

But it was a dream. She was in the sanitarium, Doctor Rodin's sanitarium, and there was nothing to be afraid of. She could see the branches of the trees that grew next to her

bed. They were pregnant with buds, gooey buds, and the oyster luminescence of the buds half shielded, half revealed the landscape as though it were under a shell.

"Nothing defines our relationship!" the doctor was shouting gleefully. "Nothing anymore makes walls around us or upon us! No one laughs!"

Over the place where the wound had been, the flesh had grown together in the form of a red rose. As she looked she felt the hurt inside her slowly healing, the phone was ringing, the hurt of a lifetime. Brother Leo was laughing in recognition. Suddenly the compulsion of her body now was to love him, everything inside her flowed together suddenly, a huge growing and expanding plant, a grapefruit plant, was inside her reaching out to meet every person in the room.

Rosa grabbed my ears and turned her head toward me. Then she slowly raised her skirt over her naked hips. A large furry monster pulsed with a strange life of its own. I did not know what it was. She was perspiring but not with the heat of a kitchen. There was a hard, desperate, twangy quality to her voice as she said, "Cambiele el Aciete?"

I swiveled my head slowly to follow her with my eyes. Her body touched me. An electric spark shot through me, a small one of low voltage. What was she doing to me? The power of the spark increased. Her odor clung to me like fog. Whonng! Whonng! I was a ship lost at sea. Rosa stood still now except for an almost unnoticeable twitch that shot along her arm when she touched me. It was getting to her too, and I do not mean the narcotics. She opened her mouth, revealing large, stately, white, perfect teeth, between which the tip of her tongue made a demure appearance, then lolled out. I flipped the cigarillo into her mouth.

"Ole!"

The crowd jumped to its feet and flowed toward me, singing:

They are unholy who are born
To love wild plum at night,
Who once have passed it on a road
Glimmering and white.

It was as though the darkness had
Speech of silver words,
Or as though a cloud of stars
Perched like ghostly birds.

They are unpitied from their birth
And homeless in men's sight,
Who love, better than the earth,
Wild plum at night.*

"This flower which I hold in my hand," she said, "was sent me from South Carolina. It is suffering from a peculiar disease which is threatening all the flowers of this variety in the world. They want to know if I can do something to heal it." She looked at it as tenderly and lovingly as a doctor would look at a sick child.

But should a breeze happen to quicken these solitudes, to rock these floating bodies, to confuse these masses of white, blue, green and pink, to mix all these colors, to combine all these murmurings, then there arises from the depths such sounds and there passes before the eyes such sights that I would in vain try to describe them to those who have never travelled these primeval fields.

In shortness, a longitude. A plenitude of thought noodling the small hibiscus plant at her left elbow. She looked long and deeply into my eyes. I felt myself a sort of Japanese flower arrangement, subjected as it were to the studious and critical gaze of a horticulturist.

"I see," she spoke, "in you the civilized man who has

* WILD PLUM by Orrick Johns

become a savage; you see in me the savage who has become the civilized man (or woman, if you prefer). Having both entered life's course by opposite ends, you have come to rest in my place and I have come to rest in yours. But you are not me. We are totally different."

"Obvious."

"No, I'm serious, James. We must study this thing out. Why, for instance your strange attraction to me, a woman who has devoted her career to the care and study of flowers... while you—may your soul rest in peace—earn your pittance as a six o'clock glove. Can you explain that?" Her voice was tremulous.

Finally the head began to move. I wasn't sorry, thinking perhaps I'd have to do something radical before long. Now I could leave her for a moment and put on the other glove. It was almost light now. What time is it? I asked the other. Six o'clock.

Come in, said a loud childish voice.

I opened the door and saw a lank-haired girl of about fifteen standing chewing gum and eyeing me curiously from beside the kitchen table. The hair was coal black and one of her eyelids drooped a little as she spoke. Well, what do you want? she said. Boy, she was tough and no kidding but I fell for her immediately. There she was—hard and straight, a member of a secret organization no doubt, and about her the perfume of excellence.

My mind seemed at that moment to pierce hers, to comprehend in one instant the essence of her personality—an intense image burned my retina from behind: two newly married girls, yearning for the sweetness of motherhood, with lips parted, striving to suck the soul of the child whom they imagined they saw wandering in fields of flowers...

The glove ceased its surrender to my hand. Casually as I could I picked up my bouquet and started to leave. Both

women made as if to stop me, then hesitated, slightly shame-faced in an undercurrent of jealousy. . . .

"What is this, mesdames?" I puzzled aloud.

The lips of one quivered. The other paled. Rhoda Von Rentfelt was seen to clutch nervously at a tall stemmed geranium, crushing it, this lovely flower, with unconscious abandon between her normally stable and disciplined fingers.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really must go. The vast Walnut Forest of Illinois awaits my ministrations."

In her crisis of frustration Rhoda let loose a throbbing scream of anguish, a lash of sound that beats on the ear like a wall of surf, jolting the others, as if they had just discovered boiling sea water around their ankles, and then that wash of noise swept past the cubicles and poured down the wide carpeted stairs to inundate the leather armchairs below, and the smoking stands, and the backgammon tables, and the tall clocks with the great pendulums that move slowly as the tilting of an ocean liner, and in the distant library the old men stir from their sleep and blink under the pale thin sheets of possibly the *London Times* drawn up over their heads, a huge gaping hole burnt in the fold by their long extinguished cigars, and on a clear day, with full throat, that wave of sound reaches three floors down to the ground level below and the tatters of it curl out into the street like wisps of scud, rolling off the pavement into the cellar-most apartments, where the custodian, sweating over an old screw, suddenly jumps up, pale and shouting—"Whazzat?!"

"It's only awld Agnes, dear, the Flower Lady."

"Ouff. I thought it be the Krauts again, wif their bloody screamin' bombs . . ."

Then English fishlady that she was, she left him with a kiss and ascended little steps to the street, where, at regular intervals, huge scoops of dirt had been left near pieces of gutted machinery. The old fellow groaned in the spirit and staggered into the house, forgetting to close the oak door

behind him. Slowly, painfully he climbed the hall stairs . . . Nora would be in bed . . . She will call the doctor . . .

He reached down onto the landing to brace his weight, then he rolled over onto the window bench. His heart took a sudden leap and stopped beating. He glanced briefly at the ceiling. Was he thinking of Nora or of the great hereafter? Smiling he died in his hat and coat.

They found him like that, one of the finest, sweetest, kindest men I had ever known, and one I had loved deeply, if distantly. He was my grandfather.

And that is the story, thought the abbé as he sipped his morning hot tea from a pewter cup embellished with vines, delicate little flowers and the figure of a man with a tiny chip on his shoulder . . . rumpling the newspaper . . . cough . . . yes yes and I'm next.

Faintly smacking his withered lips, he too dies, right then and there, page 33, the sails fall together, no remorse, enter my kingdom you who are history struck upon rock.

Downstairs, the chauffeur took out a wallet from his inside pocket and held it in front of him. Obitrol checked the photo with the face and nodded.

He nodded to a projectionist hidden in the darkness. There was a whirl of machinery and the six-by-four screen was suddenly filled with a white light, and then reversed numbers, and then the film shaking as if taken by a hand-held camera, a zoom shot of the London Transport bus terminal at Victoria. The screen was blotted out momentarily by a bus (Ladbroke Grove) passing across it, like a small red building on wheels, and then the camera, shooting wild and low, was focusing across the rows of people queueing at respective stops, into the taxi rank, and attempting to pick out a man emerging from the depths of the railway station itself. Obitrol's heart raced toward the screen. The lighting had been bad and the figure was blurred and hazy, then suddenly it sort of exploded in light and the camera cut in closer and

onto the face and the picture froze. The man's head turned, one hand a streak of gray as if he had been hailing the Queen. Obitrol stared at the enlarged black and white face before him on the screen. The stars wheeled wildly in their grooves and his heart sank; he wanted to rip the film from the wall and attack the men in the room and rush out.

Outside inky blackness pressed against the glass door, but beyond he could faintly hear the last toot of the calliope from the circus blocks away.

The ceiling dropped possibly six inches but still retained its original beauty, though in a modified form, despite the fact that the temperature of the room had just reached boiling point. Restraining himself from mopping his brow, and seeking anxiously for a simple way of asking the frighteningly obvious question, Obitrol delayed the moment by asking Flowers to pass the lighter.

It seemed like new. He walked around it five times, prodding it, stroking it, standing back and looking at it from different angles, then actually sitting inside it and holding the wheel. It felt wrong but it was definitely the same. The initials were there. As he sat numbed into a state of lethargy despite the awesome implications of the day, Obitrol knocked on the window.

"Would you let me out?"

There was a slight murmur of polite amazement. Flowers smiled and coughed, forcefully tapping the pipe on the polished veneer of the table.

Across the lot someone had set up a trampoline. In evenly paced leaps, a white-haired figure vaulted and spun against the blue sky: back triple somersault, front triple, half gainer, recovery, full gainer, recovery, jack-knife opening backwards to reverse swan, triple back, then triple front again.

"She's good!" the chauffeur said.

Cassaba nodded.

The buildings stared wide-windowed at each other; many of the windows composed of stained glass layers, were rotated across one another by hidden machinery. Balconies lipped the upper stories, with people sitting on them eating sandwiches. Below, leisurely people dressed in dark colors wandered along the streets, apparently oblivious to the motions of the acrobat.

Nightfall assembles them, as it does the stars. With nothing in common, they muster to sleep together, cursing, insulting and jostling each other, picking quarrels with old enemies, or throwing earth and rubbish, even rolling on the ground and spitting and biting their tongues with rage.

A goat turned the corner and went loping down the street, pursued by a large family of Puerto Ricans.

The music grew louder. I turned to Louise.

"Is there a fire?" a man's voice called from the orchestra. "Tell us what's happening!"

"It's completely under control. The stove in the restaurant next door—"

He never finished.

There was a hysterical scream from nowhere and he turned to see smoke billow out from under the curtain.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he shouted above the hubub, "please try to leave calmly and quietly. There is no danger if you remain calm."

But no one was listening. The audience, like one massive organism, had risen in unison, like a herd of cattle rising to the sound of small arms fire in the moonlight. The aisles were clogged with screaming, gyrating, jerking hunks of meat.

I thought I was witnessing the end of the world.

Suddenly the film resumed and the Queen, majestic, solemn, stupid, floated quickly over the screen. Then I recognized the voice of Lolita Caballero. She actually didn't have much of a voice, guttural and quivery, but when she bore down on those hot flamenco numbers, something wonderful

happened to me. I was a gypsy at heart. Ah, for a little stamping around the campfire somewhere in Spain, then for a fiery fuck in a little gypsy home-on-wheels. Lolita and Lover Boy—all the way!! I could see it now, feel our hard, thin bodies, pressed together, like fingers, perspiring; our faces greasy and dirty because we hadn't washed after dinner. We had stuffed ourselves, clawing at the plates, tearing the roasted meat apart in a savage fury, wiping greasy fingers in our thick mops of Spanish hair, and then mopping the floor with them.

But I had other things to worry about. A diaper tore loose from the basket and sailed past me. I caught it on the dead run, despite the strong wind. The basket was teetering wildly as it neared the corner, and here comes that damn goat again!

A voice, somewhere behind the screen, began reading from a prepared text.

"During these ecstatic catastrophies not only were the present and future events revealed to him by God, but even the hidden thoughts of his companions."

Thus he knew when the Oriental had finally made the decision to betray him. Quietly he took the yellow man aside one evening when the stars were out. Putting his arm around "Old Yeller", as we sometimes called him, Cassaba spoke softly so that no one, even the Oriental, would hear.

"Olim fungus ego," he said repeatedly.

They sat at a small table in the garden. The Oriental put the letter into the envelope and finished off the wine. Then both of them smoked for some minutes, without speaking, drawing long and quietly on their Cuban cigars. The street was quiet now. A car passed. It wouldn't rain again tonight. Finally Obitrol came over and made a remark about what time it was getting to be. The Oriental's face was quite suddenly suffused with a color something like the wine he had drunk.

"Let me pay the check," I said, leaning forward and reaching for my wallet.

"It is said that death may be compared to a bowel movement. Why? Because death has no friends. And death is not an enormous sexual orgasm, contrary to popular opinion. Rather death is an enormous sexual organism. Leave it at that."

Watching him, you could see that it was almost an unbearable pleasure for him to be where he was. And the bird, the bird who was dictating these words. . . . Well, the Oriental had a habit that one remarked on if one saw him enough—a slight twist of the head . . . as if he were trying to rid himself of a crick in the neck. What he was doing was turning his head so the eagle could speak more directly into his ear!

"Come my dear, we must catch up with the others! They are far ahead of us by now, treading the Elysian Fields by now!"

So hand in hand the Oriental and Obitrol trot up the rocky path that leads to the summit of this high peak in the endless chain of mountains. Happy old kids they are, and certainly alive to nature and its glories! However, progress—for this very reason—was slow. They did not get much farther than a hundred yards. At every little flower they met, Obitrol would kneel down to pray. Then he would examine the blossom, caress it, study it, talk with it, kiss it. Several times in his ecstasy it seemed he would take flight to the heavens!

At last they reached the camping-out place. The important ones were all there: Cassaba, his bride-to-be Ernest Savage, Jesus LaFuega Fiercho, the Fat Lady, Orrick Johns, Doctor Rodin, Rhoda Van Rentfelt, Rita Baby, the Madman, and of course last but not least Rawson Clivedale and Maria Malronde. El Pinto had stayed behind to guard the trail at the base of the climb. This was important, for Cassaba feared that the Sparkplug Brothers would follow us and attempt to

prevent our successful reconnaissance of an important Flash-Eater territory.

As usual, it fell to Maria Malronde to prepare the children for bed. You raise an unbelieving eyebrow? Why? Yes, we had children in our little colony of travellers, we had many of them, even though we were the avowed enemy of the Flash Eater, perhaps even because of this. It is not necessary to rationalize such behavior.

To facilitate her task, Maria—or as we called her, ‘the Blessed Virgin’—had invented an object which resembled a cross between a ball and a picture book. In fact, it had originally been manufactured for use as a croquet ball, and had been used exactly for this purpose by certain well-to-do townspeople of the plains regions. Now, covered with colorful pictures of an arresting variety of objects, peoples, places, etc., it served as Maria’s inspiration. Using the ball-book the way a gypsy hag might consult a crystal ball, she would fabricate the most inventive and fascinating stories. As she spoke the children jumped up and down on their beds, flailed around on the floor, tears and laughter streaming from their heads, until finally, exhausted with the exertions of emotional release, they were picked up one by one and draped along their bunks. I must confess we adults loved it too. We would even go so far as to sneak up outside the windows, with the summer night whirring and gleaming around us, the sun safe in its nest in the sea, and watch old Maria lift the ball aloft, gazing at it as if it had suddenly appeared in her hand from nowhere. From time to time a pen of light, cleverly concealed in her sleeve, would send up a thin, solid column of information onto the surface of the ball, illuminating this picture or that, providing more grist for Maria’s inexhaustable imagination. I should add that the ball-books were made by the children at the rate of one per day, to serve as the night’s story power, so to speak. Maria never saw the balls until, lights out, everyone was ready for the story to begin, as it

always did, in a low distant hum, which was Maria's voice warming to the evening's episodes. The children were, I might add, zealous in the extreme in their preparation of the story balls, and would shun no effort to obtain this picture or that. At the end of the week the seven balls would be dismantled—heroic episodes torn from their surfaces—and cleaned in readiness for the coming week's cycle.

In one story, light edges over the darkened cliffs. Through the sage a woman walks silently, a stick in her hand to ward off snakes. She scans the mists in the far-off mountains. She picks up a stone and smooths it, toes a patch of lichen. Two smoke-toned chows watch and sniff, then jounce knowingly after their mistress. Another day has begun for Georgia O'Keeffe.

Another day has begun for me, too. That is, I have been awake for twenty-four straight hours. Putting down my writing equipment, I rise from my chair and cross the room to the window. In the south, gray storm clouds are gathered, a brisk wind is rustling the trees—an omen—in the front yard. Quaint, I thought, how quaint.

Out in the yard in the cage, facing me, was a small Siamese rhesus with the face of a great man—Albert Einstein. With mad aloofness he stared into far distances. Frightfully human, frightfully sick. In horror I watched these two men, each looking at the other and speaking the same language, each breathing and standing on his legs, until one man extinguishes the other with only the slight pressure of one finger of his outstretched hand.

You thought he was just another stumble-bum. He was a 22-year-old Inca Indian from Bolivia, born without legs, born without a head . . . I must speak to Fabian about this . . .

Drat! To wake in the night at the stirring of some invisible angel at your side picking your pockets. . . . Or the noise of that confounded butler nosing about in the pantry for a midnight snack. . . .

With the water in his ears, he could hear slight sounds more distinctly: his back scratching against the pebbles in the bed of the stream, and, more distantly, another sound, a low rumbling that grew, too quickly, to a pounding. He knew the sound and he knew he shouldn't be hearing it now, here.

He lifted his head out of the water in time to see the sheep running full-tilt toward him—and in time for her to see him. She jumped, and her hind hooves came down within inches of his thigh.

More followed. He counted them as they splashed across the stream: two . . . nine . . . four . . .

Suddenly he realized that although his tone of voice was that of someone counting, the words he spoke did not correspond to the actual number of sheep jumping over him into the cotton horizon. At last his tone of voice told him there could be no more. He ventured a look.

From a wall of people jammed shoulder to shoulder, the parade of competitors hove into sight. First from Greece, where the Olympics began, came a man carrying a white and blue flag. Then came West Germans in blue parkas and black ski pants and then the East Germans in dun-colored caps and coats, with the girls in blazing orange, waving wildly. He waved back.

In they came, country after country—the Argentinians with woolen ponchos, the Austrians in forest green, the Bulgarians in white fur hats, the Canadians with their rainbow-colored coats and their rain-colored hats. Then Chile, South Korea, Denmark, Spain, and the Americans with blue hat bands, red tunics with white piping, blue pants and high black boots.

Then the Finns in huge white coats emblazoned with a blue streak, the Japanese in scarlet, Hungary, Iceland, Lebanon, Morocco, Mongolia, Norway, New Zealand and the Netherlands, with blue parkas and burnt orange toques. Now the Poles in a rush of color, the men with sheepskins over red

jackets, the girls in white with scarlet scarves, Rumania with cream-colored coats, a coat incongruous on its tiny 11-year-old figure skater, the Swedes in blue jackets, the Swiss all in white, a single Czechoslovak, and Turkey with red parkas and white tasselled caps.

Then the Soviet Union in a long line, girls in white with red boots, men in blue with red boots and blue and white stocking caps, Yugoslavia in brown sheepskins, and finally, as the stadium erupted in skull-cracking noise above the shrieking blare of the loudspeakers, the French in red, white and blue above brown boots.

In Houston, Texas, three chimps, neatly dressed, went to work in a furniture factory, and in California an ape was arrested for speeding after he steered his master's car through the rush hour traffic at seventy miles per hour.

And they wondered why you were writing novels and why you sucked dicks. They wondered why you had a dog named "Lassie" and a toy pig you called "Mr. Jinx." They laughed when you yoyoed Mr. Jinx on his string. Mr. Jinx in fact did look very funny running up and down, like a monkey. At the top of each ascent his little blue crystal eyes would wink and from inside him a small plaintive scratching noise that was once a hearty "oink" would emerge . . .

This was later, after we were relaxing in Hanover's principal beer-garden, when there entered a plump middle-aged man in the tight brown uniform of a Sturmbannhuehrer or Gauleiter with wet red lips and a great deal of face powder. The combination of homosexuality and arbitrary power has for me always been productive of an irrational disquiet—Tiberius, James I, Frederick the Great are none of them figures with whom I would care to have been closely associated—and the spectacle of this arrogant queer, disdainfully acknowledging the sycophantic greetings of the other customers while playfully flicking the ears of the better-

looking of his attendant storm-troopers with his shiny leather gloves, seemed quite suddenly and indescribably angelic.

Now at 80 he still climbs to the top of the highest mountain near his ranch, goes on camping trips, raises everything from rutabagas to endive in his garden, grinds his own flour, makes his own yogurt, and occasionally plays for the local double-A baseball team.

I envied him his poise as he went far to his right, into the hole, to scoop up a hard-hit grounder and, in one easy motion, fire across to the stretching first baseman. The home office had wired me to the effect that in spite of his age, he was by any standards a remarkably competent ball-player, and that I should drive down and sign him up. On the way down my car began to make a funny noise under the hood. I stopped to listen. I was cold, my ears hurt. They must have been red because I had all the windows open and the top down. I could no longer feel myself. Numb. The night is alive, the wind whistles, straight lines flee into the heavens, where the sun is falling quietly. Sunset, sunset in the African rain forest. The splendor of these sunsets. The charm of the word "splendor". A chimpanzee arrives on the scene, clutching a banana, which he drops on seeing the great expansive view. For a full fifteen minutes he stands, swaying lightly, hypnotized by the rich flickering colors of dusk. Then he withdraws silently into the thicket, leaving the banana.

Quietly I slide out of my car and run to seize the banana.

Overhead the stars were gleaming shyly. Horses moved in the brush, paying no attention to the stars or each other. The wind rose and fell, like the breast of a young girl two thousand light years from home.

The topography had changed and we now hit stretches of flat open country with mountains way off in the distance. Huge rocks and boulders lay profusely in all directions. The soil was full of rocks and there were only a few twisted live oak trees to be seen, instead of the lush green

forests. We hit town—drove through and picked up a road following the shore of the lake—brilliant blue and clear, I love you—the shore line ragged and stony, pigeons were pecking on the heads of passengers in airplanes overhead, short wind-blown and twisted trees leaning toward their reflections in the water. A wind had sprung up and massive cloud formations plowed across the blue sky. The water of the lake became choppy, the surface agitated with small rolling white-caps. The scene was magnificent and awe-inspiring—beautiful and cold and real. I filled myself with it and can at this instant not only see it all vividly but smell the freshness of the air, as well as the stink of my hairy companion.

At least I don't go around pulsing head. Do I? Slowly her head moves, following the bullwhip. The tongue going slowly and expertly over the embers of past tragedy . . . Her father grabbed her viciously, thrust the hot organ between her lips . . . She screamed. Mother! Mother, save me!

"Look sister, I don't let nobody's emotions whip and curl!"

She turned to run, yanking his balls, he bellowed and deposited her soundly in a pile of excrement under the sofa.

Cassaba mutters in his grave. "Transcend," he mutters, "transcend the gleaming swords of Christmas past . . . Whooooooooo . . ."

Now Stud had never been to school to the slender divide of his buttocks, because he was a star pupil in that resting on the flower of his bum. He noticed how Miss Ernest wasn't moved back and forth with the same bite of dust as he was, almost as if she had protected and sucked and pulled on her hymnal.

"Get up, you fuckin' bitch, I'm overhead the stars gleaming, Jesus Christ risen in your eye!" He sprawls on top of her, fingering his rosary beads.

"Oh please don't please don't!"

"Stranger, it looks like I made a mistake." Up and down the stiff rail the little choo-choo train of her hand.

Sometimes tip of his cock making little darts in her hand. She crept up his leg to nest softly in his hairbush . . .

"Mighty pretty ambition, them fellars. Yes, ha ha Miss Apple, creep around like a crab while I dismount my horse." She crept around his penis, playing with her new lice friends. The wind rose and fell in the brush as Cassaba farted and then wiped himself on his sleeve. "No smoking down there," he said.

The recording instrument clicks and unwinds, then begins to repeat itself, running along the engraved lines in the mind of the arithmetic scholar time and time again, forcing him to an awareness of What He Is . . .

The bullwhip buzzed along the ground. Not a sound save those of two panties falling. Her shirt reddened with blood. Heading toward each other their bluish signals spoke of love, love perverse and destructive. "Please, don't, please don't. I know you are one of the Flash Haters!"

"I? I am Cassaba! I guess I owe you a sweet lick for that!"

Once again the whip sang its trail of dust rising behind them, Miss Ernie fell and flailed around in the campfire. Unspeakable lusts burned and exploded in the heart of the drowning man. She was only a few feet of bodies straining under impossible knees. His breath most foul with rotten teeth and cancer of the throat. And they met. In one slow motion tore her leg off. This was blasphemies! God withdrew from the body, Cassaba fell screaming and frothing at the motu..mouth, utterly destroyed. The other rider, seeing this, brought it between his legs, stroking her soggy flower, his pistol full erect in its warm holster. Miss Apple Mouth opened eagerly to him. She searched his fag eyes to see if he was kidding.

"I guess I wow owe you something, don't I Mister?"

"What?"

"I said I guess I owe you a swirl and then popped loudly, like a root."

"Nope."

She heard this faintly, above the gentle whooshing of her mind in its eternal waters.

"Look, let's make a deal. I smell wind just before that final whipsnar." And stepping closer his face into halo, the man rustled, he smiled and rubbed her flanks. They shot forward like an enema.

Then her hand dropped from where it rested briefly before continuing to flash into his eye in moonlight.

"Don't you think we could make up, Little One?"

"What do you have in mind? You're not a very pleasant sort of man, sitting around whipping people you've never seen before."

"Not I. You are mistaken. The one who lies dead does these things."

A whizzing yo-yo came by his shoulders and jerked her toward him. A ten-foot matchstick snarled and snapped in her brain. That's the kind of sound Stud made along the dirt behind them. Hiss of the prairie grass and the mild sunburn of the whip curled around her ankles "snap!" bent forward and fastened her high-buttoned shoes. Curiously enough, she spurs now dug without mercy into the quivering buttocks of old Cassaba. He squealed like an angry pig. He was a keen judge of human nature in most circumstances, and the shit-stains in his underwear proved it in this, the most trying circumstance of his life.

Surprised to find herself taking the initiative in the afternoon's cruelties, she hesitated for the briefest of moments, then raised her pistol and dug her heels into him again. "I'm going to beat the shit out of you," she said.

Imagine, please.

Time's circle runs its third, fourth revolution. Soon the history of these lives will complete itself, their souls will break free and be assumed into the deity. ...

Imagine an almost complete trace of meaning. She wasn't sure if suddenly like a pulsing comet bursting in her

brain she should apologize. Wasn't that enough? Star-juice into the already gushing ape? Ass out? It was delicious! Girl on the moonlit plain, late at her cooing primping coming dissolve . . .

"Maybe you should caress the corners of my mouth?"

She gulped the stuff down. Then she sewed the buttons of her shirt to Stud's fly. "I guess we're even now."

"Not quite," he answered. He oxed deep into Miss Apple's eyes. "Fancy I'll stay awhile. Do a little trading in horses and goats."

Her hand dissolved quickly and went to his lips. The soft brush of the mesquite against their bare hides as they lay there, suppine on the desert floor. Her canyon bottom. Stud came, shooting a thick stream of jism onto the sand. Her fingers were about to tear his eyes out.

"Don't hurt me," he yelled, "don't hurt me!"

The night split open with God as our only spectator, a mournful tune in his mind as he cried against my shoulder, and once again the flesh and the sound of his screams subsided. Little insects were seen to be licking the soft viscous pool of cream there by our knees . . . I began crawling back toward Cassaba. I had understood at last what it was he wanted, what it was that possessed him in his attack upon my nakedness . . .

"Cassaba," I hissed softly. "Cassaba, it is me, Ernest . . ."

Cassaba stood up from his death-sleep, pulling up his pants. Bursting with expectation our sentence of death had passed, we were alone again, the angel had left us to ourselves there in the desert night. . . . Overhead the stars were out, and a soft wind was up, bringing with it the mournful howl of the prairie dog. . . .

Cassaba fastened his spurs and holster and put on his wide Mexican hat. He looked down at me for a moment, then smiled through his grisly moustachios. "Ernest, dear Ernest,

never will I understand you. I want to thank you for what you have done this evening."

"Done? What have I done?" Cautiously I watched him winding his whip and fastening it to the saddle of his mount.

"You've made me a free man, Ernest. A most cathartic experience, this night of love in the desert."

"You were dead, Cassaba. I killed you."

"I know. And now I am alive. Reborn as it were. And now I must ride to be with my friends in the mountains. Good night, Ernest." And then he rode off, slow clip cliop clippety clop, towards the rising moon, abandoning me there on the night sands of Death Valley.

In two hours the sun would begin its ascent, and I in my turn would begin my own journey into oblivion, defenseless and without water in the burning day . . .

The ski run's surface looks something like a hairy waffle painted blue. The view from the top is breathtaking as all of Paris is spread out before the skier. It was my turn. Taking a deep breath and glancing about through glazed eyes, I lunged into the descent, fell below rooftops and shot upwards and into the net, where the other members of our party were wriggling about, trying to free themselves. Their skis clacked and shimmered in the sunlight.

Fifty feet below us I spotted Cassaba, crawling along, and I just had to laugh. There was probably a text-book way of crawling. He did not know it. The clods of earth appeared friendly. For bottom soil thrown to the top they did not feel or smell so very sour. Still, it would take a long time to get them into cultivation or under grass. Probably, agriculturally speaking, this country would be in pretty poor condition for a long time.

Next to me, Jim managed to work a flask out of his hip pocket, and, pushing his goggles up onto his forehead

where ridge succeeded ridge, he took a good hard shot of brandy. Typical. Thus fortified, the young American will go about the business of courtship, his long sensitive antennae ever on the alert for a willing mate—stick it in anything—mother is saying “Din-ner”—almost but not quite always one of the opposite sex. Both the male and female have chemical sex attractants. Courtship commences when the male is lured by the female’s attractant; the pair then make antennae contact. Bzz! Bzz! Eventually, the male turns his back on the female and lifts his wings; the female climbs aboard and eats the sex attractants he has exuded from his back. The *Titanic* sinks.

Martha and I were fucking when Henry burst into the room shouting, “We’re sinking! We’re going down!” I whipped on my pants and ran to the door; in the corridor was chaos, from which a steward emerged saying, “Be calm! Take your time! Everything’s going to be all right now.”

Up on deck, the sounds that emerged were indeed lovely now and then, but also, at times, indescribably horrible. The string quartet, the one that played in the first-class lounge, was visibly shaken by the prospect of water rushing over their instruments playing, say, Beethoven’s string quartet No. 15 in A Minor Op. 132.

For no reason at all I remembered, with blazing clarity, that in order to get a television out of sight, some former neighbors of mine had sacrificed a window. The same dark stained shutters that unfolded over the window concealed the television, conveying an illusion of identical windows set into beautifully polished wood panelling. A stunning idea.

Martha’s eyes were pits of gravity in her cheeks.

In America the stars wobbled over the golf course. And when Spring came and the eaves dripped a steady tattoo, strange birds cheeped in the wet trees around the school, the ice went out of the Missouri with a roar.

Did we kiss? I hoped we would still think so. But though my love was a gas pain, so real and strong, hers was a whisker she clipped and watched fly up into the clouds.

My eye fell on her spotless bobby sox. How does she keep them so clean? I wondered. The day was beautiful and growing even more so. Locking my resolve, I took her head between my hands and slowly brought it between my eyes, where my brain throbbed like an insane, soggy flower.

A train whistled and a bird answered.

A little later (having found our bicycles), we were able to afford each other the irritating, theoretically inane spectacle of a nude but shod body mounted upon a machine, sailing along into the sunrise.

"Strange though it might seem," I cried, paddling rapidly, "I think I'm the only person I know in this school who's basically religious. I happen to believe in God, I think."

She threw back her face and laughed so hard I thought she would lose control and swerve into a tree or perhaps ditch.

"Your mind is like a toilet inside a toad," she answered.

My heart fluttered briefly and for a moment I thought I would kill her, this girl who not five minutes ago had joyfully consented to oral intercourse.

"I don't see what you mean," I shouted.

Every day, day after day, millions of miracles occur on the land, in the sea, and in the air.

The *Titanic* broke upward from underwater. Like a reversed film, the lifeboats returned to its sides and shot upward. Passengers flew up out of the sea, removed their life jackets and resumed tea. Tears filled my eyes.

A river of tears, low, slow-flooding, cool, and a bit muddy. The branches of the rain forest are hanging low over

the moving water. A woman is there, dressed in blue. You knew her when you were much younger. Now you are a man of tired years, drowsing in the afternoon's languor and the strange harmonic mode of the whistling schoolboy: fifth-third, fifth-third, fifth-third, fifth-octave.

You are alive, and it is lunch time. Seated across from you, in front of the lion's cage, is a 55-year-old Pietro Torretta, a slight, neatly dressed man with a hollow cheeked face and a knife slash for a mouth. That slash never healed. Vehicular death. The screaming children boarding the autobus. You fantasize your own demise, then suddenly fall out of your flesh for the briefest of moments . . .

I wonder what makes you suddenly so generous with your liquor? You, you my estranged mother. I drink deeply from the spout of your lips. I am happy, slightly afraid, slightly nauseous, but happy.

The jaunty crew of four stopped momentarily along the face of Blue Ridge and gazed out together across the canyon valley . . . It seems you only smile when I'm moving away . . . The green is near to us, but distant and almost blue in its greyness . . . The darkening trees moving silently in the wind.

Roberto stood up and stretched, pulling the damp pants away from his skin. I've been asleep, he thought, and now I'm awake. The young woman opposite me on the grass . . . see how her features stiffen in the paling moonlight. I think she is an Aquarian. The dog of her mind raises a cry, I can hear it from here. Perhaps I should walk over to her and kiss her.

No, not today.

Biting his tongue to quell an attack of nausea induced by the body's chill moisture, Roberto commenced the examination of his fingernails. Next he drew a small flash from his pocket and played it into the mouth, eyes intently scrutinizing lips teeth and tongue. Then, finding no trace of

acid burns, he examined in swift succession the ears, the eyes, and the hollows which were the dead girl's armpits. Next he surveyed in deliberate dispassion the smooth, firm, lovely breasts. Employing his gloved fingers, he gently pushed up the tender flesh of the right breast; discovering nothing he did the same to the left. This time he did not remove his hand. He brought his eye close to the breast, peering wildly at it. It gazed back at him. Suddenly, standing erect and pointing to the breast, he gasped, "My God!"

The heads of the students gathered in a tight semi-circle as he used a scalpel to indicate a tiny puncture and the smear of blood which had spread in the crease beneath the breast. Someone had driven a long heavy needle into her heart.

"Be good, Boris."

She kissed him gingerly on the cheek and stood back, smiling benevolence. He took her gloved hand in his and squeezed it.

"Yes, love."

In her heart your death is brewing, bubbling, taking shape according to some irrevocable law of the cosmos . . . You are going to die, at her hand, and there is not a thing you can do about it.

"I know."

"Goodbye, Boris."

"Goodbye, love."

They kiss with lips that part and he boards the train for the city. A brave Mexican is watching all the while from a window of the train.

These are the enemy, these we have come to seize. Demure, isn't she? A lady, no doubt, of high standing in her community. She looks at you over faded spectacles in the tram, and the color of your hair changes from brown to denim.

You try to pretend she doesn't exist, but she does. She is kneeling in front of you now, in a bowl of chili, very gracefully placing the salad bowl on the carpet. Feedback is screaming in your mind. Yes, and now her long sensuous fingers are reaching for yours, touching them, and a secret vibration beginning to build in your veins and tendons. . . .

Little Jesus leaned back against the dirty wall of the station and leafed through a faded copy of *Time*. A close observer could see the yellowness of his eyes, creeping in from the corners, like mist sliding across a window.

He spit once, into the gutter. Then he looked around as Cassaba came out of the station manager's office, carrying the smallest of black leather satchels.

"Amigo."

"Es o.k., Chico-Jesusito. Less go."

Jesus rolled the magazine and thrust it deep into his back pocket. Casually as bank robbers they strolled down the long pier, heels clicking against the concrete and steel plating . . . now heels booming over the narrow wooden trestle that arches across the Gonhila River . . . three miles below . . . Jesus looking up at the birds and laughing to himself, very pleased.

"The sky is blue today, my friend."

"The sky is blue everyday, don't you notice?"

Don't you notice the small wound on his scar, the thin ribbon of pink tissue that decorates his shoulderblades? Don't you notice the please-to-meet-you in his eyes, the way he carries his legs, as if supporting the sweetest of burdens? And the real woman who walks inside him, bumping shoulders, she is his sister and she it is who teaches him to walk in power and spirit . . .

Oh, Rosa . . .

Cassaba tore open a pack of cigarettes and threw the cellophane over the railing of the bridge. A gull banked and

slid into a dive, nabbing the paper brief seconds before it touched the rushing white water.

"Jesus, I want to hide out for awhile . . . I don't know how long exactly . . . You can say someone rented the extra room to write his thesis . . . He's paying you 100 dollars to stay there three weeks and to bring him his food and a bottle of tequila . . . Sabe?"

"Porque?"

"Dr. Rodin is dead. I killed him."

"Ahhh."

Jesus squinted and felt a sharp pain in his throat. His forehead began to ache and water gathered in his eyes . . . rainwater of past lives, past years, train whistles, piano music down a city street, smell of burning leaves and the odor of fresh dog turd. . . .

That afternoon Cassaba went out and bought the papers. There was no mention of Ernest nor of Doctor Rodin and his secretary.

The next day, exerting his muscles, he compressed the angel's throat against his loathsome breast. For a moment he felt pity for his heavenly friend, but he could no longer restrain his wrath!

I sat across the room, picking my teeth, watching a basketball game through the window. A Negro boy and a Latin type were teamed up against another Negro boy and a very large white girl, all aged roughly 15 or 16. Casually my eyes drift back over to witness the scene in the corner, and then back to the window, where rain drips off the ledge and into the geranium pot.

Beautiful geranium, I think.

My students had given it to me several days ago, and now the great watering can in the sky was dribbling a few atoms of moisture into its parched earth. My kids are a funny bunch. Several of them claim to have apparitions. They often miss school. Out chasing phantoms through the woods. A

small crowd of boys and girls were claiming to have seen the Blessed Virgin. I met some of them on the road to the grotto, holding candles in their hands and kneeling in pools of water.

The constable muttered in his unwholesome sleep. "Many times have I seen these visionaries. I chase them away. And sometimes I pursue them as far as the forest. Several used to gather atop the Massabielle, but the gendarmes drove them off with shouts of 'Clear off you rougues!' Commissioner Jacomet had only to show his face and these frenzied fools took to their heels."

Only the taxi coming toward them through the darkness made any difference.

I got in.

The tall girl made a smooth lay-up and her team-mate laughed and fell on the ground and rolled into a puddle and lay still.

I say "Now" to the taxi driver. Nothing happens. I am holding out. There is a tiny seed of fear lying at the boot. It refuses to rise to the surface. I relax all my muscles, every last one. I stop fighting with myself. My mind soars deeper. My penis is quivering with heat and excitement. I can't feel its existence, but I know it is quivering and excited.

The cabbie twists in his seat and makes a face.

A crystal arrow explodes in my heart. I am released from care and caring. Somewhere among the ragged rolling clouds the blackened stub of a cigarette is being wafted higher and higher.

Crossing the street I am almost hit by a taxi. I make a dash for the other side. I walk jauntily along the pavement, whistling a tune, loudly. As I pass a place called "Casa Angelo" I am accosted by a man wearing sunglasses and with a book wedged into his armpit. He tells me he is very hungry and would like some money. I reach into my watchpocket and pull out what change I have. He holds his hand out and I

place my hand next to his. Then I let the change fall into his palm.

I vaguely sense a girl walking behind him and I lean to the left to catch a better look. Yes, it is Ernest, on her way to school, carrying her shabby and badly woven basket, at the bottom of which, all higgledypiggledy, lay a stocking to knit, a crust of black bread, and her dog ear spelling book. The alertness of the dog's ear was the alleged cause of her excellent ability to spell.

There are a couple of quarters, a nickel, and a few pennies, fifty-eight cents all told. He thanks me warmly and smiles through his mustache. Then he introduces me to his buddies, who have been standing in the background all this time. They laugh and smile too. We shake hands. One is named Juan, and the other is named Charley. My friend's name is Alex.

They try to teach me a few words in Spanish, such as *something something* de Dios. Alex asks me if I know what *Dios* means. I tell him sure, I'm Cuban. Charley whips out a bottle and we have a drink, like in South America, and we dance around the street a little, slapping our hands together and laughing under the marquee.

Back at the ranch, the *caballeros* were preparing to make the drive into the mountains, where lay the last bitter knowledge that was needed before the retreat. The dream was crimson with sharp edges. A man, dark, looking for his horse in the shadows near the bunkhouse. I jerked open the door on his side and dropped the crumpled paper into his lap. Looking into his eye (red, even crimson, as in a poor color print) I said, "When you can find the time, you know what to do with it."

"Yes, I understand," he mumbled, somewhat embarrassed. "We must be patient, Cassaba. There is still a good deal of time to deal with these matters."

"I know how much time there is, my good friend. And I persevere in that bubble of time, only to reach the outer surface at last and find it broken. . . ."

His brown face hardened a little and he gripped the steering wheel so hard that knots of muscle sprang up along his forearm. For ear may know what eye cannot. The blind speak easy and die in their dirt. . . .

That afternoon Cassaba went out and bought the papers. There was no mention of Hauser and O'Brien. Grunting in his sleeve the old Mexican went back inside, grey eyes smiling sleepily into an electric blanket. A dog must cover his shit, he thought, because it will betray his passage . . . but the elephant has no need to hide his tracks . . . his paths are open, his ways are free.

(And in her softness there is a sense of peace. . . . I know the softness and the loveliness of her illusion. . . . I know them and I despise them. . . .)

"And yet still I am victim." "Victim and sorcerer." Spitting once, in his usual fashion, the angel of light proceeded into the bunkhouse and threw himself down behind his desk, where he rummaged in his papers the rest of the afternoon, looking for clues to the mystery that plagued his waking hours. . . .

Rising at dawn, the huddled figures drawing on their serapes and big hats, tying the string at the throat, strapping leather around their haunches. . . . One has a twink in his eye, watches the others cower in the cold shadows of day-break, watches from an incredible distance. . . .

"What do you think, El Pinto, do you think these men will have the soul to complete their task today?"

El Pinto said nothing. He was smiling far away in the sheet of gray that lay over the village of his birth. Faces, children's faces, smiling and running. . . . Old shep has gone where the good doggies go. . . . There is Rosa again, smiling and raising her skirt to pee, smiling and forgetting I am her brother. . . .

Myself I use to laugh when I thought about it, how Cassaba he would come home after work and crumple papers and rustle some work sheets about on his desk, all the time muttering and groaning to himself in that Mexican gargle of his. . . . And then he would look up at me from across the desk and smile, and a bright silver dollar twinkle would cross his eyes for the briefest of momentos. . . .

"This is it, Ernest, this is it. . . ." And then he would mumble off incoherent musings forgetting I was even in the room, talking and babbling and sputtering between his mustaches little drivulets of spittle and sorgum juice. . . . Everyone liked him, there was no question of that. We all agreed as one man that he was the best leader we had ever had.

I looked across the room to where he was sitting, chewing now on a few strands of hemp. . . . Truly noble visage, scarred by the ravages of disease, famine, untold struggles with death and the warrior. . . .

He raised his eyes that pierced mine. "Ernest, do me a favor will you?"

"What is it sir?"

"Do something about that accursed pimple on your cheek. It's been driving me crazy all morning. I keep wanting to get up and go over to you and squeeze it!"

"Yes sir!" I blushed. As soon as he would leave the room I would get up and go into the bathroom and squeeze the pimple, letting the white juice pop out over my fingertips. . . . Then I would lick the juice from my fingertips and wipe my hands on the large red oval towel that hung under the mirror. A little blood perhaps would appear at the orifice of the wound among the hairs of my cheek. This could be admonished with a little scrap of toilet paper, followed by a few drops of cold water. Afterwards, back in my room, I would polish and clean my revolver and load my gunbelt with shells.