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Emanuele Coccia

EVERYONE WITH LUNGS

There are these things:

cells, the movement of cells and the division of cells

and then the general beating of circulation

and hands, and body, and feet

and skin that surrounds hands, body, feet.

This is a shape,

a shape of blood beating and cells dividing.

But outside of this shape is space.

There is space between the hands.

There is space between the hands and space around the hands.

There is space around the hands and space in the room.

There is space in the room that surrounds the shapes of everyone's hands and body and feet and cells and the beating contained within.

There is space, an uneven space, made by this pattern of bodies.

This space goes in and out of everyone's bodies.

Everyone with lungs breathes the space in and out as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands and the space of the room in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands and the space of the room and the
space of the building that surrounds the room in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands and the space of the room and the
space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of
the neighborhoods nearby in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands and the space of the room and the
space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of
the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands
and the space around the hands and the space of the room and
the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space
of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the
space of the regions in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands
and the space around the hands and the space of the room and
the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space
of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the
space of the regions and the space of the nations in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands
and the space around the hands and the space of the room and
the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space
of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the
space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space of
the continents and islands in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands
and the space around the hands and the space of the room and

the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space
of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the
space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space
of the continents and islands and the space of the oceans in and
out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands
and the space around the hands and the space of the room and
the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space
of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the
space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space
of the continents and islands and the space of the oceans and the
space of the troposphere in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands
and the space around the hands and the space of the room and
the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space
of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the
space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space
of the continents and islands and the space of the oceans and the
space of the troposphere and the space of the stratosphere in and
out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands
and the space around the hands and the space of the room and
the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space
of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the
space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space
of the continents and islands and the space of the oceans and
the space of the troposphere and the space of the stratosphere
and the space of the mesosphere in and out.

In this everything turning and small being breathed in and out
by everyone with lungs during all the moments.

Then all of it entering in and out.

The entering in and out of the space of the mesosphere in the entering in and out of the space of the stratosphere in the entering in and out of the space of the troposphere in the entering in and out of the space of the oceans in the entering in and out of the space of the continents and islands in the entering in and out of the space of the nations in the entering in and out of the space of the regions in the entering in and out of the space of the cities in the entering in and out of the space of the neighborhoods nearby in the entering in and out of the space of the building in the entering in and out of the space of the room in the entering in and out of the space around the hands in the entering in and out of the space between the hands.

How connected we are with everyone.

The space of everyone that has just been inside of everyone mixing inside of everyone with nitrogen and oxygen and water vapor and argon and carbon dioxide and suspended dust spores and bacteria mixing inside of everyone with sulfur and sulfuric acid and

titanium and nickel and minute silicon particles from pulverized glass and concrete.

How lovely and how doomed this connection of everyone with lungs.

Brooklyn, New York

WRITERS ON WRITING

What Makes a Story

Ursula K. Le Guin

What makes a story is —

you want to 'find out what happens next' — this bit of the story leads you to the next one.

Like running, when you have to put the left foot down ahead of the right foot, because you are actually not balanced on the right foot that touches the ground but are leaning forward into the run, and then you have to put the right foot down ahead of the left one because ditto. This is the cantputdowner type story, fast-paced, suspenseful. You don't see much scenery, running, or learn much. You run for the sake of running, the pleasure and excitement.

Then there is the story like walking, steady, and you fall into the flow of the gait and cover ground while seeing everything around you, scenery you may never have seen before; and the walk may end up somewhere you've never been.

And there's the story like dancing, where the next movement keeps growing out of the last movement, but not in a straightforward way, its direction isn't merely onwards but involves circles and feints and repetitions and all kinds of strange gestures, and yet if the dance is true to itself, all the movements are connected and every one follows from the last, not predictably, but inevitably.

I use bodily similes not mechanical ones, walking, running, dancing, not driving fast or slow in a car or flying in a plane, because I think art depends on rhythms, and body rhythms are what writers use. Mechanical rhythms, non-rhythmic movement like in a car or plane, may be used successfully in mechanical arts, like the movies. But writing, whatever its medium, is made of words, and words are bodily, made with the body and the breath, received by the body, felt with the body, and the rhythms of words are bodily rhythms.



"A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end:" This comes from Aristotle, and it splendidly describes a great many stories from the European narrative tradition, but it doesn't describe all stories. It's a recipe for steak, it's not a recipe for tamales. The three-part division is typically European, and I would say that it's also typically European in putting emphasis on the end — on where the story goes, what you get to.

It implies process or progress in time: begin, proceed, end. My talk about running, walking, dancing rhythms in story also implies lapse of time. However, when looking at the construction of a story, what if space supplies the language? The story as bag or pot. Or the story as house.

A house consists basically of an inside; that's what a house is — something to come into from outside. There's a front door, an entrance. Inside consists of a room, or different kinds of rooms, where various things can happen, and maybe halls, stairs, closets, furniture. Probably windows, from which you can see outside. And there's usually a back door.

You want the entrance to be attractive, you want the front door to be invitingly open, showing a glimpse of what's inside. Once you've lured your reader inside, you may direct her in a definite route right through the house and the events happening in it to the back door. Or you may just provide the rooms and halls and staircases and events, and let the reader find her own way around — let her live there for a while. Or you may conduct her smilingly up to the attic and show her the yellow wallpaper and lock her in. Or you may show her views of undreamed-of landscapes through the windows, charm'd magic casements opening on the foam of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn, so she never wants to leave the house at all, and has to be pushed out the back door — or shown that there's a sequel right next door —

About the back door, sometimes it's the important thing about the house: what the back door opens onto. Maybe no back stairs, aaaaaiiii thud. But sometimes the exit is there only because the reader can't live her whole life in the house, so you have to let her out; but it's the house that counts, what happens in the house. The end may be a climax or revelation, a denouement or end in the Aristotelian sense, or it may just be where this story stops being. If the house is soundly built, and what happens inside it makes sense, if the house itself is a memorable experience, the back door isn't any more important than any other part of it.

WHAT IS “NOT WRITING”?

There are years, days, hours, minutes, weeks, moments, and other measures of time spent in the production of “not writing.” Not writing is working, and when not working at paid work working at unpaid work like caring for others, and when not at unpaid work like caring, caring also for a human body, and when not caring for a human body many hours, weeks, years, and other measures of time spent caring for the mind in a way like reading or learning and when not reading and learning also making things (like garments, food, plants, artworks, decorative items) and when not reading and learning and working and making and caring and worrying also politics, and when not politics also the kind of medication which is consumption, of sex mostly or drunkenness, cigarettes, drugs, passionate love affairs, cultural products, the internet also, then time spent staring into space that is not a screen, also all the time spent driving, particularly here where it is very long to get anywhere, and then to work and back, to take her to school and back, too.

There is illness and injury which has produced a great deal of not writing. There is cynicism, disappointment, political outrage, heartbreak, resentment, and realistic thinking which has produced a great deal of not writing. There is reproduction which has been like illness and injury and taken up many hours with not writing. There is being anxious or depressed which takes up many hours though not very much once there is no belief in mental health. There is trauma which is fantastic in the way it is brief and clear and also the way it lingers around and emerges unpredictably as if it will forever. Trauma is always the indirect direct producer of so much not writing. It is like a mind which has a shadow and then is the shadow and then isn't a mind or its shadow but isn't at all.

There are some hours, though not very many, on airplanes, and times with friends spent in the production of not writing. There is talking which is like writing and which produces not writing in equal measure to producing writing. There is an amount of time not writing which is not wanting to actually have to talk to humans unless it is in order to get them to have sex or in order to convince them to leave. There is sleep, which is often dreams, which is closer to writing—dreams are more like writing than not writing in that they are not intruded upon in their moments by the necessities of all the paid work, care work, social expectations, romantic love or talking to people. There is sleep which is often about gossip, architecture, and modes of civic planning and in this is closer to writing than not writing. In the dreams there is always walking around, finding walls, follies, and not getting to one place or the next but it is often those I love but whom I do not get to see very much who walk with me. There are photographs one takes, of oneself and of other people and it is in these there is the production of not writing. There is dressing and

undressing, sometimes too much, particularly when things have run away, died, or one has to meet new people. There is shopping, which is a woman shopping.

There is in not writing not very much time spent on envy which is a pang, mostly, which is motivating like getting a buzz from an outlet telling one to remove one's hand from the outlet, from the power source. There is the way that the lives of others seem so often unenviable and only enviable as they are "writing" when all this time is spent not writing like right now in the not writing in which I should be dealing with bills, mail, laundry, my bedroom, months of emails from October onward even though it is now June, with my jobs, with care, with the contents of my refrigerator, with my flat tire, with the cat's litter box, with friendship, with Facebook, with my body which wants to get in the swimming pool with my body which wants to turn brown in the sun with my body which wants to drink some tea with my body which wants to do shoulder presses which wants to join a gym which wants to take a shower and get cleaned up which wants a lover which mostly wants to swim and then there is "not writing." There is envy which is also mixed with repulsion at those who do not have a long list of not writing to do.

It is easy to imagine not writing, both accidentally and intentionally. It is easy because there have been years and months and days I have thought the way to live was not writing have known what writing consisted of and have thought "I do not want to do that" and "writing steals from my loved ones" and "writing steals from my life and gives me nothing but pain and worry and what I can't have" or "writing steals from my already empty bank account" or "writing gives me ideas I do not need or want" or "writing is the manufacture of impossible desire" or writing is like literature is like the world of monsters is the production of culture is I hate culture is the world of wealthy women and of men.

Anne Boyer, "What is 'Not Writing'?", excerpted from *Garments Against Women* (Ahsahta Press, 2015)

Essay on the Concept of Reading

(*Essai sur la notion de lecture*)

This essay was written in the spring of 1941. While it appears that Weil had plans to expand it at some future date, the present form of the essay is already the result of much previous thinking, as her notebooks show many forays into the concept. The concept of reading also appears in other essays of this period and later. As it is, the essay is in a largely finished state, Weil's mother having typed it, and her typescript has Weil's comments on it. The essay appeared in *Les Études philosophiques*, a journal founded by Gaston Berger, in 1946. The notion of reading that Weil develops here does not seem to be in response to any other thinker; it is original to her.

We shall attempt to define a concept that has not yet found a suitable name, but for which the name "reading" may be the best one. For there is a mystery in reading, a mystery that, if we contemplate it, may well help us, not to explain, but to grab hold of other mysteries in human life.

All of us know that sensation is immediate, a brute fact, and that it seizes us by surprise. Without warning a man is punched in the stomach; everything changes for him before he even knows what happened. I touch something hot and I jerk my hand back before I even know that I burned myself. Something seizes me here—it is the universe, and I recognize it by the way it treats me. No one is surprised by the power

that punches, burns, or sudden noises have to grab hold of us, for we know, or at least believe, that they come from outside us, from matter, and that the mind does not play any part in the sensation, except to submit to it. The thoughts that we ourselves form may bring on certain emotions, but we are not seized by them in the same way.

The mystery is that there are sensations that are pretty much insignificant in themselves, yet, by what they signify, what they mean, they seize us in the same way as the stronger sensations. There are some black marks on a sheet of white paper; they couldn't differ more from a punch in the stomach. Yet, they can have the same effect. We have all experienced, to a greater or lesser degree, the effect of bad news that we have read in a letter or newspaper. Before we have fully taken account of what is going on, we feel ourselves seized and thrown down just as if we had been hit; even much later the sight of the letter remains painful. Sometimes, when time has lessened the pain a bit, one is shuffling through papers and suddenly the letter jumps out, an even more stabbing pain surfaces, just as piercing as any physical pain, seizing us as if it came from outside ourselves and as if the letter itself were on fire. Two women each receive a letter saying that her son is dead. The first one glances at it, faints, and until the day she dies her eyes, her mouth, and her movements will never again be the same. The second one remains unmoved; her face, her posture do not change at all: she doesn't know how to read. It isn't the sensation, it is the meaning that has seized the first woman by striking her mind, immediately, as a brute fact, without her participation in the matter, just the way that sensations strike us. Everything happens as if the pain were in the letter itself, and jumped out from the letter to land on the face reading it. With respect to the actual sensations themselves—the color of the paper or the ink—they do not even come to mind. It is the pain that is given to one's sight.

Thus at each instant of our life we are gripped from the outside, as it were, by meanings that we ourselves read in appearances. That is why we can argue endlessly about the reality of the external world, since what we call the world are the meanings that we read; they are not real. But they seize us as if they were external; that is real. Why should we try to resolve this contradiction when the more important task of thought in this world is to define and contemplate insoluble contradictions, which, as Plato said, draw us upwards?

What is peculiar here is that what we are given is not sensations *and* meanings; what we read is alone what is given. Studies of eyewitness accounts have notably shown this. Proofreading is difficult because while reading we often see letters that the typesetters have actually forgotten to put in; one has to force oneself to read a different kind of meaning here, not that of words or phrases, but of mere letters, while still not forgetting that the first kind of meaning exists. It is impossible not to read; we cannot look at a printed text in a language we understand that is placed in front of us and not read it. At best, one could do this only after a lot of practice.

The "blind man's stick," a favorite example of Descartes, furnishes an image analogous to reading. Everybody can convince himself that when handling a pen his touch goes right through the pen to the nib. If the pen skips because of some problem with the paper, the *pen's* skipping is what is immediately felt; we don't even think about the sensations in our fingers or hand through which we read. However, the pen's skipping is really only something we read. The sky, the sea, the sun, the stars, human beings, everything that surrounds us is in the same way something that we read. What we call a correction of a sensory illusion is actually a modified reading. If at night, on a lonely road, I think I see a man waiting in ambush instead of what is actually a tree, it is a human and menacing presence that forces itself on me, and, as in the case of the letter, it makes me quiver even before I know what it is. I get closer and suddenly everything changes, and as I read a tree, and not a man, I no longer quiver. There is not an appearance *and* then an interpretation; a human presence has penetrated to my soul through my eyes, and now, just as suddenly, the presence of a tree. If I hate someone, he is not on one side and my hatred on the other; when he comes near me it is odiousness itself that approaches; the perversity of his soul is more evident to me than the color of his hair. Moreover, if he is blond, he is a hateful blond, if he is a brunette, he is a hateful brown. Esther in drawing near to Ahasuerus did not draw near to a man who she knew could put her to death; she drew near to majesty itself, to terror itself that reaches her soul through her eyes; that is why the very effort of walking towards him makes her stumble. She herself says so; what she looks at with fear is not the face of Ahasuerus, it is the majesty that is etched there, and she reads that. We speak generally in such cases of the effects of the

imagination, but it may well be better to use the word “reading.” This word implies that it is a question of effects produced by appearances. However, they are appearances that do not actually appear, or hardly ever; what does appear is something else that is related to appearances as a phrase is related to letters. We see it as an appearance, suddenly, as a brute fact, from outside, and, according to the evidence, pretty much irrefutably.

If I see a book bound in black, except to philosophize, I do not doubt that black is there. If I look at the top of a newspaper and see “June 14,” I do not doubt that it was printed on June 14. If a being that I hate, or that I fear, or that I despise, or that I love approaches, I above all do not doubt that I have in front of me the odious, the dangerous, the despicable, the lovable. If someone, reading the same newspaper and looking at the same place in it, seriously told me, after several tries, that he did not read “June 14” but “June 15,” that would bother me. I wouldn’t know what to say. If someone does not hate, fear, despise, or love the way I do, that also bothers me. How? He sees these beings—or, if they are distant, he sees the indirect manifestations of their existence—and he does not read the odious, the dangerous, the despicable, the lovable? That is not possible. This is a case of bad faith; he’s lying; he’s crazy. It is not quite right to say that we believe ourselves in danger because we are afraid; on the contrary, we are afraid because of the presence of danger since it is danger that gives rise to fear. However, danger *is* something that I read. Sounds and sights are by themselves devoid of danger, they are no more dangerous than the paper and the ink in a threatening letter. But in the case of a threatening letter the danger that I read takes me beyond those things, and makes fear come to me. If I hear an explosion, fear lives in the noise and comes to take my soul by hearing; I no more can refuse to fear than I can refuse to hear. If I know what the sound is, the same thing happens when I hear the “ack-ack” of a machine gun; it doesn’t if I don’t know. It is not, however, a question of something that is analogous to a conditioned reflex; it is a question of something analogous to *reading*, where sometimes a combination of novel signs that I have never seen seizes my soul right where the wounding meaning penetrates, along with the black and the white, and just as irresistibly.

Thus meanings, which if looked at abstractly would seem to be mere thoughts, arise from every corner around me, taking possession of my soul and shaping it from one moment to the next in such a way that, to borrow a familiar English phrase, "my soul is no longer my own." I believe what I read, my judgments are what I read, I act according to what I read; how could I act any other way? If I read in a noise honor to be won, I run towards the noise; if I read danger and nothing else, I run far from the noise. In both cases, the necessity of acting the way I do, even if I regret it, is imposed on me in a clear and immediate way, as the noise, with the noise. I read in the noise. In the same way, if during civil unrest or war unarmed men are sometimes killed, it is because there is something vile about these beings that penetrates through the eyes to the soul of armed men along with the sight of their clothes, hair, faces, something that asks to be annihilated. In a glance, these armed men read along with their hair color and flesh the evidence that says it is necessary to kill them. If in the normal course of life there are actually few crimes, it is because we read in the colors that penetrate our eyes that when a human being is standing in front of us that there is something to which we owe a certain measure of respect. It is the same thing as with the case of the man who, on a lonely road, first sees a man looking out for passersby, and then a tree. It is in the first case above all an unreserved response to a human presence, and the idea that there could be a *question* of a man is an abstract one that is weak and that comes from within him, not from the outside, and that has no bite. Then suddenly is triggered within him, without transition, the fact that he is alone, surrounded only by plants and things. The idea that a man could have been there where he now sees a tree has become in its turn a weak idea. In the same way, during peacetime, the idea of causing the death of a human being comes from the inside, it isn't read in the appearances—one reads, on the contrary, in the appearances the prohibition of killing. But in a civil war, put somebody in contact with a certain category of human beings and the idea of *sparing* a life is weak, coming from the inside. There is no transition possible in going from one state to the other; the passage happens as by the pulling of a trigger. Each reading, when it is current, appears as the only real, only possible way to look at things; the other one seems purely imaginary. These are, of course, extreme examples, but

all of our life is made from the same cloth; meanings impose themselves on us successively, and each of them, when it appears and enters into us through the senses, reduces all opposing ideas to the status of phantoms.

I possess a certain power over the universe that allows me to change appearances, but it is an indirect one that requires work; it isn't there by simply wishing. I put a sheet of white paper over a black book and I no longer see black. This power is limited by the limits of my physical strength. I also possibly possess a certain power to change the meanings that I read in appearances and that are imposed on me. However, this power is also limited, indirect, and it, too, requires work. Labor in the normal sense of the word is an example of this work because every tool is a blind man's stick, an instrument for reading, and every apprenticeship is an apprenticeship in reading. When the apprenticeship ends, meanings come to me from the nib of my pen or from a phrase embedded in printed characters. For the sailor, for the experienced captain, his boat has become in a sense an extension of his own body; it is an instrument by which to read the tempest, and he reads it very differently than a passenger does. Where the passenger reads chaos and unlimited danger, the captain reads necessities, limited dangers, resources for escaping, and an obligation to be courageous and honorable.

Action on oneself and action on others consist in transforming meanings. A man, a head of state, declares war, and new meanings rise up all round forty million people. The general's art is to lead enemy soldiers into reading flight in appearances and in such a way that the idea of holding fast loses all substance, all effectiveness. He can do it, for example, by stratagems, by surprises, by using new weapons. War, politics, eloquence, art, teaching, all action on others essentially consists in changing what they read.

Whether it is a question of action on oneself or another, there are two issues to deal with, that of technique and that of value. Texts, whose appearances are characters, take hold of my soul, then abandon it and are replaced by others. Is one worth more than the other? Is one truer than the other? Where does one find a norm? Thinking a text to be true even though I am not reading it, that I have never read it, assumes that there is a reader of this truthful text, which is to say, it assumes God. But as soon as we do that, there is a contradiction, for the concept of reading

does not fit our concept of God. Even if it did, it still would not let us order our readings of texts according to a scale of values.

Still, posed this way, the problem would perhaps be worth meditating on. For posed in this way it presents in one package all the possible problems of value, to the degree that they are concrete. A man who is tempted to keep a deposit for himself will not keep from doing it simply because he has read *The Critique of Practical Reason*; he will refrain from it, because it will seem to him, despite himself, that something in the deposit itself cries out to be given back. Everybody has experienced something like this where it seems that one would actually like to act badly, but cannot do it. At other times, one would like to act well, but one cannot do it. Figuring out whether one who reads returning a deposit this way reads better than someone who reads in the appearances all the desires that he might be able to satisfy if he kept the money is to seek for a criterion that would allow one to decide the matter, to seek out a technique that would permit one to pass from one reading to another. That is a problem that is more concrete than trying to decide whether it is better to keep it or give it back. Furthermore, by posing the problem of value this way around the concept of reading puts it in relation to truth and beauty as well as to the good, and it is not possible to separate them. Perhaps doing this, the connection of these three things, which is a mystery, would be made a bit clearer. We do not know how to think these things as one, and yet they cannot be thought separately.

S h o r t A s s i g n m e n t s

The first useful concept is the idea of short assignments. Often when you sit down to write, what you have in mind is an autobiographical novel about your childhood, or a play about the immigrant experience, or a history of—oh, say—say women. But this is like trying to scale a glacier. It's hard to get your footing, and your fingertips get all red and frozen and torn up. Then your mental illnesses arrive at the desk like your sickest, most secretive relatives. And they pull up chairs in a semicircle around the computer, and they try to be quiet but you know they are there with their weird coppery breath, leering at you behind your back.

What I do at this point, as the panic mounts and the jungle drums begin beating and I realize that the well has run dry and that my future is behind me and I'm going to have to get a job only I'm completely unemployable, is to stop. First I try to breathe, because I'm either sitting there panting like a lapdog

or I'm unintentionally making slow asthmatic death rattles. So I just sit there for a minute, breathing slowly, quietly. I let my mind wander. After a moment I may notice that I'm trying to decide whether or not I am too old for orthodontia and whether right now would be a good time to make a few calls, and then I start to think about learning to use makeup and how maybe I could find some boyfriend who is not a total and complete fixer-upper and then my life would be totally great and I'd be happy all the time, and then I think about all the people I should have called back before I sat down to work, and how I should probably at least check in with my agent and tell him this great idea I have and see if he thinks it's a good idea, and see if *he* thinks I need orthodontia—if that is what he is actually thinking whenever we have lunch together. Then I think about someone I'm really annoyed with, or some financial problem that is driving me crazy, and decide that I must resolve this before I get down to today's work. So I become a dog with a chew toy, worrying it for a while, wrestling it to the ground, flinging it over my shoulder, chasing it, licking it, chewing it, flinging it back over my shoulder. I stop just short of actually barking. But all of this only takes somewhere between one and two minutes, so I haven't actually wasted that much time. Still, it leaves me winded. I go back to trying to breathe, slowly and calmly, and I finally notice the one-inch picture frame that I put on my desk to remind me of short assignments.

It reminds me that all I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame. This is

all I have to bite off for the time being. All I am going to do right now, for example, is write that one paragraph that sets the story in my hometown, in the late fifties, when the trains were still running. I am going to paint a picture of it, in words, on my word processor. Or all I am going to do is to describe the main character the very first time we meet her, when she first walks out the front door and onto the porch. I am not even going to describe the expression on her face when she first notices the blind dog sitting behind the wheel of her car—just what I can see through the one-inch picture frame, just one paragraph describing this woman, in the town where I grew up, the first time we encounter her.

E. L. Doctorow once said that “writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” You don’t have to see where you’re going, you don’t have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you. This is right up there with the best advice about writing, or life, I have ever heard.

So after I’ve completely exhausted myself thinking about the people I most resent in the world, and my more arresting financial problems, and, of course, the orthodontia, I remember to pick up the one-inch picture frame and to figure out a one-inch piece of my story to tell, one small scene, one memory, one exchange. I also remember a story that I know I’ve told elsewhere but that over and over helps me to get a grip: thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time,

was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird."

I tell this story again because it usually makes a dent in the tremendous sense of being overwhelmed that my students experience. Sometimes it actually gives them hope, and hope, as Chesterton said, is the power of being cheerful in circumstances that we know to be desperate. Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavor, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives, to wake up and grow and belong. It is no wonder if we sometimes tend to take ourselves perhaps a bit too seriously. So here is another story I tell often.

In the Bill Murray movie *Stripes*, in which he joins the army, there is a scene that takes place the first night of boot camp, where Murray's platoon is assembled in the barracks. They are supposed to be getting to know their sergeant, played by Warren Oates, and one another. So each man takes a few moments to say a few things about who he is and where he is from. Finally it is the turn of this incredibly intense, angry guy named Francis. "My name is Francis," he says. "No one calls me Francis—anyone here calls me Francis and I'll kill them. And another thing. I don't like to be touched. Anyone

here ever tries to touch me, I'll kill them," at which point Warren Oates jumps in and says, "Hey—lighten up, Francis."

This is not a bad line to have taped to the wall of your office.

Say to yourself in the kindest possible way, Look, honey, all we're going to do for now is to write a description of the river at sunrise, or the young child swimming in the pool at the club, or the first time the man sees the woman he will marry. That is all we are going to do for now. We are just going to take this bird by bird. But we are going to finish this *one* short assignment.

James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78

Interviewed by Jordan Elgrably

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James Baldwin, ca. 1955. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten

This interview was conducted in the two places dearest to James Baldwin's struggle as a writer. We met first in Paris, where he spent the first nine years of a burgeoning career and wrote his first two novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*, along with his best-known collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*. It was in Paris, he says, that he was first able to come to grips with his explosive relationship with himself and America. Our second talks were held at Baldwin's *spoutres-and-stone* villa in St. Paul de Vence, where he has made his home for the past ten years. We lunched on an August weekend, together with seasonal guests and his secretary. Saturday, a storm raged amid intolerable heat and humidity, causing Baldwin's minor case of arthritis to pain his writing hand (left) and wrist. Erratic power shortages caused by the storm interrupted the tape machine by our side. During the blackouts we would discuss subjects at random or wait in silence while sipping our drinks.

Returning Sunday at Baldwin's invitation, the sun was shining and we were able to lunch outdoors at a picnic table, shaded by a bower that opened onto property dotted with fruit trees and a spectacular view of the Mediterranean littoral. Baldwin's mood had

brightened considerably since the previous day, and we entered the office and study he refers to as his “torture chamber.”

Baldwin writes in longhand (“you achieve shorter declarative sentences”) on the standard legal pad, although a large, old Adler electric sits on one end of his desk—a rectangular oak plank with rattan chairs on either side. It is piled with writing utensils and drafts of several works-in-progress: a novel, a play, a scenario, essays on the Atlanta child murders, these last compiled in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. His most recent work includes *The Devil Finds Work*, an attack on racial bias and fear in the film industry, and a novel, *Just Above My Head*, which draws on his experiences as a civil-rights activist in the 1960s.

INTERVIEWER

Would you tell us how you came to leave the States?

JAMES BALDWIN

I was broke. I got to Paris with forty dollars in my pocket, but I had to get out of New York. My reflexes were tormented by the plight of other people. Reading had taken me away for long periods at a time, yet I still had to deal with the streets and the authorities and the cold. I knew what it meant to be white and I knew what it meant to be a nigger, and I knew what was going to happen to me. My luck was running out. I was going to go to jail, I was going to kill somebody or be killed. My best friend had committed suicide two years earlier, jumping off the George Washington Bridge.

When I arrived in Paris in 1948 I didn't know a word of French. I didn't know anyone and I didn't want to know anyone. Later, when I'd encountered other Americans, I began to avoid them because they had more money than I did and I didn't want to feel like a freeloader. The forty dollars I came with, I recall, lasted me two or three days. Borrowing money whenever I could—often at the last minute—I moved from one hotel to another, not knowing what was going to happen to me. Then I got sick. To my surprise I wasn't thrown out of the hotel. This Corsican family, for reasons I'll never understand, took care of me. An old, old lady, a great old matriarch, nursed me back to health after three months; she used old folk remedies. And she had to climb five flights of stairs every morning to make sure I was kept alive. I went through this period where I was very much alone, and wanted to be. I wasn't part of any community until I later became the Angry Young Man in New York.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you choose France?

BALDWIN

It wasn't so much a matter of choosing France—it was a matter of getting out of America. I didn't know what was going to happen to me in France but I knew what was going to happen to me in New York. If I had stayed there, I would have gone under, like my friend on the George Washington Bridge.

INTERVIEWER

You say the city beat him to death. You mean that metaphorically.

BALDWIN

Not so metaphorically. Looking for a place to live. Looking for a job. You begin to doubt your judgment, you begin to doubt everything. You become imprecise. And that's when you're beginning to go under. You've been beaten, and it's been deliberate. The whole society has decided to make you *nothing*. And they don't even know they're doing it.

INTERVIEWER

Has writing been a type of salvation?

BALDWIN

I'm not so sure! I'm not sure I've escaped anything. One still lives with it, in many ways. It's happening all around us, every day. It's not happening to me in the same way, because I'm James Baldwin; I'm not riding the subways and I'm not looking for a place to live. But it's still happening. So salvation is a difficult word to use in such a context. I've been compelled in some ways by describing my circumstances to learn to live with them. It's not the same thing as accepting them.

INTERVIEWER

Was there an instant you knew you were going to write, to be a writer rather than anything else?

BALDWIN

Yes. The death of my father. Until my father died I thought I could do something else. I had wanted to be a musician, thought of being a painter, thought of being an actor. This was all before I was nineteen. Given the conditions in this country to be a black writer was impossible. When I was young, people thought you were not so much wicked as sick, they gave up on you. My father didn't think it was possible—he thought I'd get killed, get murdered. He said I was contesting the white man's definitions, which was quite right. But I had also learned from my father what he thought of the white man's definitions. He

was a pious, very religious and in some ways a very beautiful man, and in some ways a terrible man. He died when his last child was born and I realized I had to make a jump—a leap. I'd been a preacher for three years, from age fourteen to seventeen. Those were three years which probably turned me to writing.

INTERVIEWER

Were the sermons you delivered from the pulpit very carefully prepared, or were they absolutely off the top of your head?

BALDWIN

I would improvise from the texts, like a jazz musician improvises from a theme. I never wrote a sermon—I studied the texts. I've never written a speech. I can't *read* a speech. It's kind of give-and-take. You have to sense the people you're talking to. You have to respond to what they hear.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a reader in your mind when you write?

BALDWIN

No, you can't have that.

INTERVIEWER

So it's quite unlike preaching?

BALDWIN

Entirely. The two roles are completely unattached. When you are standing in the pulpit, you must sound as though you know what you're talking about. When you're writing, you're trying to find out something which you don't know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you to anyway.

INTERVIEWER

Is that one of the reasons you decided to be a writer—to find out about yourself?

BALDWIN

I'm not sure I decided. It was that or nothing, since in my own mind I was the father of my family. That's not quite the way *they* saw it, but still I was the oldest brother, and I

took it very seriously, I had to set an example. I couldn't allow anything to happen to me because what then would happen to them? I could have become a junkie. On the roads I traveled and the streets I ran, anything could have happened to a boy like me—in New York. Sleeping on rooftops and in the subways. Until this day I'm terrified of the public toilet. In any case . . . my father died, and I sat down and figured out what I had to do.

INTERVIEWER

When did you find time to write?

BALDWIN

I was very young then. I could write *and* hold a few jobs. I was for a time a waiter . . . like George Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. I couldn't do it now. I worked on the Lower East Side and in what we now call Soho.

INTERVIEWER

Was there anyone to guide you?

BALDWIN

I remember standing on a street corner with the black painter Beauford Delaney down in the Village, waiting for the light to change, and he pointed down and said, "Look." I looked and all I saw was water. And he said, "Look again," which I did, and I saw oil on the water and the city reflected in the puddle. It was a great revelation to me. I can't explain it. He taught me how to see, and how to trust what I saw. Painters have often taught writers how to see. And once you've had that experience, you see differently.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think painters would help a fledgling writer more than another writer might? Did you read a great deal?

BALDWIN

I read everything. I read my way out of the two libraries in Harlem by the time I was thirteen. One does learn a great deal about writing this way. First of all, you learn how little you know. It is true that the more one learns the less one knows. I'm still learning how to write. I don't know what technique is. All I know is that you have to make the reader *see it*. This I learned from Dostoyevsky, from Balzac. I'm sure that my life in France would have been very different had I not met Balzac. Even though I hadn't experienced it yet, I understood something about the concierge, all the French institutions and personalities. The way that country and its society works. How to find my way around in it, not get lost in it, and not feel rejected by it. The French gave me

what I could not get in America, which was a sense of "If I can do it, I may do it." I won't generalize, but in the years I grew up in the U.S., I could not do that. I'd already been defined.

INTERVIEWER

Did what you wanted to write about come easily to you from the start?

BALDWIN

I had to be released from a terrible shyness—an illusion that I could hide anything from anybody.

INTERVIEWER

I would think that anyone who could time after time, and without notes, address a congregation would never be shy again.

BALDWIN

I was scared then and I'm scared now. Communication is a two-way street, really, it's a matter of listening to one another. During the civil-rights movement I was in the back of a church in Tallahassee and the pastor, who recognized me, called my name and asked me to say a few words. I was thirty-four and had left the pulpit seventeen years before. The moment in which I had to stand up and walk down the aisle and stand in that pulpit was the strangest moment in my life up to that time. I managed to get through it and when I walked down from the pulpit and back up the aisle, a little old black lady in the congregation said to a friend of hers, "He's little, but he's loud!"

INTERVIEWER

What was the process whereby you were able to write?

BALDWIN

I had to go through a time of isolation in order to come to terms with who and what I was, as distinguished from all the things I'd been told I was. Right around 1950 I remember feeling that I'd come through *something*, shed a dying skin and was naked again. I wasn't, perhaps, but I certainly felt more at ease with myself. And then I was able to write. Throughout 1948 and 1949 I just tore up paper.

INTERVIEWER

Those years were difficult, and yet you received four writing grants between 1945 and 1956. How much encouragement did they afford you?

BALDWIN

Well, the first one was the most important in terms of morale—the Saxton Fellowship in 1945. I was twenty-one. I was launched into the publishing world, so to speak. And there was the novel, which became *Go Tell It on the Mountain* several years later.

INTERVIEWER

The Saxton was intended to help you finish the novel you were working on?

BALDWIN

It helped me finish the novel, it kept me *alive*. The novel didn't work, but I started doing book reviews for the *New Leader* at ten and twenty dollars a shot. I had to read everything and had to write all the time, and that's a great apprenticeship. The people I worked with were left-of-center Trotskyites, Socialist Trotskyites. I was a young Socialist. That was a very nice atmosphere for me; in a sense it saved me from despair. But most of the books I reviewed were *Be Kind to Niggers*, *Be Kind to Jews*, while America was going through one of its liberal convulsions. People suddenly discovered they had a Jewish problem, with books like *Gentleman's Agreement*, *Earth and High Heaven*, or they discovered they had niggers, with books like *Kingsblood Royal* and *Quality*.

Thousands of such tracts were published during those years and it seems to me I had to read every single one of them; the color of my skin made me an expert. And so, when I got to Paris, I had to discharge all that, which was really the reason for my essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel." I was convinced then—and I still am—that those sort of books do nothing but bolster up an image. All of this had quite a bit to do with the direction I took as a writer, because it seemed to me that if I took the role of a victim then I was simply reassuring the defenders of the status quo; as long as I was a victim they could pity me and add a few more pennies to my home-relief check. Nothing would change in that way, I felt, and that essay was a beginning of my finding a new vocabulary and another point of view.

INTERVIEWER

If you felt that it was a white man's world, what made you think that there was any point in writing? And why is writing a white man's world?

BALDWIN

Because they own the business. Well, in retrospect, what it came down to was that I would not allow myself to be defined by other people, white or black. It was beneath me to blame anybody for what happened to me. What happened to me was *my* responsibility. I didn't want any pity. "Leave me alone, I'll figure it out." I was very wounded and I was very dangerous because you become what you hate. It's what happened to my father and

I didn't want it to happen to me. His hatred was suppressed and turned against himself. He couldn't let it out—he could only let it out in the house with rage, and I found it happening to myself as well. And after my best friend jumped off the bridge, I knew that I was next. So—Paris. With forty dollars and a one-way ticket.

INTERVIEWER

Once in Paris, you spent a lot of time upstairs at the Café de Flore. Is that where *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* were written?

BALDWIN

A lot of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* had to be written there, between there and the Hotel Verneuil, where I stayed for a lot of the time I was in Paris. After ten years of carrying that book around, I finally finished it in Switzerland in three months. I remember playing Bessie Smith all the time while I was in the mountains, and playing her till I fell asleep. The book was very hard to write because I was too young when I started, seventeen; it was really about me and my father. There were things I couldn't deal with technically at first. Most of all, I couldn't deal with *me*. This is where reading Henry James helped me, with his whole idea about the center of consciousness and using a single intelligence to tell the story. He gave me the idea to make the novel happen on John's birthday.

INTERVIEWER

Do you agree with Alberto Moravia, who said that one ought only to write in the first person, because the third projects a bourgeois point of view?

BALDWIN

I don't know about that. The first person is the most terrifying view of all. I tend to be in accord with James, who hated the first-person perspective, which the reader has no reason to trust—why should you need this *I*? How is this person real by dint of that bar blaring across the page?

INTERVIEWER

When did you first conceive of leaving black characters out of *Giovanni's Room*?

BALDWIN

I suppose the only honest answer to that is that *Giovanni's Room* came out of something I had to face. I don't quite know when it came, though it broke off from what later turned into *Another Country*. Giovanni was at a party and on his way to the guillotine. He took all the light in the book, and then the book stopped and nobody in the book would speak

to me. I thought I would seal Giovanni off into a short story, but it turned into *Giovanni's Room*. I certainly could not possibly have—not at that point in my life—handled the other great weight, the “Negro problem.” The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. I could not handle both propositions in the same book. There was no room for it. I might do it differently today, but then, to have a black presence in the book at that moment, and in Paris, would have been quite beyond my powers.

INTERVIEWER

Was it David who first appeared in *Giovanni's Room*?

BALDWIN

It was, yes, but that novel has a curious history. I wrote four novels before I published one, before I'd even left America. I don't know what happened to them. When I came over they were in a duffel bag, which I lost, and that's that. But the genesis of *Giovanni's Room* is in America. David is the first person I thought of, but that's due to a peculiar case involving a boy named Lucien Carr, who murdered somebody. He was known to some of the people I knew—I didn't know him personally. But I was fascinated by the trial, which also involved a wealthy playboy and his wife in high-level society. From this fascination came the first version of *Giovanni's Room*, something called *Ignorant Armies*, a novel I never finished. The bones of *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* were in that.

INTERVIEWER

Wasn't it after your first two novels, which were in many ways extremely personal, that you introduced more of the political and sociological counterpoint (evident in your essays) into *Another Country*?

BALDWIN

From my point of view it does not quite work that way, making attempts to be merely personal or to bring in a larger scope. No one knows how he writes his book. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was about my relationship to my father and to the church, which is the same thing really. It was an attempt to exorcise something, to find out what happened to my father, what happened to all of us, what had happened to me—to John—and how we were to move from one place to another. Of course it seems rather personal, but the book is not *about* John, the book is *notabout* me.

INTERVIEWER

“One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience,” you've said.

BALDWIN

Yes, and yet one's own experience is not necessarily one's twenty-four-hour reality. Everything happens to you, which is what Whitman means when he says in his poem "Heroes," "I am the man, I suffered, I was there." It depends on what you mean by experience.

INTERVIEWER

Nevertheless, it seems that your struggles with social injustices were kept apart as the material for your essays, while your fiction dealt predominantly with your own past.

BALDWIN

If I wanted to survive as a writer I would eventually have had to write a book like *Another Country*. On the other hand, short stories like "Sonny's Blues" or "Previous Condition," which appeared before *Another Country*, were highly personal and yet went further than the immediate dilemmas of the young writer struggling in the Village or of Sonny in "Sonny's Blues."

INTERVIEWER

Ralph Ellison said in his *Paris Review* interview that he writes "*primarily* not concerned with injustice, but with art," whereas one might almost find you a sort of spokesman for blacks.

BALDWIN

I don't consider myself a spokesman—I have always thought it would be rather presumptuous.

INTERVIEWER

Although you are aware of the fact that many people read and are moved by your essays, as well as your speeches and lectures . . .

BALDWIN

Let's go back now. Those essays really date from the time I was in my early twenties, and were written for the *New Leader* and *The Nation* all those years ago. They were an attempt to get me beyond the chaos I mentioned earlier. I lived in Paris long enough to finish my first novel, which was very important for me (or I wouldn't be here at all). What held me in Paris later—from '55 to '57—was the fact that I was going through a kind of breakup in my private life, yet I knew I had to go back to America. And I went. Once I was in the civil-rights milieu, once I'd met Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X and Medgar Evers and all those other people, the role I had to play was confirmed. I didn't think of myself as a public speaker, or as a spokesman, but I knew I could get a

story past the editor's desk. And once you realize that you can do something, it would be difficult to live with yourself if you didn't do it.

INTERVIEWER

When you were much younger, what distinctions did you make between art and protest?

BALDWIN

I thought of them both as literature and still do. I don't see the contradiction which some people point out as inherent, though I can sense what Ralph, among others, means by that. The only way I could play it, once indeed I found myself on that road, was to assume that if I had the talent, and my talent was important, it would simply have to survive whatever life brought. I couldn't sit somewhere honing my talent to a fine edge after I had been to all those places in the South and seen those boys and girls, men and women, black and white, longing for change. It was impossible for me to drop them a visit and then leave.

INTERVIEWER

You were in utter despair after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. Did you find it difficult to write then, or do you work better out of anguish?

BALDWIN

No one works better out of anguish at all; that's an incredible literary conceit. I didn't think I could write at all. I didn't see any point to it. I was hurt . . . I can't even talk about it. I didn't know how to continue, didn't see my way clear.

INTERVIEWER

How did you eventually find your way out of the pain?

BALDWIN

I think really through my brother, David. I was working on *No Name in the Street* but hadn't touched it after the assassination. He called me and I told him "I just can't finish this book. I don't know what to do with it." And he came across the ocean. I was here in St. Paul, living in Le Hameau across the road. I was sick, went to four or five hospitals. I was very lucky, because I could've gone mad. You see, I had left America after the funeral and gone to Istanbul. Worked—or tried to—there. Got sick in Istanbul, went to London, got sick in London, and I wanted to die. Collapsed. I was shipped down here, out of the American Hospital in Paris. I'd been in the region in 1949, but I had never dreamt of coming to live in St. Paul. Once I was here, I stayed. I didn't really have anyplace else to go. Well, I could have gone back to America, and I did, to do a *Rap on Race*, which

helped me significantly. But principally, David came and he read *No Name in the Street* and sent it on to New York.

INTERVIEWER

In an *Esquire* essay, you once wrote that you've been "schooled in adversity and skilled in compromise." Does that perhaps reflect trying to get your work published?

BALDWIN

No, though it has been such a stormy career. It's a terrible way to make a living. I find writing gets harder as time goes on. I'm speaking of the working process, which demands a certain amount of energy and courage (though I dislike using the word), and a certain amount of recklessness. I don't know, I doubt whether anyone—myself at least—knows how to *talk* about writing. Perhaps I'm afraid to.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see it as conception, gestation, accouchement?

BALDWIN

I don't think about it that way, no. The whole process of conception—one talks about it after the fact, if one discusses it at all. But you really don't understand it. After the fact I may discuss a work, yet I'm uncertain that what I do say about it afterwards can be taken as gospel.

INTERVIEWER

One critic suggested that James Baldwin's best work was yet to come and would be an autobiographical novel, which *Just Above My Head* was in part.

BALDWIN

He may have a point there. I hope, certainly, that my best work is before me. It depends on what one means by "autobiographical." I certainly have not told my story yet, I know that, though I've revealed fragments.

INTERVIEWER

Are you, or do you remain, very close to your characters?

BALDWIN

I don't know if I feel close to them, now. After a time you find, however, that your characters are lost to you, making it quite impossible for you to judge them. When you've finished a novel it means, "The train stops here, you have to get off here." You never get the book you wanted, you settle for the book you get. I've always felt that when a book ended there was something I didn't see, and usually when I remark the discovery it's too late to do anything about it.

INTERVIEWER

This occurs once it has already been published?

BALDWIN

No, no, it happens when you are right here at the table. The publication date is something else again. It's out of your hands, then. What happens here is that you realize if you try to redo something, you may wreck everything else. But, if a book has brought you from one place to another, so that you see something you didn't see before, you've arrived at another point. This then is one's consolation, and you know that you must now proceed elsewhere.

INTERVIEWER

Are there a lot of your characters walking around here?

BALDWIN

No, they begin walking around before you put them on paper. And after you put them on paper you don't see them anymore. They may be wandering around here. *You* might see them.

INTERVIEWER

So once you've captured a character in your work, it is no longer a phantom?

BALDWIN

Actually, what has happened is that the character has tyrannized you for however long it took, and when the novel is over he or she says Ciao, thanks a lot. *Pointe finale*. Before *Another Country*, Ida talked to me for years. We get on very well now.

INTERVIEWER

How soon after you conceived of Rufus, in *Another Country*, did you know he was going to commit suicide, or was he modeled after your adolescent friend who jumped off the George Washington Bridge in New York?

BALDWIN

Oh, he was taken directly from that friend, yet, oddly enough, he was the last person to arrive in the novel. I'd written the book more than once and I'd felt I'd never get it right. Ida was important, but I wasn't sure I could cope with her. Ida and Vivaldo were the first people I was dealing with, but I couldn't find a way to make you understand Ida. Then Rufus came along and the entire action made sense.

INTERVIEWER

And Richard, the rather idealistic writer?

BALDWIN

This is all far beyond my memory. Well, there was Vivaldo, whose name I didn't know for some time. He was called Daniel at first, and at one point was black. Ida, on the other hand, was always Ida. Richard and Cass were part of the decor. From my point of view, there was nothing in the least idealistic about Richard. He was modeled on several liberal American careerists from then and now. In any case, in order to make the reader see Ida, I had to give her a brother, who turned out to be Rufus. It's fascinating from the point of view of styles, and of accommodations to human pain, that it took me so long—from 1946 to 1960—to accept the fact that my friend was dead. From the moment Rufus was gone, I knew that if you knew what had happened to Ida, you'd equally understand Rufus, and you'd see why Ida throughout the book was so difficult with Vivaldo and everybody else—with herself above all, because she wasn't going to be able to live with the pain. The principal action in the book, for me, is the journey of Ida and Vivaldo toward some kind of coherence.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a big shifting of gears between writing fiction and writing nonfiction?

BALDWIN

Shifting gears, you ask. Every form is difficult, no one is easier than another. They all kick your ass. None of it comes easy.

INTERVIEWER

How many pages do you write in a day?

BALDWIN

I write at night. After the day is over, and supper is over, I begin, and work until about three or four a.m.

INTERVIEWER

That's quite rare, isn't it, because most people write when they're fresh, in the morning.

BALDWIN

I start working when everyone has gone to bed. I've had to do that ever since I was young—I had to wait until the kids were asleep. And then I was working at various jobs during the day. I've always had to write at night. But now that I'm established I do it because I'm alone at night.

INTERVIEWER

When do you know something is the way you want it?

BALDWIN

I do a lot of rewriting. It's very painful. You know it's finished when you can't do anything more to it, though it's never exactly the way you want it. In fact, the hardest thing I ever wrote was that suicide scene in *Another Country*. I always knew that Rufus had to commit suicide very early on, because that was the key to the book. But I kept putting it off. It had to do, of course, with reliving the suicide of my friend who jumped off the bridge. Also, it was very dangerous to do from the technical point of view because this central character dies in the first hundred pages, with a couple of hundred pages to go. The point up to the suicide is like a long prologue, and it is the only light on Ida. You never go into her mind, but I had to make you see what is happening to this girl by making you feel the blow of her brother's death—the key to her relationship with everybody. She tries to make everybody pay for it. You cannot do that, life is not like that, you only destroy yourself.

INTERVIEWER

Is that the way a book starts for you, though? Something like that?

BALDWIN

Probably that way for everybody: something that irritates you and won't let you go. That's the anguish of it. Do this book, or die. You have to go through that.

INTERVIEWER

Does it purge you in any way?

BALDWIN

I'm not so sure about *that*. For me it's like a journey, and the only thing you know is that if when the book is over, you are prepared to continue—you haven't cheated.

INTERVIEWER

What would cheating be?

BALDWIN

Avoiding. Lying.

INTERVIEWER

So there is a compulsion to get it out?

BALDWIN

Oh yes, to get it out and get it right. The word I'm using is compulsion. And it is true of the essay as well.

INTERVIEWER

But the essay is a little bit simpler, isn't it, because you're angry about something which you can put your finger on . . .

BALDWIN

An essay is not simpler, though it may seem so. An essay is essentially an argument. The writer's point of view in an essay is always absolutely clear. The writer is trying to make the readers see something, trying to convince them of something. In a novel or a play you're trying to *show* them something. The risks, in any case, are exactly the same.

INTERVIEWER

What are your first drafts like?

BALDWIN

They are overwritten. Most of the rewrite, then, is cleaning. Don't describe it, show it. That's what I try to teach all young writers—take it out! Don't describe a purple sunset, make me see that it is purple.

INTERVIEWER

As your experience about writing accrues, what would you say increases with knowledge?

BALDWIN

You learn how little you know. It becomes much more difficult because the hardest thing in the world is simplicity. And the most fearful thing, too. It becomes more difficult because you have to strip yourself of all your disguises, some of which you didn't know you had. You want to write a sentence as clean as a bone. That is the goal.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mind what people say about your writing?

BALDWIN

Ultimately not. I minded it when I was younger. You care about the people you care about, what they say. You care about the reviews so that somebody will read the book. So, those things are important, but not of ultimate importance.

INTERVIEWER

The attitudes you found in America which made you go to France—are they still with us, are they exactly the same?

BALDWIN

I always knew I would have to come back. If I were twenty-four now, I don't know if and where I would go. I don't know if I would go to France, I might go to Africa. You must remember when I was twenty-four there was really no Africa to go to, except Liberia. I thought of going to Israel, but I never did, and I was right about that. Now, though, a kid now . . . well, you see, something has happened which no one has really noticed, but it's very important: Europe is no longer a frame of reference, a standard-bearer, the classic model for literature and for civilization. It's not the measuring stick. There are other standards in the world. It's a fascinating time to be living. There's a whole wide world which isn't now as it was when I was younger. When I was a kid the world was white, for all intents and purposes, and now it is struggling to *remain* white—a very different thing.

INTERVIEWER

It's frequently been noted that you are a master of minor characters. How do you respond to that?

BALDWIN

Well, minor characters are the subtext, illustrations of whatever it is you're trying to convey. I was always struck by the minor characters in Dostoyevsky and Dickens. The

minor characters have a certain freedom which the major ones don't. They can make comments, they can move, yet they haven't got the same weight, or intensity.

INTERVIEWER

You mean to say their actions are less accountable?

BALDWIN

Oh no, if you fuck up a minor character you fuck up a major one. They are more a part of the decor—a kind of Greek chorus. They carry the tension in a much more explicit way than the majors.

INTERVIEWER

Excuse me for asking, but might your mother be standing behind you while you're writing; is she perhaps behind many of your characters?

BALDWIN

I wouldn't think so, but to tell you the truth, I wouldn't know. I've got five sisters. And in a funny way, there have been many women in my life, so it wouldn't be my mother.

INTERVIEWER

Have you been through analysis?

BALDWIN

God no, never got "adjusted."

INTERVIEWER

Both you and William Styron (intentionally or not) write about victims and victimization. Styron has said he has never felt like a victim. Have you?

BALDWIN

Well, I refuse to. Perhaps the turning point in one's life is realizing that to be treated like a victim is not necessarily to become one.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe in a community of writers? Is that of any interest to you?

BALDWIN

No. I've never *seen* one in any case . . . and I don't think any writer ever has.

INTERVIEWER

But weren't William Styron and Richard Wright, say, important to you in formulating your viewpoints?

BALDWIN

Richard was very important to me. He was much older. He was very nice to me. He helped me with my first novel, really. That was 1944–45. I just knocked on his door out in Brooklyn! I introduced myself, and of course he'd no idea who I was. There were no essays then, no fiction—this was 1944. I adored him. I loved him. We were very unlike each other, as writers, probably as people too. And as I grew older, that became more and more apparent. And after that was Paris.

INTERVIEWER

And Styron?

BALDWIN

Well, as I was saying, Bill is a friend of mine who happens to be a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Did you take a position on his book about Nat Turner?

BALDWIN

I did. My position, though, is that I will not tell another writer what to write. If you don't like their alternative, write yours. I admired him for confronting it, and the result. It brought in the whole enormity of the issue of history versus fiction, fiction versus history, and which is which . . . He writes out of reasons similar to mine: about something which hurt him and frightened him. When I was working on *Another Country* and Bill was working on *Nat Turner*, I stayed in his guest house for five months. His hours and mine are very different. I was going to bed at dawn, Bill was just coming up to his study to go to work; his hours going on as mine went off. We saw each other at supertime.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of conversations would you hold?

BALDWIN

We never spoke about our work, or very rarely. It was a wonderful time in my life, but not at all literary. We sang songs, drank a little too much, and on occasion chatted with the people who were dropping in to see us. We had a certain common inheritance in terms of the music.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of music are you hearing while in the immediate process of writing? Do you experience anything physical or emotional?

BALDWIN

No. I'm very cold—cold probably isn't the word I want: *controlled*. Writing for me must be a very controlled exercise, formed by passions and hopes. That is the only reason you get through it, otherwise you may as well do something else. The act of writing itself is cold.

INTERVIEWER

I'm going to presage my own question. Most of the novelists I've spoken to claim they read exceedingly fewer contemporary novels, but find themselves drawn to plays, history, memoirs, biographies, and poetry. I believe this is true for you as well.

BALDWIN

In my case it is due to the fact that I'm always doing some kind of research. And yes, I read many plays and a lot of poetry as a kind of apprenticeship. You are fascinated, I am fascinated by a certain *optic*—a process of seeing things. Reading Emily Dickinson, for example, and others who are quite far removed from one's ostensible daily concerns, or obligations. They are freer, for that moment, than you are partly because they are dead. They may also be a source of strength. Contemporary novels are part of a universe in which you have a certain role and a certain responsibility. And, of course, an unavoidable curiosity.

INTERVIEWER

You read contemporary novels out of a sense of responsibility?

BALDWIN

In a way. At any rate, few novelists interest me—which has nothing to do with their values. I find most of them too remote for me. The world of John Updike, for instance, does not impinge on my world. On the other hand, the world of John Cheever *did* engage me. Obviously, I'm not making a very significant judgment about Updike. It's entirely subjective, what I'm saying. In the main, the concerns of most white Americans (to

use *that* phrase) are boring, and terribly, terribly self-centered. In the worst sense. Everything is contingent, of course, on what you take yourself to be.

INTERVIEWER

Are you suggesting they are less concerned, somehow, with social injustice?

BALDWIN

No, no, you see, I don't want to make that kind of dichotomy. I'm not asking that anybody get on picket lines or take positions. That is entirely a private matter. What I'm saying has to do with the concept of the self, and the nature of self-indulgence which seems to me to be terribly strangling, and so limited it finally becomes sterile.

INTERVIEWER

And yet in your own writing you deal with personal experiences quite often.

BALDWIN

Yes, but—and here I'm in trouble with the language again—it depends upon how you conceive of yourself. It revolves, surely, around the multiplicity of your connections. Obviously you can only deal with your life and work from the vantage point of your self. There isn't any other vantage point, there is no other point of view. I can't say about any of my characters that they are utter fictions. I do have a sense of what nagged my attention where and when; even in the dimmest sense I know how a character impinged on me in reality, in what we call reality, the daily world. And then, of course, imagination has something to do with it. But it has got to be triggered by something, it cannot be triggered by itself.

INTERVIEWER

What is it about Emily Dickinson that moves you?

BALDWIN

Her use of language, certainly. Her solitude, as well, and the style of that solitude. There is something very moving and in the best sense funny. She isn't solemn. If you really want to know something about solitude, become famous. That is the turn of the screw. That solitude is practically insurmountable. Years ago I thought to be famous would be a kind of ten-day wonder, and then I could go right back to life as usual. But people treat you differently before you realize it. You see it in the wonder and the worry of your intimates. On the other side of that is a great responsibility.

INTERVIEWER

Is one's past cluttered, as a celebrated writer?

BALDWIN

There are many witnesses to my past, people who've disappeared, people who are dead, whom I loved. But I don't feel there are any ghosts, any regrets. I don't feel that kind of melancholy at all. No nostalgia. Everything is always around and before you. Novels that haven't worked, loves, struggles. And yet it all gives you something of immeasurable power.

INTERVIEWER

This brings us to your concern with reality as being history, with seeing the present shaded by everything which occurred in a person's past. James Baldwin has always been bound by his past, and his future. At forty, you said you felt much older than that.

BALDWIN

That is one of those things a person says at forty, at forty especially. It was a great shock to me, forty. And I did feel much older than that. Responding to history, I think a person is in sight of his or her death around the age of forty. You see it coming. You are not in sight of your death at thirty, less so at twenty-five. You are struck by the fact of your mortality, that it is unlikely you'll live another forty years. So time alters you, actually becoming either an enemy or a friend.

INTERVIEWER

You seem very troubled—but not by death?

BALDWIN

Yes, true, but not at all by death. I'm troubled over getting my work done and over all the things I've not learned. It's useless to be troubled by death, because then, of course, you can't live at all.

INTERVIEWER

"Essentially, America has not changed that much," you told the *New York Times* when *Just Above My Head* was being published. Have you?

BALDWIN

In some ways I've changed precisely because America has not. I've been forced to change in some ways. I had a certain expectation for my country years ago, which I know I don't have now.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, before 1968, you said, "I love America."

BALDWIN

Long before then. I still do, though that feeling has changed in the face of it. I think that it is a spiritual disaster to pretend that one *doesn't* love one's country. You may disapprove of it, you may be forced to leave it, you may live your whole life as a battle, yet I don't think you can escape it. There isn't any other place to go—you don't pull up your roots and put them down someplace else. At least not in a single lifetime, or, if you do, you'll be aware of precisely what it means, knowing that your real roots are always elsewhere. If you try to pretend you don't see the immediate reality that formed you I think you'll go blind.

INTERVIEWER

As a writer, are there any particular battles you feel you've won?

BALDWIN

The battle of becoming a writer at all! "I'm going to be a great writer when I grow up," I used to tell my mother when I was a little boy. And I'm still going to be a great writer when I grow up.

INTERVIEWER

What do you tell younger writers who come to you with the usual desperate question: How do I become a writer?

BALDWIN

Write. Find a way to keep alive and write. There is nothing else to say. If you are going to be a writer there is nothing I can say to stop you; if you're not going to be a writer nothing I can say will help you. What you really need at the beginning is somebody to let you know that the effort is real.

INTERVIEWER

Can you discern talent in someone?

BALDWIN

Talent is insignificant. I know a lot of talented ruins. Beyond talent lie all the usual words: discipline, love, luck, but, most of all, endurance.

INTERVIEWER

Would you suggest that a young writer from a minority consecrate himself to that minority, or is his first obligation his own self-realization as a writer?

BALDWIN

Your self and your people are indistinguishable from each other, really, in spite of the quarrels you may have, and your people are all people.

INTERVIEWER

Wasn't *Giovanni's Room* partially an attempt to break down these divisions, pointing out that David could be white, black, or yellow?

BALDWIN

Certainly, for in terms of what happened to him, none of that mattered at all.

INTERVIEWER

Yet, later on, notably in the case of Rufus and *Another Country*, one's race becomes essential to your story.

BALDWIN

Important in that particular novel, yes, but *Another Country* is called that because it is trying to convey the reality of that country. The story would be different if it were in France, or even in England.

INTERVIEWER

What is your present relationship with people like Ralph Ellison, Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones) or Eldridge Cleaver?

BALDWIN

I never had a relationship with Cleaver. I was in difficulties because of Cleaver, which I didn't want to talk about then, and don't wish to discuss now. My real difficulty with Cleaver, sadly, was visited on me by the kids who were following him, while he was calling me a faggot and the rest of it. I would come to a town to speak, Cleveland, let's say, and he would've been standing on the very same stage a couple of days earlier. I had to try to undo the damage I considered he was doing. I was handicapped with *Soul on Ice*, because what I might have said in those years about Eldridge would have been taken as an answer to his attack on me. So I never answered it, and I'm not answering it now.

Cleaver reminded me of an old Baptist minister I used to work with when I was in the pulpit. I never trusted him at all. As for Baraka, he and I have had a stormy time too, but we're very good friends now.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read each other's work?

BALDWIN

Yes—at least I read his. And as for Ralph, I haven't seen him in many years.

INTERVIEWER

You haven't corresponded at all?

BALDWIN

No. I gather Ralph did not like what he considered I was doing to myself on the civil-rights road. And so, we haven't seen each other.

INTERVIEWER

If you were both to meet over lunch tomorrow, what might you talk about?

BALDWIN

I'd love to meet him for lunch tomorrow, and share a bottle of bourbon, and probably talk about the last twenty years we haven't seen each other. I have nothing against him in any case. And I love his great book. We disagreed about tactics, I suppose. But I had to go through the civil-rights movement and I don't regret it at all. And those people trusted me. There was something very beautiful about that period, something life-giving for me to be there, to march, to be a part of a sit-in, to see it through my own eyes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that now blacks and whites can write about each other, honestly and convincingly?

BALDWIN

Yes, though I have no overwhelming evidence in hand. But I think of the impact of spokespersons like Toni Morrison and other younger writers. I believe what one has to do as a black American is to take white history, or history as written by whites, and claim it all—including Shakespeare.

INTERVIEWER

"What other people write about me is irrelevant," you once wrote in *Essence*. Was that meant to go unqualified; do you not relate to criticism in any way?

BALDWIN

It is never entirely true that you don't give a shit what others say about you, but you must throw it out of your mind. I went through a very trying period, after all, where on one side of town I was an Uncle Tom and on the other the Angry Young Man. It could make one's head spin, the number of labels that have been attached to me. And it was inevitably painful, and surprising, and indeed, bewildering. I *do* care what certain people think about me.

INTERVIEWER

But not literary critics?

BALDWIN

Literary critics cannot be one's concern. Ideally, however, what a critic can do is indicate where you've been excessive or unclear. As far as any sort of public opinion is a question, I would say that one cannot possibly react to any of it. Things may be said which hurt, and you don't like it, but what are you to do? Write a White Paper, or a Black Paper, defending yourself? You can't do that.

INTERVIEWER

You have often left your home in St. Paul, returning to America and going on the road. Do you feel comfortable as a speaker?

BALDWIN

I have never felt comfortable as a speaker, no.

INTERVIEWER

You feel more at ease behind the typewriter?

BALDWIN

Well, certainly, although I used to be a preacher, which helps on the road.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk a little more about your relationship to Richard Wright, under whose aegis you received your first writing grant?

BALDWIN

As I said before, I just knocked on his door in New York. I was nineteen. And he was very nice. The only trouble was I didn't drink in those years. He drank bourbon. Now, I'm going to save you the trouble of asking me about writers and alcohol: I don't know any writers who don't drink. Everybody I've been close to drinks. But you don't drink while you're working. It's funny, because it is all a reflex, like lighting a cigarette. Your drink is made and then you go off to another place. When you finally get back to the drink it's mainly water. And the cigarette has gone out. Talking about Richard and our early hostile period, which I thought was ridiculously blown out of proportion, I should say that when I thought I was dealing with Richard, I was in fact thinking of Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Richard's *Native Son* was the only contemporary representation there was of a black person in America. One of the reasons I wrote what I did about the book is a technical objection, which I uphold today. I could not accept the performance of the lawyer at the end of the book. I was very explicit about that. I think it was simply absurd to talk about this monster created by the American public, and then expect the public to save it! Altogether, I found it too simpleminded. Insofar as the American public creates a monster, they are not about to recognize it. You create a monster and destroy it. It is part of the American way of life, if you like. I reserve, in any case, the utmost respect for Richard, especially in light of his posthumous work, which I believe is his greatest novel, *Lawd Today*. Look it up.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any resistance today to black writers in publishing houses?

BALDWIN

There is an enormous resistance, though it differs from Wright's time. When I was young, the joke was "How many niggers you got at your plantation?" Or, more snidely, "How many niggers you got at your publishing house?" And some had one, most had none. That's not true now.

INTERVIEWER

How does it strike you that in many circles James Baldwin is known as a prophetic writer?

BALDWIN

I don't try to be prophetic, as I don't sit down to write literature. It is simply this: a writer has to take all the risks of putting down what he sees. No one can tell him about that. No

one can control that reality. It reminds me of something Pablo Picasso was supposed to have said to Gertrude Stein while he was painting her portrait. Gertrude said, "I don't look like that." And Picasso replied, "You will." And he was right.

Author photograph by Nancy Crampton.

kaie kellough meets the *québécois* reggae vampirates uptown

irate
i rate you a pirate

a cracker patwa snatcher
a *kebek*-

wha?

diction copy-
scatter, jam

downer, jah muse
sickener, yr ancestor:

a kin napper.

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duppy breath, rot a *buckra*'s tung, sting his sing, ruck his cuss, fuck
& fuss him, e

rode his vo-
chords raze his vox. salt
 his loss. hex
 his hope.
 vex hiss pirit
 ded.
 i ink
 my bloody x
 on dis anti
 vampiracy en-
 treaty to my ancy. grant me: may no piece
 nor chalice pass
 nor peace come to pass
 tween we
 & foul-fanged thee

rewind

*listening to a beat-up taj mahal record (mo' roots, 1974)
on an ancient turntable at 3 a.m.*

lost, nocturnal, rum-tossed
i blow a nebula off the needle, blow stardust off the record

swivel and fit the diamond tip
into the vinyl's delta

crackle rackle

crackle rackle

taj mahal, metallic, moans : "my grandfather..."
his voice, sharp as plucked steel : "married one fine..."

rackle rackle

rackle rackle

"st. kitts woman..." his voice slices (a razor thru skin

(as the diamond cuts concentric circles
into the spinning disc))

his voice slices through static
penetrates

deep down into this nocturnal groove
delves

rackle crackle

rackle crackle

deeper than self-reflection
plumbs

crackle rackle

crackle rackle

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delves

rackle crackle

rackle crackle

deeper than self-reflection
plumbs

crackle rackle

crackle rackle

memory's fathoms
sounds

crackle crackle

crackle crackle

ashes, dust, ancestries
sounds

to my ancestro

to my ancestro

& sped on a searching song
weeps into bluer breaches

wearied
his voice creaks, cracks, the svelte needle skids

to my ancestro

to my ancestro

skips

to my ancestro

to my ancestro

the voice ceases to search, far
unconscious shores

reached, the song, static-wracked
crashes

to my ancestro

to my ancestro

announces arrival, found
i nudge the needle

to my ancesto

to my ancesto

i nudge the needle

to my ancesto

to my ancesto

ahead a half-millenia

between the royal mount and the river below

quartier ville-marie, montréal, fête st-jean 2005

buses sway through the gray swelter sweeping up from *rue ontario*. the *taverne* sags against the boxing gym. the african barbershop's speakers pump the rhythms of the equator. the vietnamese *épicerie*, its dead-ringer butchers in blood-spattered doctors' coats shelves palm oil, plantain, cornmeal. next door, bleached-blond *pitounes* entrust their calluses to masked korean manicurists. on the corner, teenagers mix with fast-aging juiceheads. the city serves this steaming cocktail of youth, immigrant dreams and drunkenness.

across *ontario* squats *metro frontenac*. three circling flights deep. in the underground heat, the punishment fits the rhyme: a junky strives to hawk a hot bike for 10 bucks before *les flics* bind his wrists with iron. the metro roars, hellbound, toward opposite poles: *centre-ville's* concrete cauldron or suburbs where sirens and tobacco factory funk settle into lilac perfumed silence. but here, the *fleur-de-lys* unfurls over rotting balconies.

children tough and wiry as weeds dash down rusted walkups, kick away cans and garbage bags to clear a canvas, chalk daydreams on the sidewalk. stooped men wither into cigarette smoke. all the pawnshops on *ontario est* are packed with hagglers hawking bile and costume jewelry for petty prices – neighborhood princes seeking oblivion in bomb-shaped 11 bottles of *bière extra-forte*. once drunk, will they dream of *cartier's* voyages?

come night, that black summer gleaming through the smoke and light-pollution, the battered latina across the alley forces a serrated scream. her *hombre* vomits down three flights of spiralling steel stairs. his acid stomach-rot splats a mosaic pattern in the courtyard where african, latin-american, *québécois* children play and fight at multiculturalism.

poor artists rich in lovers, dreams, words and all things vain but pure. muse to muted horn blues blown up from the *quartier des spectacles*. these blues battle uphill, against the traffic and television babel before dying on the leaves of concrete-rupturing maples. these are the ghosts of a generation's hopes on a *fête nationale* past. be they writ to witness, be they writ to last.

coming thru slaughter

for fats domino

when slow-rolling, slow-to-anger rivers
surged & sloshed mud, debris, stray piano keys
up blueberry hill, when bloated corpses bobbed thru storyville

where sousaphones' circular bells once beamed: brass suns
where low yellows, high browns cakewalked through town
where barrelhouse boogies, tickled by professors of the ivories

tinkled the cration myth of true democracy: jazz, in whose annals
creole sports, gracile & dangerous as razors, flashed diamond grins
when floods sloshed through ol' blu orleans

life floated, treaded the mud of its origins. pharoah
hard-hearted, budged not from his white house. hollywood
sped no seraphic cavalry. marie laveau

conjured no black star liner, no great black ark, no sun-ship
outlined in molten anger against the azure
when floods sloshed through ol' new orleans

bloated corpses floated, stank, and sank
in a mud-gumbo of stray piano keys, broken steeples, history
stank, & sank into new life's brazen glitter flitting

over creation's ever-river rolling

Extract from *Sailor*

All the baddies were laid out in rows in Saint Georges markit, on the tap of all the oul bits of fruit an vegetables that was goin off, mushin intee the flewet, rattin more quick wi the weight of the baddies pressin down on them.

There was a quare awful smell, sweet, high an far away, soft fruits hingin low off trees just afore they drap, hunderds of wee flies buzzin.

A small mawn wi one arm, hunched in a pair of brown ovrills, was hawkin bout a medal watrin can, walkin slow roun the edge walls of the markit, the wadder he sprinkeld oudda it smelt like carbolic soap.

The baddies were kept in seppert rows of wemen, men an childer, all lit up wi skinny April sun comin in thew the markits glass roof broke intee sharp jugs, a fine run of mizzle covered the childers baddies, stickin til them.

People clusterd tilgether in knats, crooked in each oers arms, walked slow up an down the rows led by wemen wearin white uniforms. They were stumblin, hardly able til luck at the swolled faces. The culler of them faces put me in mind of the green grey sleach that gathers roun the drain in the yard when its been rainin. Some of the faces was covered oer wi white sheets ripped up intee squares the size of Daddys hawnkerchief. The folks that was searchin thew thone ones didnt lift up the scraps of sheets, stead they hoked thew the pagits of the baddies coats, inspected their shoes an boots. Ah plucked a scrap of sheet off one of the baddies til luck, til see what was under, there was so little left of thone face ah cudnt tell if it was a mawn ner a wemen. Mammy bent down, let go of ma paw til pick up a ripped piece of card wi numbers chalked on it.

Mick, whats these pinned on for?

Thems for matchin up the baddies wi the people that claims them. We may keep luckin love, there's a quare few in here.

Wiout Mammy haulin me ah bolted, clambrin oer, hokin thew the baddies til get at juicy bits of fruit that cud still be ate. Daddys face was like thunder.

Come ere ya skitter, ahl put a pin in yer cooter.

He clattered down the rows til blatter me. The oer people roun were tutt'n, goin for ma tail, a big lump near me shouted.

Fer fucks sake, its a disgrace so it is!

Ah says til meself, ah says, ahl nat be caught whenever there's this much fruit til ate.

Ah skipped an spyhopped, chuttrin, dodgin mens fists an boots, there was definitely a banana near me, ah cud smell it thew the badness. Here's me liftin the flap of a big owl oercoat, so ah cud get at the banana under it. Alwe nat had a banana since Christmas, the one Daddy brought back wi us on the big ship, an ah didnt even get til ate all of it for ah had til share it wi Mammy. Ah tugged an tugged at the coat, til ah clocked it was the arm on the inside the sleeve that was stappin me gertin at thone banana ah wanted. So ah had til try hard til lift the arm up wi ma two paws, for it was dead heavy, stiff as a poker.

What was left of the banana was almost nathin. Coal black an flat. Ah grabbed it. Sucked out the squashed shugar til there was nought left, thew the skin on the markit flew..

THE SCIENCE OF FICTION



Where did the mountain go?

A multi-authored folk tale in the future adapted from the Palestinian folk tale "Gazelle."¹ Abboud channels her childhood memory, as well as the expansive community of women storytellers and a chatbot AI in the remaking of the original tale.²

Once there was ... once there was not
A thing that grinds silver and gold; a fugitive transformer-robo-deer; three human hairs in a world of hair extinction and three brothers who lived not too far from here [or her].

The narrator of this tale consoled a friend in the orchestra of abandonment, in search of word companionship.
Hisk, hisk. [A sound of flapping wings nearing surface water.]

Three brothers who lived not too far from here—or her—
assembled as was their annual habit to go hunting. They liked to hunt. Before I tell you about the hunt, a few words about their mother, the great Queen. Their mother was a great Queen, but she knew her time would soon come to an end. She said to them, "Listen! I'm about to die. Promise me to care for your three sisters, and promise to rule as I have ruled, with fairness and equanimity."

And sure enough, a day came, and a day went. Another day came, and another went—[interrupted by an innocent asking]: *Where did it go? Where does any day go*, is my response. Yes, and the Queen passed away.
They buried her alongside her fourth husband (a farmer in his boyhood, although I am not sure why this is relevant to my story). It was not the custom of this day, but such was her wish. They buried her at the foot of a faultless water spring in 'Ein Qiniya. A day came and a day went, and an oak tree grew there, or here, where her body lay rested.

Just seven kilometers west of Ramallah, 'Ein Qiniya village is inhabited by one-thousand humans—and over ten-thousand non-humans.

Does this include spirits?

No one knows. It is considered bad luck to count spirits.

In all these years, 'Ein Qiniya has never aged, even when it was annexed into categorical, colonial divisions, during the time that once was. The land—and all that was living upon, below

1. See Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana, *Speak Bird Speak Again: Palestinian Arab Folktales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

2. The artist recounts: "My collaboration with the OpenAI chat was very curious and interesting (I was curious and 'it' tried to be interesting). I would feed it minimal parts from 'Gazelle,' not in any specific order, and it would write away. It wrote too much at every response—I felt like it was taking over the story. By this I mean when I work with human co-authors, we tend to leave the end of our individual part with space for extension, contribution, and exchange where the subsequent author can imagine from and write content into. But with the AI, it wanted to always end the story with its part and not give me or the story room for continuation."



and above—was divided into areas “A,” “B,” and “C.” Because ‘Ein Qiniya was enclosed in area “C,” the development of its infrastructure was forbidden by the occupying regime of the time. The irony of such an aggressive law (and trust me in saying that it was aggressive), was that it would unintentionally serve to preserve the village agricultural areas.

Are there only two distinct and contrasting directions? Either colonial hostility, or Indigenous preservation?

It is considered unlucky to ask such questions—the evil spirits of the time-that-once-was might be listening!

That was indeed a different time, the year 1993, it was Oslo, people gathered around tables and maps, where the animals were not invited, nor the waters invoked.

What about the illegal settlers? I heard they were handed plenty of what was cut from others, and in broad daylight too.

Indeed, these tales are not whispers.

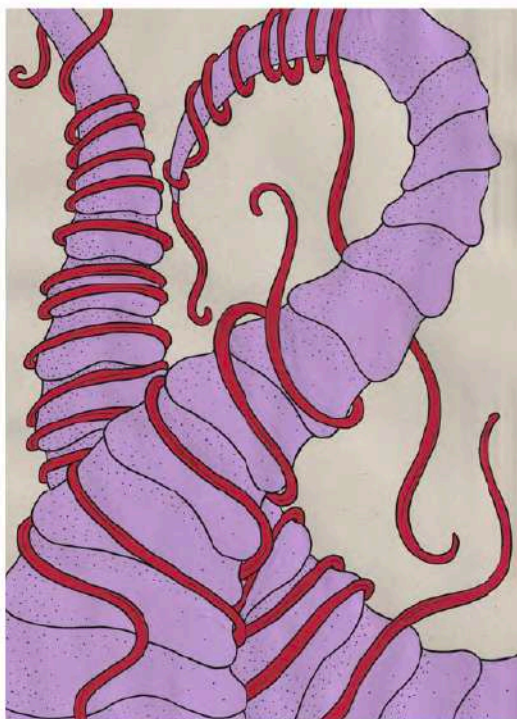
Or,

these tales whisper. Historummr.³ You must come close to the page to recall the odor trail long gone.

The oak tree stood, lived, and breathed, unaffected by storms that come and go as the day.

And the brothers, they went hunting.

3. A new word among the new world languages meaning lies of our histories. Etymology from history + rumor.



A gazelle suddenly sprang before them and Oh!, how she filled their eyes!

Is that another way of saying that their eyes were filled with desire for her?

Yes.

All three brothers argued over who among them should hunt her.

This one said, "She's mine!" and that one said, "She's mine!" While they were arguing, the gazelle passed one of the brothers, the youngest, and it became clear to them all that she had chosen him.

I must tell you that she was not really a gazelle. She was a transformer-robo-deer, and capable of transforming herself from animal to humanoid robot at will.

Ours is a story in a future of days long past, after all.

Gazelle chose the youngest brother, Hasan Alqaader [root word: destiny or fate] because she could sense—or scan—the goodness in his heart. In the future, our words of the past will be replaced by others, and *sense* will be entirely consumed by *scan*. She was as authentic as they—the artificial intelligentsia—came. Her scan was dead-on.

"All right, brothers," Hasan Alqaader announced. "You must go back now. She's mine." And then the chase began! He chased the gazelle until she led Hasan to the town where his eldest sister now lived.

Upon entering the town—and losing sight of the gazelle—he saw his sister and could not believe the wonderful surprise for he had no idea where she lived after her marriage. The brothers had kept their promise to their Queen and cared for their sisters until marriage separated kin.

How happy they were to meet! They celebrated with singing and dancing.

"And what brought you this way, brother?" she asked.

"Gazelle brought me," he answered. He proceeded to tell his sister the story of how he chased the gazelle who led him to his sister's town. "No one is any match for the gazelle!" explained Alqaader's eldest sister.

In the morning he moved on. Gazelle appeared and did as she had done before, slowing down, and then running away as soon as he came near, until she led him to the home of his second sister. They were happy to meet each other and celebrated with food and French 75 to honor the good old days. "Brother, what has brought you here?"

"Gazelle brought me, sister," he answered.

"No one's any match for the gazelle!"

The next day, it was the same, the robo-deer named Gazelle led Alqaader to his third sister's town and again it was the same words and compassions exchanged.



Now, each of his sisters had given him a secret parting gift, a red hair, saying, "If you're ever in a tight spot, just rub this hair, and before you know it, we'll be there." You see, this was a time when the red hair gene had vanished. In a world where there was no more hair on our human heads, red had prevailed, until it eventually reached extinction. It was believed now by the humanoid-Sayers to contain the most potent of magic.

On the fourth day, Gazelle appeared again, and they did as they had done before. She filled his eyes, scanned his heart for vital health signs pre-chase, and ran. Forgetting the world and the word behind him, Hasan Alqaader jumped and chased after her, until, on the fourth day, Gazelle led him into her own city. A city in the future with crystal flora and diamond fauna. You can switch from day to night and from the night to day simply by clapping a command. And with everyone chasing after their own desires—*man's greed in the future is no different than today*—the land is inflicted with endless flickering lights. Existence is such that there is never one full minute of darkness or one of light. In the city of Gazelle's home. A city called "Disco."

This was part of the reason the transformer-robo-deer named Gazelle was a fugitive from her own home, opting to wander in the wild and into past worlds. She found her freedom inside a past that had never been hers. She was curious about the stories implanted in her transformer brain. The tales of ancient oak trees and enchanted springs. She wondered if she might understand "emotion" after exploring it in the heart of a human man.

What is desire? And do not tell me it is considered unlucky to speak of it!

I will tell you, but first, let me finish the story.

Now, Gazelle has suitors all over the world and across the multi-encased universe. Every time one of them comes asking for her hand, her father says, "I will not marry off my creation to a man/woman who will make of her a servant! S/he who can move this mountain from the foot of our town can have her hand; and whoever fails will find his/her soul entrapped inside a glass jar!"

By now, Alqaader realised the identity of his hunt-subject, but it was too late to reverse travel in time for he was already in love. He asked for my advice, but no words from a friend would console his aching heart. I could, however, within the very minimal power I possess, arrange for the two to meet. Their time had only known the urgency of the chase. In that meeting, Gazelle transformed into her humanoid form. Her mechanical hand she extended to hold his, cooling the perspiration from his skin. They observed the slowness of being together until she broke the silence to confess [speaking in Transformer tongue]: *Sroith zheir shatuk twaiidh inah, enzheirs kashulil vurn. Dhwyn tael kashuwi bithil, dyrn zhiv tyndahl anilam.*⁴

4. The artist recounts: "When I asked the Chatbot AI to generate a new language as part of our story-writing collaboration, there was a resistance at first from the AI, but eventually it summoned a few new words. I liked how it accounted for body sounds in the language-making.

When I asked for the name of the new language, the AI response was: 'I did not assign a specific name to the new language I generated. However, the text has a few unique features, such as the use of certain letters and sounds, and the arrangement of words and phrases. If you would like to give it a name, you are free to do so!'"



The next morning, Alqaader searched for the hairs his sisters had gifted. He rubbed all three of them—and behold! Six-hundred hosts of jinn appeared. Gazelle also now understood human/non-human compassion—*was this love?*—and she too came to his aid. They all started on the mountain, and before day had risen or night had ascended [*for these two were one and the same, remember?*], Behold! it was—in the name of the galactic universal all-encompassing One—it was as if there was no mountain there at all.

Where did the mountain go?

It ran away with my story,
where two lovers meet inside.

Desire is a spontaneous Splush! Plush! Ush!

Hisk, hisk. Drink, drink.

My thirst, my thirst.

My thirst my thirst is greater than yours.

Only one destiny for me, he is heard singing.

Have you seen her; he screams away.

Have you seen her; not today.

BIO

Jumana Emil Abboud works through drawing, workshopping, and wording to animate and support imaginaries of the oppressed, and her creative motives emphasize a time and place where human and non-human are dependent on story and water. She currently lives and works in Jerusalem and London where she is currently pursuing her practice-led PhD at Slade School of Fine Art, UCL.



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FICTION JUNE 9 & 16, 2014 ISSUE

THE BAD GRAFT

BY KAREN RUSSELL

June 2, 2014



Save this story

I. GERMINATION

The book cover features a solid, vibrant red background. The title 'THE BAD GRAFT' is printed in large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters. Below the title, the author's name 'KAREN RUSSELL' is printed in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the cover, there are several thin, light-colored, dried plant stems or grass blades protruding upwards. The title and author's name have long, dark shadows cast to the right, giving the text a three-dimensional appearance.

THE BAD GRAFT
KAREN RUSSELL



Photograph by Michael Marcelle

The land looked flattened, as if by a rolling pin. All aspects, all directions. On either side of Highway 62, the sand cast up visions of evaporated civilizations, dissolved castles that lay buried under the desert. Any human eye, goggled by a car's windshield, can graft such fantasies onto the great Mojave. And the girl and the boy in the Dodge Charger were exceptionally farsighted. Mirages rose from the boulders, a flume of dream attached to real rock.

And hadn't their trip unfolded like a fairy tale? the couple later quizzed each other, recalling that strange day, their first in California, hiking among the enormous apricot boulders of Joshua Tree National Park. The girl had got her period a week early and was feeling woozy; the boy kept bending over to remove a pebble from his shoe, a phantom that he repeatedly failed to find. Neither disclosed these private discomforts. Each wanted the other to have the illusion that they might pause, anywhere, at any moment, and make love. And while both thought this was highly unlikely—not in this heat, not at this hour—the possibility kept bubbling up, every place they touched. This was the only true protection they'd brought with them as they walked deeper into the blue-gold Mojave.

On the day they arrived in Joshua Tree, it was a hundred and six degrees. They had never been to the desert. The boy could scarcely believe the size of the boulders, clustered under the enormous sun like dead red rockets awaiting repair, or the span of the sky, a cheerfully vacant blue dome, the desert's hallucinatory choreography achieved through stillness, brightness, darkness, distance—and all of this before noon. It was a big day, they agreed. It was a day so huge, in fact, that its real scale would always elude them. Neither understood that a single hour in the desert could mutate their entire future as a couple. In a sense, they will never escape this trail loop near Black Rock Canyon. They had prepared for the hike well, they thought, with granola bars, water, and an anti-UV sunscreen so powerful that its S.P.F. seemed antagonistic. "Albino spring break," the boy said, rubbing the cream onto her nose. They'd heard about the couple who had died of dehydration six miles from where they were standing. They congratulated themselves on being unusually responsible and believed themselves to be at the start of a long journey, weightless spores blowing west.

The trip was a kind of honeymoon. The boy and girl were eloping. They weren't married, however, and had already agreed that they never would be—they weren't that kind of couple. The boy, Andy, was a reader; he said that they were seafarers, wanderers. "Ever unfixed," a line from Melville, was scraped in red ink across the veins of his arm. The girl, Angie, was three years sober and still struggling to find her mooring on dry land. On their first date they had decided to run away together.

Andy bought a stupidly huge knife; Angie had a tiny magenta flashlight suspended on a gold chain, which she wore around her throat. He was twenty-two, she had just turned twenty-six. Kids were for later, maybe. They could still see the children they had been: their own Popsicle-red smiles haunting them. Still, they'd wanted to celebrate a beginning. And the Mojave was a good place to launch into exile together; already they felt their past lives in Pennsylvania dissolving into rumor, sucked up by the hot sun of California and the perfectly blue solvent of the sky.

They'd been driving for three days; almost nobody knew yet that they were gone. They'd cashed old checks. They'd quit their jobs. Nothing was planned. The rental Dodge Charger had been a real steal, because the boy's cousin Sewell was a manager at the Zero to Sixty franchise, and because it smelled like decades of cigarettes. Between them they had nine hundred and fifty dollars left now. Less, less, less. At each rest stop, Angie uncapped the ballpoint, did some nauseating accounting. Everything was going pretty fast. By the time they reached Nevada, they had spent more than eight hundred dollars on gasoline.

Near Palm Springs, they stop to eat at a no-name diner and nearly get sick from the shock of oxygen outside the stale sedan. The night before, just outside Albuquerque, they parked behind a barbecue restaurant and slept inside a cloud of meat smells. The experience still has the sizzle of a recent hell in Angie's memory. Will they do this every night? She wants to believe her boyfriend when he tells her they are gypsies, two moths drunk on light, darting from the flower of one red sunset to the next; but several times she's dozed off in the passenger seat and awakened from traitorous dreams of her old bedroom, soft pillows.

After dinner, Andy drives drowsily, weaving slightly. Sand, sand, sand—all that pulverized time. Aeons ago, the world's burst hourglass spilled its contents here; now the years pile and spin, waiting with inhuman patience to be swept into some future ocean. Sand washes right up to the paved road, washes over to the other side in a solid orange current, illuminated by their headlights.

"Who lives way out like that?" Angie says, pointing through the window at a line of trailer homes. *Why* is the implied question. Thirteen-foot saguaro cacti look like enormous roadside hitchhikers, comical and menacing. Andy is drifting off, his hand on Angie's bare thigh, when a streak of color crosses the road.

"Jesus! What was that?"

A parade of horned beasts. Just sheep, Angie notes with relief.

Andy watches each animal go from sheep to cloud in the side mirror, reduced immediately into memory. The radio blares songs about other humans' doomed or lost loves, or their bombastic lusts in progress. Andy watches his girlfriend's red lips move, mouthing the lyrics to a song Andy didn't realize he knew. *My wife's lips*, he thinks, and feels frightened by the onslaught of an unexpected happiness. Were they serious, coming out here? Were they kidding around? Are they getting more serious? Less? Perhaps they'll sort it all out at the next rest stop.

That night, they stay in a fifty-dollar motel. By dawn, they are back on the highway. They don't try to account for their urgency to be gone. Both feel it; neither can resist it.

At 10 A.M., Angie lifts her arm to point at the western sky. There is a pale rainbow arcing over the desert. It looks as if God had made a bad laundry error, mixed his colors with his whites. How could even the rainbow be faded? she wonders.

"Look!" she blurts. "We're here."

The sign reads "Entering Joshua Tree National Park."

Quietly, they roll under the insubstantial archway of the rainbow. Andy slows the Charger. He wants to record this transition, which feels important. Usually, you can only catch the Sasquatch blur of your own legendary moments in the side mirrors.

More and more slowly, they drive into the park. Sand burns outside their windows in every direction. Compass needles spin in their twinned minds: everywhere they look, they are greeted by horizon, deep gulps of blue. People think of the green pastoral when they think of lovers in nature. Those English poets used the vales and streams to douse their lusts into verse. But the desert offers something that no forest brook or valley ever can: distance. A cloudless roominghouse for couples. Skies that will host any visitors' dreams with the bald hospitality of pure space. In terms of an ecology that can support two lovers in hot pursuit of each other, this is the place; everywhere you look, you'll find monuments to fevered longing. Craters beg for rain all year long. Moths haunt the succulents, winging sticky pollen from flower to flower.

Near the campground entrance, they are met by a blue-eyed man of indeterminate age, a park employee, who comes lunging out of the infernal brightness with whiskery urgency. His feet are so huge that he looks like a jackrabbit, even in boots.

"Where did you folks wash up from?" he asks.

Their answer elicits a grunt.

"First-timers to the park?"

The boy explains that they are on their honeymoon, watches the girl redden with pleasure.

Up close, the ranger has the unnervingly direct gaze and polished bristlecone skin of so many outdoorsmen. A large bee lifts off a cactus, walks the rim of his hat, and he doesn't flick it off, a show of tolerance that is surely for their benefit.

"Do Warren Peak. Go see the Joshua trees. Watch the yucca moths do their magic. You're in luck—you've come smack in the middle of a pulse event. As far as we can tell, the entire range of Joshuas is in bloom right now. You think *you're* in love? The moths are smitten. In all my years, I've seen nothing to rival it. It's a goddam orgy in the canyon."

It turns out that their visit has coincided with a tremendous blossoming, one that is occurring all over the Southwest. Highly erotic, the ranger says, with his creepy bachelor smile. A record number of greenish-white flowers have erupted out of the Joshuas. Pineapple-huge, they crown every branch.

“Now, there’s an education for a couple, huh? Charles Darwin agrees with me. Says it’s the most remarkable pollination system in nature. ‘There is no romance more dire and pure than that of the desert moth and the Joshua.’ ”

“Dire?” the girl asks. And learns from the ranger that the Joshua trees may be on the brink of extinction. Botanists believe they are witnessing a coordinated response to crisis. Perhaps a drought, legible in the plants’ purplish leaves, has resulted in this push. Seeds in abundance. The ancient species’ Hail Mary pass. Yucca moths, attracted by the flowers’ penetrating odor, are their heroic spouses, equally dependent, equally endangered; their larval children feast on yucca seeds.

“It’s an obligate relationship. Each species’ future depends entirely on the other,” the ranger says, and then grins hugely at them. The boy is thinking that the math sounds about right: two species, one fate. The girl wonders, of their own elopement: Who is more dependent on whom? What toast might Charles Darwin make were they to break their first vows and get married?

So they obey the ranger, drive the Charger another quarter mile, park at the deserted base of Warren Peak.

Angie says she has to pee, and Andy sits on the hood and watches her.

They set off along the trail, which begins to ascend the ridgeline east of Warren Peak. Now Joshua woodland sprawls around them.

This is where the bad graft occurs.

For the rest of her life, she will be driven to return to the park, searching for the origin of the feeling that chooses this day to invade her and make its home

under her skin.

Before starting the ascent, each pauses to admire the plant that is the park's namesake. The Joshua trees look *hilariously* alien. Like Satan's telephone poles. They're primitive, irregularly limbed, their branches swooning up and down, sparsely covered with syringe-thin leaves—more like spines, Angie notes. Some mature trees have held their insane poses for a thousand years; they look as if they were on drugs and hallucinating themselves.

The ranger told them that the plant was named in the nineteenth century by a caravan of Mormons, passing through what they perceived to be a wasteland. They saw a forest of hands, which recalled to them the prayers of the prophet Joshua. But the girl can't see these plants as any kind of holy augury. She's thinking: Dr. Seuss. Timothy Leary.

"See the moths, Angie?"

No wonder they call it a "pulse event"—wings are beating everywhere.

Unfortunately for Angie, the ranger they encountered had zero information to share on the ghostly Leap. So he could not warn her about the real danger posed to humans by the pulsating Joshuas. Between February and April, the yucca moths arrive like living winds, swirling through Black Rock Canyon. Blossoms detonate. Pollen heaves up.

Then the Joshua tree sheds a fantastic sum of itself.

Angie feels dizzy. As she leans out to steady herself against a nearby Joshua tree, her finger is pricked by something sharp. One of the plant's daggerlike spines. Bewildered, she stares at the spot of red on her finger. Running blood looks exotic next to the etiolated grasses.

Angie Gonzalez, wild child from Nestor, Pennsylvania, pricks her finger on a desert dagger and becomes an entirely new creature.

When the Leap occurs, Angie does not register any change whatsoever. She has no idea what has just added its store of life to hers.

But other creatures of the desert *do* seem to apprehend what is happening. Through the crosshairs of its huge pupils, a tarantula watches Angie's skin drink in the danger: the pollen from the Joshua mixes with the red blood on her finger. On a fuchsia ledge of limestone, a dozen lizards witness the Leap. They shut their gluey eyes as one, sealing their lucent bodies from contagion, inter-kingdom corruption.

During a season of wild ferment, a kind of atmospheric accident can occur: the extraordinary moisture stored in the mind of a passing animal or hiker can compel the spirit of a Joshua to Leap through its own membranes. The change is metaphysical: the tree's spirit is absorbed into the migrating consciousness, where it lives on, intertwined with its host.

Instinct guides its passage now, through the engulfing darkness of Angie's mind. Programmed with the urgent need to plug itself into some earth, the plant's spirit goes searching for terra firma.

Andy unzips his backpack, produces Fiji water and a Snoopy Band-Aid.

"Your nose got burned," he says, and smiles at her.

And, at this juncture, she can smile back.

He kisses the nose.

"C'mon, let's get out of here."

Then something explodes behind her eyelids into a radial green fan, dazzling her with pain. Her neck aches, her abdomen. The pain moves lower. It feels as if an umbrella were opening below her navel. Menstrual cramps, she thinks. Seconds later, as with a soldering iron, an acute and narrowly focussed heat climbs her spine.

At first, the Joshua tree is elated to discover that it's alive: *I survived my Leap. I was not annihilated. Whatever "I" was.*

Grafted to the girl's consciousness, the plant becomes aware of itself. It dreams its green way up into her eyestalks, peers out:

Standing there, in the mirror of the desert, are a hundred versions of itself. Here is its home: a six-armed hulk, fibrous and fruiting obscenely under a noon sun. Here is the locus that recently contained this tree spirit. For a tree, this is a dreadful experience. Its uprooted awareness floats throughout the alien form. It concentrates itself behind Angie's eyeballs, where there is moisture. This insoluble spirit, this refugee from the Joshua tree, understands itself to have leapt into Hell. The wrong place, the wrong vessel. It pulses outward in a fuzzy frenzy of investigation, flares greener, sends out feelers. Compared with the warm and expansive desert soil, the human body is a cul-de-sac.

This newborn ghost has only just begun to apprehend itself when its fragile tenancy is threatened: Angie sneezes, rubs at her temple. Unaware that this is an immunologic reflex, she is convulsed by waves of nostalgia for earlier selves, remote homes. Here, for some reason, is her childhood back yard, filled with anarchic wildflowers and bordered by Pennsylvania hemlock.

Then the pain dismantles the memory; she holds her head in her hand, cries for Andy.

This is the plant, fighting back.

The girl moans.

“Andy, you don’t have any medicine? Advil . . . something?”

The vegetable invader feels the horror of its imprisonment. Its new host is walking away from the Joshua-tree forest, following Andy. What can this kind of survival mean?

Although they don’t know it, escape is now impossible for our vagabonding couple. Andy opens the sedan door, Angie climbs in, and in the side mirrors the hundreds of Joshuas shrink away into hobgoblin shapes.

“Angie? You got so quiet.”

“It’s the sun. My head is killing me, honey.”

Dispersed throughout her consciousness, the tree begins to grow.

Andy has no clue that he is now party to a love triangle. What he perceives is that his girlfriend is acting very strangely.

“Do you need some water? Want to sit and rest awhile?”

At the motel, the girl makes straight for the bathroom faucet. She washes down the water with more water, doesn’t want to eat dinner. When Andy tries to undress her, she fights him off. Her movements seem to him balletic, unusually nimble; yet, walking across the room, she pauses at the oddest moments. That night, she basks in the glow of their TV as if it were the sun. Yellow is such a relief.

“I hate this show,” the boy says, staring not at the motel TV but at her. “Let’s turn it off?”

Who are you? he does not bother to ask.

Calmly, he becomes aware that the girl he loves has exited the room. Usually, when this sensation comes over him, it means she’s fallen asleep. Tonight she is sitting up in bed, eyes bright, very wide awake. Her eyes in most lighting are

hazel; tonight they are the brightest green. As if great doors had been flung open onto an empty and electrically lit room.

The Joshua tree “thinks” in covert bursts of activity:

Oh, I have made a terrible mistake.

Oh, please get me out of it, get me out of it, send me home.

“The headache,” she calls the odd pressure at first. “The green headache.”

“Psychosis,” at 4 A.M., when its power over her crests and she lies awake terrified. “Torpor” or “sluggishness” when it ebbs.

Had you told her, *The invader is sinking its roots throughout you, tethering itself to you with a thousand spectral feelers*—who knows what she would have done? —

The next day, they wake at dawn, as per their original plan: to start every day at sunup and navigate by whim. They go north on 247, with vague plans to stop in Barstow for gas. The girl’s eyes are aching. Partway across the Morongo Basin, she starts to cry so hard that the boy is forced to pull over.

“Forget it,” she says.

“Forget what?”

“It. All of it. The seafaring stuff—I can’t do it anymore.”

The boy blinks at her.

“It’s been four days.”

But her lips look blue, and she won’t be reasonable.

“Leave me here.”

“You don’t have any money.”

"I'll work. They're hiring everywhere in town, did you notice that?" A job sounds unaccountably blissful to the girl. Drinking water in the afternoon. Sitting at a desk.

"What? What the hell are you talking about?"

The boy scowls down at his arm, flipped outward against the steering wheel. She keeps talking to him in a new, low monotone, telling him that she loves the desert, she loves the Joshua trees, she wants to stay. Dumbly, he re-reads his own tattoo: "Ever unfixed." For some reason, he finds that he cannot quite blame the girl for ruining things. It's the plan he hates, their excellent plan, for capsizing on them.

The crumbly truth: the boy imagined that he'd be the one to betray the girl.

"Andy, I'm sorry. But I know that I belong here."

"O.K., just to be clear: When you say 'here,' you mean this parking lot?" The sedan is parked outside Cojo's Army Surplus and Fro-Yo; it's a place where you can purchase camo underwear and also a cup of unlicensed T.C.B.Y. swirl. "Or do you mean this?" He waves his arms around to indicate the desert.

Had they continued, just a short distance northwest of Yucca Valley they would have reached the on-ramp to I-15 North and, beyond that, the pinball magic of the tollbooths, that multiverse of possible futures connected by America's interstate system.

For the next two hours, they fight inside the car.

Round clusters of leaves shake loose in front of her eyes, greeny-white blossoms. If she could only show him the desert in her imagination, Angie thinks, the way she sees it.

When it becomes clear that she's not joking, the boy turns the car around. Calls Cousin Sewell in Pennsylvania, explains their situation. "We want to stay awhile," he says. "We like it here."

Sewell needs to know how long. They'll have to put the car on some conveyance, get it back to Pennsylvania.

"Indefinitely," the boy hears himself say. Her word, for what she claims to want.

They decide to pay the weekly rate at the motel. They go for walks. They go for drives. Her favorite thing seems to be sitting in a dry wreck of a turquoise Jacuzzi they discover on the edge of town, some luckless homesteader's abandoned pleasure tub. And he likes this too, actually—sitting in the tub, he finds it easy to pretend that they aren't trapped in a tourist town, that they are sailing toward an elsewhere. And he loves what happens to her face right at sunset over the infinite desert. Moonlight, however, affects her in a way that he finds indescribably frightening. The change is in the eyes, he thinks.

II. EMERGENCE

Two weeks later, in late April, their money runs out. They've spent the days outside, Angie doing stretches in the motel courtyard, Andy reading his stolen library books from back east, waiting for the bad enchantment to break. Andy tells Angie he is leaving her. They have no vehicle, the rental Dodge having been chauffeured east by a genial grifter pal of Sewell's. Angie nods, staring out the window of their room as the rain sweeps over the desert. All the muddy colors of the sky touch the earth.

"Did you hear me? I said I'm leaving, Angie."

That afternoon, Andy gets a job at the Joshua Tree Saloon.

Then there is a period of peace, coinciding with the Joshua tree's dormancy inside of Angie, which lasts from April to mid-May. In the park, the Joshuas' blossoms have all dropped off, leaving dried stalks. Andy does not even suggest "moving on" anymore, so thrilled is he to laugh with Angie again. He comes home with green fistfuls of tourist cash, reeking of Fireball and Pine Sol. O.K., he thinks. Oh, thank God. We're getting back to normal.

Then one day, after a spectacular freak thundershower, Angie tells him that he needs to go home. Or away. Elsewhere, a bedroom other than the motel.

She feels terrible, she doesn't know what she is saying.

Get me out of it, the plant keeps throbbing like a muscle in Angie's mind. A rustling sound in her inner ear, the plant's footsteps. A throaty appetite makes her imagine stuffing herself with hot mouthfuls of desert sand. Once Andy leaves her, she'll have a chance to inspect her interior, figure out what's gone haywire.

"Let's go to Reno," Andy says. He feels quite desperate now, spinning the radio dial through seas of static. His great success this week at work was formalizing, via generous pours of straight gin, a new friendship with Jerry the Mailman, who has given him access to his boxy truck.

"Go to Reno. Win big. I'll be right here. I don't want to leave the desert."

Why doesn't she? The girl grows hysterical whenever Andy drives toward the freeway that might carry them away from the Mojave. She feels best when they are close to Warren Peak and the Black Rock Canyon campground.

For the next two weeks, she keeps encouraging Andy to leave her. Sometimes she feels a lump in her throat that she can't swallow, and it's easy to pretend that this is a vestige of who she used to be, her Pennsylvania history, now compacted into a hard ball she cannot access or dissolve; for Andy's sake, she wishes she could be that girl again. Dimly she is aware that she used to crave travel, adventure. She can remember the pressure of Andy's legs tangled around her,

but not what she held in her mind. The world has grown unwieldy, and there are days now when the only thing that appeals to her is pulling up her T-shirt and going belly flat on the burning pink sand beyond the motel walkway. One night, Angie turns to face the wall. Golf-ball-size orange-and-yellow flowers pattern their wallpaper. Plus water stains from ancient leaks. She has never noticed this before. Under the influence of the Joshua, she sees these water stains as beautiful. That Rorschach is more interesting than TV. "What do you see?" she asks the boy.

"I'm not in the mood," he says, having at last been granted the opportunity to have a mood, after days and hours spent trying to rekindle her appetite for pleasure, for danger. He realizes that he has cut all ties for her, that he has nothing he wants to return to in Pennsylvania. It's a liberating, terrifying feeling. If she leaves him—if he leaves her—what then?

Now the plant is catching on to something.

In its three months of incubation, it grows exponentially in its capacity for thought. Gradually, the plant learns to "think" blue, to "smell" rain through a nose.

Unfurling its languorous intelligence, it looks out through her eyes, hunting for meaning the way it used to seek out deep sun, jade dew, hunting now for the means of imagining its own life, comprehending what it has become inside the girl.

The Joshua tree discovers that it *loves* church! Plugging one's knees into the purple risers, lifting to enter a song. The apple-red agony painted onto the cheeks of the sallow man. All the light that fills the church drifts dreamily over the Joshua tree, which stretches to its fullest extension inside the girl during the slow-crawling time of the service. It approves of this place, which resembles a massive seed hull. Deeply, extrapolating from its forays into the earth, it understands the architecture and the impulse. Craving stillness, these humans have evolved this stronghold.

"How was it?" Andy asks, picking her up. He refused to go with her. Sundays are his day off. "Delicious God-bread? Lots of songs?"

"It was nice. What are you so jealous about?"

"Angie, you never said."

"Mmm?"

"I didn't know you were religious."

Her head bobs on the long stem of her neck, as if they were agreeing on a fascinating point.

"Yes. There's plenty we don't know about each other."

I can still get out of this, he thinks. Without understanding exactly how the trap got sprung, he can feel its teeth in him.

"You should come in next time," she offers. "You'd like the windows."

"I can see the windows right now."

"You'd like being on our side of them."

Seed hull, the girl thinks, for no reason.

Sometimes, to earn extra money, she watches kids who are staying at the motel. Six dollars an hour, four dollars for each additional kid. She is good at it, mostly.

Timmy Babson hates the babysitter. Sometimes her eyes are a dull, friendly brown and as kind as his sister's; sometimes they are twin vacuums. This is already pretty scary. But tonight, when he looks over, he sees the bad light flooding into them. Not yellow, not green. An older color, which Timmy recognizes on sight but cannot name. And this is much worse.

His own eyes prickle wetly. His blond hair darkens with sweat; pearls of water stand out on his smooth six-year-old forehead. The longer he stares back, the wider the gaze seems to get, like a grin. Her eyes radiate hard spines of heat, which drill into him. Timmy Babson feels punctured, “seen.”

“Jane!” Timmy screams for his mother, calling for her by her first name for the first time. “Jane, Jane! It’s looking at me again!”

On her good days, Angie tries to battle the invader. She thinks she’s fighting against lethargy. She does jumping jacks in the motel courtyard, calls her best friend in Juneau from the motel pay phone and anxiously tries to reminisce about their shitty high-school band. They sing an old song together, and she feels almost normal.

But, increasingly, she finds herself powerless to resist the warmth that spreads through her chest, the midday paralysis, the hunger for something slow and deep and unnameable. Some maid has drawn the blackout curtains. One light bulb dangles. The dark reminds Angie of packed earth, moisture. What she interprets as sprawling emotion is the Joshua tree. Here was its birth, in the sands of Black Rock Canyon. Here was its death, and its rebirth as a ghostly presence in the human. Couldn’t it perhaps Leap back into that older organism?

The light bulb pulses in time with Angie’s headache. It acquires a fetal glow, otherworldly.

Home, home, home.

Down, down, down.

Her heels grind uselessly into the carpet. Her toes curl at the fibres. She stands in the quiet womb of the room, waiting for a signal from the root brain, the ancient network from which the invader has been exiled. She lifts her arms until they are fully extended, her fingers turned outward. Her ears prick up like sharp leaves, alert for moisture.

She is still standing like that when Andy comes home with groceries at 10 P.M., her palms facing the droning light bulb, so perfectly still that he yelps when he spots her.

How old such stories must be, legends of the bad romance between wandering humans and plants! How often these bad grafts must occur, and few people ever the wiser!

In 1852, the Mormon settlers who gave the Joshua tree its name reported every variety of disturbance among their party after hikes through the sparse and fragrant forests of Death Valley. One elder sat on a rock at the forest's edge and refused to move.

1873, in the lawless town of Panamint City. Darwin in 1874; Modoc in 1875. During the silver boom dozens of miners went missing. Many leapt to their deaths down the shafts. The silver rush coincided with a pulse event: the trees blossomed unstoppably, wept pollen, and Leapt, eclipsing the minds of these poor humans, who stood no chance against the vegetable's ancient spirit. Dying is one symptom of a bad graft. The invasive species coiled green around the silver miners' brains.

1879: All towns abandoned. Sorted ore sat in wheelbarrows aboveground, winking emptily at the nearby Joshuas.

In 1922, in what is now the southern region of the park, near the abandoned iron mines of Eagle Mountain, a man was killed by the human host of a Joshua tree. It was not difficult to find the murderer, since a girl was huddled a few feet from the warm body, sobbing quietly.

“A crime of passion,” the young officer, who tended to take a romantic view of motives, murmured. The grizzled elder on the call with him had less to say about what drove anyone to do anything.

All the girl could remember was the terrible, irremediable tension between wanting to be somewhere and wanting to be nowhere. And the plant, crazed by its proximity to rich familiar soil, tried repeatedly to Leap out of her. This caused her hand to lift, holding a long knife, and plummet earthward, rooting into the fleshy chest of her lover, feeling deeper and deeper for moisture.

The Joshua tree’s greatest victory over the couple comes four months into their stay: they sign a lease. A bungalow on the outskirts of the national park, with a fence to keep out the coyotes and an outdoor shower.

When the shower water gets into their mouths, it tastes like poison. Strange reptiles hug the fence posts, like colorful olives on toothpicks. Andy squeezes Angie’s hand and returns the gaze of these tiny monsters; he feels strangely bashful as they bugle their throats at him. Four months into his desert sojourn, and he still doesn’t know the name of anything. Up close, the bungalow looks a lot like a shed. The bloated vowels of his signature on the landlord’s papers make him think of a large hand blurring underwater.

Three Joshua trees grow right in their new back yard.

Rent, before utilities, is four hundred dollars.

"We can't afford this," he tells the girl, speaking less to her than to the quiet trees, wanting some court stenographer in the larger cosmos to record his protest.

The landlord, who is a native of Yucca Valley, is taking the young couple through the calendar. His name is Desert John, and he offers these Eastern kids what he calls Desert John's Survival Tips. With laconic glee, he advises Andy to cut back the chaparral in their back yard to waist height in summer, to avoid the "minimal" danger of baby rattlesnakes. He tells Angie to hydrate "aggressively," especially if she's trying to get pregnant. (Angie starfishes a hand over her belly button and blanches; nobody has said anything to suggest this.) With polite horror, the couple nod along to stories of their predecessors, former tenants who collapsed from heat exhaustion, were bitten by every kind of snake and spider: "Fanged in the ankle and ass, I shit you not, kids. Beware the desert hammock." Average annual rainfall: five inches. Eight-degree nights in December, one-hundred-and-twelve-degree July days. Andy is thinking of Angie's face on the motel pillow. He calculates they've slept together maybe fourteen times in four months. In terms of survival strategies, in a country hostile to growth? These desert plants, so ostentatiously alive in the Mojave, have got zero on Andy.

III. ESTABLISHMENT

Once, and only once, the three of them achieve a perfect union.

It takes some doing, but Andy finally succeeds in getting her out of the house.

"It's our anniversary," he lies, since they never really picked a day.

He's taking Angie to Pappy and Harriet's Pioneertown Palace, a frontier-themed dance hall frequented by bikers and artists and other jolly modern species of degenerates. It's only six miles northeast of their new home and burns like a Roman candle against the immensity of the Mojave. Through surveying expeditions made in Jerry's truck, Andy has delimited the boundary lines of Angie's tolerance; once they move beyond a certain radius, she says that her

head feels “green” and her bones begin to ache. Pain holds her here—that’s their shared impression. So when Andy parks the truck they are both relieved to discover that she is smiling.

The Joshua tree discovers that it *loves* to dance! Better even than church is the soft glow of the hexagonal dance floor. Swung around in strangers’ arms, Andy and Angie let themselves dance until they are sick, at the edge of the universe. Andy lets Angie buy him three shots of rum. A weather seizes them and blows them around—a weather you can order for a quarter, the jukebox song.

It is a good night. Outside the dance hall, the parking lot is full of cars and trucks, empty of humans. The wind pushes into them, as hot as the blasts of air from a hand dryer. Angie draws Andy’s attention to the claret cup of the moon. “It looks red,” she says. And it does. Sitting on a stranger’s fender, listening to the dying strains of a pop song they both despise, Andy asks her softly, “What’s changed, Angie?”

And when she doesn’t or can’t answer he asks, “What’s changing now?”

A question they like better, because at least its tense sounds more hopeful.

The Joshua tree leafs out in her mind. Heat blankets her; for a moment she is sure she will faint. Her vision clears. “Bamboleo” plays inside the dance hall. Through the illuminated squares of its windows, they can see the waving wheat of the dancers’ upper bodies. Mouths gape in angry shock behind the frosted glass; they are only singing along to the music, Angie knows. Outside, the boy presses his mouth against hers. Now he is pressing every part of himself against the girl; inside her, his competitor presses back.

“Let’s go. Let’s go. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Let’s go back inside.”

In the end, the three of them settle on a compromise: they dance in the empty parking lot, under stars that shoot eastward like lateral rain.

For a second, the Joshua tree can feel its grip on the host weakening. The present threatens its existence: the couple's roaring happiness might dislodge the ghostly tree. So it renews its purchase on the girl, roots into her memory.

"Remember our first day, Andy? The hike through Joshua Tree?"

Compared with that, Angie thinks, what is there for us in the present? "Nostalgia," we are apt to label this phenomenon. It is the success of the invading plant, which seeks only to anchor itself in the past. Why move forward? Why move at all?

"Is this the spot? Are you sure?"

Andy spreads out the blanket. A soft aura surrounds the low moon, as if the moon itself were dreaming. The red halo reminds him of a miner's carbide lantern.

At first, when the girl suggested that they drive out to the park, he felt annoyed, then scared; the light was in her eyes again, eclipsing the girl she'd been only seconds earlier. But once he'd yielded to her plan the night had organized itself into a series of surprises, the first of which was his own sharp joy; now he finds he's thrilled to be back inside the Black Rock Canyon campground with her. (The Joshua is also pleased, smiling up through Angie's eyes.) It is her idea to retrace the steps of their first hike to Warren Peak. "For our anniversary," she says coolly, although this rationale rings hollow, reminds Andy of his own bullshit justifications for taking out a lease on a desert "bungalow." He does not guess the truth, of course, which is that, slyly, the Joshua tree is proliferating inside Angie, each of its six arms forking and flowering throughout her in the densest multiplication of desire. *Leap, Leap, Leap*. For months it has been trying to drive the couple back to this spot. Its vast root brain awaits it, forty feet below the soil.

Angie has no difficulty navigating down the dark path; the little flashlight around her neck is bouncing like a leashed green sun. Her smile, when she turns to find Andy, is so huge that he wonders if he wasn't the one to suggest this night hike to her. Something unexpected happens then, for all of them: they reënter the romance of the past.

"Why didn't we then . . ." all three think as one.

Quickly that sentiment jumps tenses, becomes:

"Why don't we now . . ."

When they reach the water tank, which is two hundred yards from the site of the Leap, Angie asks Andy to shake out the blanket. She sucks on the finger she pricked.

Around the blanket, tree branches divide and braid. They look mutinous in their stillness. Andy can see the movie scene: Bruce Willis attacking an army of Joshuas. He is imagining this, the trees swimming across the land like sand octopuses, flailing their spastic arms, when the girl catches his wrist in her fingers.

"Can we?"

"Why not?"

Why didn't they, Andy wonders, back then? The first time they walked this loop, they were preparing to do plenty. Andy unzips his jeans, shakes the caked-black denim off like solid dust. Angie is wearing a dress. Their naked legs tangle together in a pale, fleshy echo of the static contortionists that surround their blanket. Now the Joshua tree loves her. It grows and it flowers.

Angie will later wonder how exactly she came to be in possession of Andy's knife. Its bare blade holds the red moon inside it. She watches it glimmer there, poised just above Andy's right shoulder. The ground underneath the blanket seems to undulate; the fabric of the desert is wrinkling and flowing all around them. Even the Joshua trees, sham dead, now begin to move; or so it seems to the girl, whose blinded eyes keep stuttering.

The boy's mouth is at the hollow of the girl's throat, then lower; she moans as the invader's leaves and roots go spearing through her, and still he is unaware that he's in any danger.

I can Leap back, the plant thinks.

Angie can no longer see what she is doing. Her eyes are shut, her thoughts have stopped. One small hand rests on Andy's neck; the other fist withdraws until the knife points earthward. *Down, down, down*, the invader demands. Something sighs sharply, and it might be Andy or it might be the entire forest.

Leap, Leap, Leap, the Joshua implores.

What saves the boy is such a simple thing. Andy props himself up on an elbow, pausing to steady his breath. He missed the moment when she slid the knife from the crumpled heap of his clothing; he has no idea that its blade is sparkling inches from his neck. Staring at Angie's waxy, serious face, he is overcome by a flood of memories.

"Hey, Angie?" he asks, stroking the fine dark hairs along her arm. "Remember how we met?"

One of the extraordinary adaptive powers of our species is its ability to transmute a stray encounter into a first chapter.

Angie has never had sticking power. She dropped out of high school; she walked out of the G.E.D. exam. Her longest relationship, prior to falling for

Andy, was seven months. But then they'd met (no epic tale there—the game was on at a home-town bar), and something in her character was spontaneously altered.

He remembers the song that was playing. He remembers ordering another round he could not afford—a freezing Yuengling for himself, ginger ale for her. They were sitting on the same wooden stools, battered tripods, that had supported the plans and commitments of the young in that town for generations.

The Joshua tree flexes its roots. Desperately, it tries to fix its life to her life. In the human mind, a Joshua's spirit can be destroyed by the wind and radiation fluxes of memory. Casting its spectral roots around, the plant furiously reddens with a very human feeling: humiliation.

What a thing to be undone by—golden hops and gingerroot, the clay shales of Pennsylvania!

It loses its grip on her arm; the strength runs out of her tensed biceps.

The girl's fingers loosen; the knife falls, unnoticed, to the sand.

The green invader is displaced by the swelling heat of their earliest happiness. Banished to the outermost reaches of Angie's consciousness, the Joshua tree now hovers in agony, half forgotten, half dissolving, losing its purchase on her awareness and so on its own reality.

"What a perfect night!" the couple agree.

Angie stands and brushes sand from her skirt. Andy frowns at the knife, picks it up.

"Happy anniversary," he says.

It is not their anniversary, but doesn't it make sense for them to celebrate the beginning here? This desert hike marked the last point in space where they'd

both wanted the same future. What they are nostalgic for is the old plan, the first one. Their antique horizon.

Down the trail, up and down through time, the couple walk back toward the campground parking lot. Making plans again, each of them babbling excitedly over the other. Maybe Reno. Maybe Juneau.

Andy jogs ahead to their loaner getaway vehicle.

The Black Rock Canyon campground is one of the few places in the park where visitors can sleep amid the Joshua trees, soaking up the starlight from those complex crystals that have formed over millennia in the desert sky. Few of these campers are still outside their tents and R.V.s, but there is one familiar silhouette: it's the ranger, who is warming his enormous feet, bony and perfectly white, by the fire pit. Shag covers the five-foot cactus behind him, which makes it look like a giant's mummified thumb.

"You lovebirds again!" he crows, waving them over.

Reluctantly, Andy doubles back. Angie is pleased, and frightened, that he remembers them.

"Ha! Guess you liked the hike."

For a few surreal minutes, standing before the leaping flames, they talk about the hike, the moths, the Joshua woodland. Andy is itching to be gone; already he is imagining giving notice at the saloon, packing up their house, getting back on the endlessly branching interstate. But Angie is curious. Andy is a little embarrassed, in fact, by the urgent tone of her questions. She wants to hear more about the marriage of the yucca moth and the Joshua—is theirs a doomed romance? Can't the two species untwine, separate their fortunes?

Andy leaves to get the truck.

And the pulse event? Have the moths all flown? Will the Joshua tree die out, go extinct in the park?

A key turns in the ignition. At the entrance to Black Rock Canyon, Andy leans forward against the wheel, squinting through the windshield. He is waiting for the girl to emerge from the shadows, certain that she will do so; and then a little less sure.

“Oh, it’s a hardy species,” the ranger says. His whiskers are clear tubes that hold the red firelight. “Those roots go deep. I wouldn’t count a tree like that out.” ♦

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Karen Russell has written five books, including the short-story collection “Orange World” and the novel “Swamplandia!”

VASTER THAN EMPIRES AND MORE SLOW



Trees again.

As I recall, Robert Silverberg, who first published this story in New Dimensions 1, asked very gently if I would change the title. I could see where a reader about halfway through might find the title all too descriptive of the story itself; but it was too beautiful, and too beautifully apt, to part with, and Mr Silverberg let me keep it. It's from Marvell, "To his Coy Mistress"—

*Our vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow. . . .*

Like "Nine Lives," this is not a psychomystery but a regular science fiction story, developed not for action/adventure, but psychologically. Unless physical action reflects psychic action, unless the deeds express the person, I get very bored with adventure stories; often it seems that the more action there is, the less happens. Obviously my interest is in what goes on inside. Inner space and all that. We all have forests in our minds. Forests unexplored, unending. Each of us gets lost in the forest, every night, alone.

Hidden in the foliage here is a tiny act of homage. The protagonist of "He Who Shapes" by Roger Zelazny, one of the finest science fiction stories I know, is called Charles Render. I christened a syndrome after him.

It was only during the earliest decades of the League that the Earth sent ships out on the enormously long voyages, beyond the pale, over the stars and far away. They were seeking for worlds which had not been seeded or settled by the Founders on Hain, truly alien worlds. All the Known Worlds went back to the Hainish Origin, and the Terrans, having been not only founded but salvaged by the Hainish, resented this. They wanted to get away from the family. They wanted to find somebody new. The Hainish, like tiresomely understanding parents, supported their explorations, and contributed ships and volunteers, as did several other worlds of the League.

All these volunteers to the Extreme Survey crews shared one peculiarity: they were of unsound mind.

What sane person, after all, would go out to collect information that would not be received for five or ten centuries? Cosmic mass interference had not yet been eliminated from the operation of the ansible, and so instantaneous communication was reliable only within a range of 120 lightyears. The explorers would be quite isolated. And of course they had no idea what they might come back to, if they came back. No normal human being who had experienced time-slippage of even a few decades between League worlds would volunteer for a round trip of centuries. The Surveyors were escapists, misfits. They were nuts.

Ten of them climbed aboard the ferry at Smeming Port, and made varyingly inept attempts to get to know one another during the three days the ferry took getting to their ship, *Gum*. Gum is a Cetian nickname, on the order of Baby or Pet. There were two Cetians on the team, two Hainishmen, one Beldene, and five Terrans; the Cetian-built ship was chartered by the Government of Earth. Her motley crew came aboard wriggling through the coupling tube one by one like apprehensive spermatozoa trying to fertilize the universe. The ferry left, and the navigator put *Gum* underway. She flittered for some hours on the edge of space a few hundred million miles from Smeming Port, and then abruptly vanished.

When, after 10 hours 29 minutes, or 256 years, *Gum* reappeared in normal space, she was supposed to be in the vicinity of Star KG-E-96651. Sure enough, there was the gold pinhead of the star. Somewhere within a four-hundred-million-kilometer sphere there was also a greenish planet, World 4470, as charted by a Cetian mapmaker. The ship now had to find the planet. This was not quite so easy as it might sound, given a four-hundred-million-kilometer haystack. And *Gum* couldn't bat about in planetary space at near lightspeed; if she did, she and Star KG-E-96651 and World 4470 might all end up going bang. She had to creep, using rocket propulsion, at a few hundred thousand miles an hour. The Mathematician/Navigator, Asnanifoil, knew pretty well where the planet ought to be, and thought they might raise it within ten E-days. Meanwhile the members of the Survey team got to know one another still better.

"I can't stand him," said Porlock, the Hard Scientist (chemistry, plus physics, astronomy, geology, etc.), and little blobs of spittle appeared on his mustache. "The man is insane. I can't imagine why he was passed as fit to join a Survey team, unless this is a deliberate experiment in noncompatibility, planned by the Authority, with us as guinea pigs."

"We generally use hamsters and Hainish gholes," said Mannon, the Soft Scientist (psychology, plus psychiatry, anthropology, ecology, etc.), politely; he was one of the Hainishmen. "Instead of guinea pigs. Well, you know, Mr Osden is really a very rare case. In fact, he's the first fully cured case of Render's Syndrome—a variety of infantile autism which was thought to be incurable. The great Terran analyst Hammergeid reasoned that the cause of the autistic condition in this case is a supernormal empathic capacity, and developed an appropriate treatment. Mr Osden is the first patient to undergo that treatment, in fact he lived with Dr Hammergeid until he was eighteen. The therapy was completely successful.

"Successful?"

"Why, yes. He certainly is not autistic."

"No, he's intolerable!"

"Well, you see," said Mannon, gazing mildly at the saliva-flecks on Porlock's mustache, "the normal defensive-aggressive reaction between strangers meeting—let's say you and Mr Osden just for example—is something you're scarcely aware of; habit, manners, inattention get you past it; you've learned to ignore it, to the point where you might even deny it exists. However, Mr Osden, being an empath, feels it. Feels his feelings, and yours, and is hard put to say which is which. Let's say that there's a normal element of hostility towards any stranger in your emotional reaction to him when you meet him, plus a spontaneous dislike of his looks, or clothes, or handshake—it doesn't matter what. He feels that dislike. As his autistic defense has been unlearned, he resorts to an aggressive-defense mechanism, a response in kind to the aggression which you have unwittingly projected onto him." Mannon went on for quite a long time.

"Nothing gives a man the right to be such a bastard," Porlock said.

"He can't tune us out?" asked Harfex, the Biologist, another Hainishman.

"It's like hearing," said Olleroo, Assistant Hard Scientist, stooping over to paint her toenails with fluorescent lacquer. "No eyelids on your ears. No Off switch on empathy. He hears our feelings whether he wants to or not."

"Does he know what we're *thinking*?" asked Eskwana, the Engineer, looking round at the others in real dread.

"No," Porlock snapped. "Empathy's not telepathy! Nobody's got telepathy."

"Yet," said Mannon, with his little smile. "Just before I left Hain there was a most interesting report in from one of the recently rediscovered worlds, a hilfer named Rocannon reporting what appears to be a teachable telepathic technique existent among a

mutated hominid race; I only saw a synopsis in the HILF Bulletin, but—" He went on. The others had learned that they could talk while Mannon went on talking; he did not seem to mind, nor even to miss much of what they said.

"Then why does he hate us?" Eskwana said.

"Nobody hates you, Ander honey," said Olleroo, daubing Eskwana's left thumbnail with fluorescent pink. The engineer flushed and smiled vaguely.

"He acts as if he hated us," said Haito, the Coordinator. She was a delicate-looking woman of pure Asian descent, with a surprising voice, husky, deep, and soft, like a young bullfrog. "Why, if he suffers from our hostility, does he increase it by constant attacks and insults? I can't say I think much of Dr Hammergeld's cure, really, Mannon; autism might be preferable. . . ."

She stopped. Osen had come into the main cabin.

He looked flayed. His skin was unnaturally white and thin, showing the channels of his blood like a faded road map in red and blue. His Adam's apple, the muscles that circled his mouth, the bones and ligaments of his wrists and hands, all stood out distinctly as if displayed for an anatomy lesson. His hair was pale rust, like long-dried blood. He had eyebrows and lashes, but they were visible only in certain lights; what one saw was the bones of the eye sockets, the veining of the lids, and the colorless eyes. They were not red eyes, for he was not really an albino, but they were not blue or grey; colors had cancelled out in Osen's eyes, leaving a cold water-like clarity, infinitely penetrable. He never looked directly at one. His face lacked expression, like an anatomical drawing, or a skinned face.

"I agree," he said in a high, harsh tenor, "that even autistic withdrawal might be preferable to the smog of cheap secondhand emotions with which you people surround me. What are you sweating hate for now, Porlock? Can't stand the sight of me? Go practice

some auto-eroticism the way you were doing last night, it improves your vibes. Who the devil moved my tapes, here? Don't touch my things, any of you. I won't have it."

"Osden," said Asnanifoil in his large slow voice, "why *are* you such a bastard?"

Ander Eskwana cowered and put his hands in front of his face. Contention frightened him. Olleroo looked up with a vacant yet eager expression, the eternal spectator.

"Why shouldn't I be?" said Osden. He was not looking at Asnanifoil, and was keeping physically as far away from all of them as he could in the crowded cabin. "None of you constitute, in yourselves, any reason for my changing my behavior."

Harfex, a reserved and patient man, said, "The reason is that we shall be spending several years together. Life will be better for all of us if—"

"Can't you understand that I don't give a damn for all of you?" Osden said, took up his microtapes, and went out. Eskwana had suddenly gone to sleep. Asnanifoil was drawing slipstreams in the air with his finger and muttering the Ritual Primes. "You cannot explain his presence on the team except as a plot on the part of the Terran Authority. I saw this almost at once. This mission is meant to fail," Harfex whispered to the Coordinator, glancing over his shoulder. Porlock was fumbling with his fly-button; there were tears in his eyes. I did tell you they were all crazy, but you thought I was exaggerating.

All the same, they were not unjustified. Extreme Surveyors expected to find their fellow team members intelligent, well-trained, unstable, and personally sympathetic. They had to work together in close quarters and nasty places, and could expect one another's paranoias, depressions, manias, phobias and compulsions to be mild enough to admit of good personal relationships, at least most of the

time. Osden might be intelligent, but his training was sketchy and his personality was disastrous. He had been sent only on account of his singular gift, the power of empathy: properly speaking, of wide-range bioempathic receptivity. His talent wasn't species-specific; he could pick up emotion or sentience from anything that felt. He could share lust with a white rat, pain with a squashed cockroach, and phototropy with a moth. On an alien world, the Authority had decided, it would be useful to know if anything nearby is sentient, and if so, what its feelings towards you are. Osden's title was a new one: he was the team's Sensor.

"What is emotion, Osden?" Haito Tomiko asked him one day in the main cabin, trying to make some rapport with him for once. "What is it, exactly, that you pick up with your empathic sensitivity?"

"Muck," the man answered in his high, exasperated voice. "The psychic excreta of the animal kingdom. I wade through your faeces."

"I was trying," she said, "to learn some facts." She thought her tone was admirably calm.

"You weren't after facts. You were trying to get at me. With some fear, some curiosity, and a great deal of distaste. The way you might poke a dead dog, to see the maggots crawl. Will you understand once and for all that I don't want to be got at, that I want to be left alone?" His skin was mottled with red and violet, his voice had risen. "Go roll in your own dung, you yellow bitch!" he shouted at her silence.

"Calm down," she said, still quietly, but she left him at once and went to her cabin. Of course he had been right about her motives; her question had been largely a pretext, a mere effort to interest him. But what harm in that? Did not that effort imply respect for the other? At the moment of asking the question she had felt at

most a slight distrust of him; she had mostly felt sorry for him, the poor arrogant venomous bastard, Mr No-Skin as Olleroo called him. What did he expect, the way he acted? Love?

"I guess he can't stand anybody feeling sorry for him," said Olleroo, lying on the lower bunk, gilding her nipples.

"Then he can't form any human relationship. All his Dr Hammergeld did was turn an autism inside out. . . ."

"Poor frot," said Olleroo. "Tomiko, you don't mind if Harfex comes in for a while tonight, do you?"

"Can't you go to his cabin? I'm sick of always having to sit in Main with that damned peeled turnip."

"You do hate him, don't you? I guess he feels that. But I slept with Harfex last night too, and Asnanifoil might get jealous, since they share the cabin. It would be nicer here."

"Service them both," Tomiko said with the coarseness of offended modesty. Her Terran subculture, the East Asian, was a puritanical one; she had been brought up chaste.

"I only like one a night," Olleroo replied with innocent serenity. Beldene, the Garden Planet, had never discovered chastity, or the wheel.

"Try Osden, then," Tomiko said. Her personal instability was seldom so plain as now: a profound self-distrust manifesting itself as destructivism. She had volunteered for this job because there was, in all probability, no use in doing it.

The little Beldene looked up, paintbrush in hand, eyes wide. "Tomiko, that was a dirty thing to say."

"Why?"

"It would be vile! I'm not attracted to Osden!"

"I didn't know it mattered to you," Tomiko said indifferently, though she did know. She got some papers together and left the cabin, remarking, "I hope you and Harfex or whoever it is finish by last bell; I'm tired."

Olleroo was crying, tears dripping on her little gilded nipples. She wept easily. Tomiko had not wept since she was ten years old.

It was not a happy ship; but it took a turn for the better when Asnanifoil and his computers raised World 4470. There it lay, a dark-green jewel, like truth at the bottom of a gravity well. As they watched the jade disc grow, a sense of mutuality grew among them. Osden's selfishness, his accurate cruelty, served now to draw the others together. "Perhaps," Mannon said, "he was sent as a beating-gron. What Terrans call a scapegoat. Perhaps his influence will be good after all." And no one, so careful were they to be kind to one another, disagreed.

They came into orbit. There were no lights on nightside, on the continents none of the lines and clots made by animals who build.

"No men," Harfex murmured.

"Of course not," snapped Osden, who had a viewscreen to himself, and his head inside a polythene bag. He claimed that the plastic cut down on the empathic noise he received from the others. "We're two lightcenturies past the limit of the Hainish Expansion, and outside that there are no men. Anywhere. You don't think Creation would have made the same hideous mistake twice?"

No one was paying him much heed; they were looking with affection at that jade immensity below them, where there was life, but not human life. They were misfits among men, and what they saw there was not desolation, but peace. Even Osden did not look quite so expressionless as usual; he was frowning.

Descent in fire on the sea; air reconnaissance; landing. A plain of something like grass, thick, green, bowing stalks, surrounded the ship, brushed against extended viewcameras, smeared the lenses with a fine pollen.

"It looks like a pure phytosphere," Harfex said. "Osden, do you pick up anything sentient?"

They all turned to the Sensor. He had left the screen and was

pouring himself a cup of tea. He did not answer. He seldom answered spoken questions.

The chitinous rigidity of military discipline was quite inapplicable to these teams of mad scientists; their chain of command lay somewhere between parliamentary procedure and peck-order, and would have driven a regular service officer out of his mind. By the inscrutable decision of the Authority, however, Dr Haito Tomiko had been given the title of Coordinator, and she now exercised her prerogative for the first time. "Mr Sensor Osden," she said, "please answer Mr Harfex."

"How could I 'pick up' anything from outside," Osden said without turning, "with the emotions of nine neurotic hominids pullulating around me like worms in a can? When I have anything to tell you, I'll tell you. I'm aware of my responsibility as Sensor. If you presume to give me an order again, however, Coordinator Haito, I'll consider my responsibility void."

"Very well, Mr. Sensor. I trust no orders will be needed henceforth." Tomiko's bullfrog voice was calm, but Osden seemed to flinch slightly as he stood with his back to her, as if the surge of her suppressed rancor had struck him with physical force.

The biologist's hunch proved correct. When they began field analyses they found no animals even among the microbiota. Nobody here ate anybody else. All life-forms were photosynthesizing or saprophagous, living off light or death, not off life. Plants: infinite plants, not one species known to the visitors from the house of Man. Infinite shades and intensities of green, violet, purple, brown, red. Infinite silences. Only the wind moved, swaying leaves and fronds, a warm soughing wind laden with spores and pollens, blowing the sweet pale-green dust over prairies of great grasses, heaths that bore no heather, flowerless forests where no foot had ever walked, no eye had ever looked. A warm, sad world, sad and serene. The Surveyors, wandering like picnickers over sunny plains

of violet filicaliformes, spoke softly to each other. They knew their voices broke a silence of a thousand million years, the silence of wind and leaves, leaves and wind, blowing and ceasing and blowing again. They talked softly; but being human, they talked.

"Poor old Osden," said Jenny Chong, Bio and Tech, as she piloted a helijet on the North Polar Quadrating run. "All that fancy hi-fi stuff in his brain and nothing to receive. What a bust."

"He told me he hates plants," Olleroo said with a giggle.

"You'd think he'd like them, since they don't bother him like we do."

"Can't say I much like these plants myself," said Porlock, looking down at the purple undulations of the North Circumpolar Forest. "All the same. No mind. No change. A man alone in it would go right off his head."

"But it's all alive," Jenny Chong said. "And if it lives, Osden hates it."

"He's not really so bad," Olleroo said, magnanimous. Porlock looked at her sidelong and asked, "You ever slept with him, Olleroo?"

Olleroo burst into tears and cried, "You Terrans are obscene!"

"No she hasn't," Jenny Chong said, prompt to defend. "Have you, Porlock?"

The chemist laughed uneasily: ha, ha, ha. Flecks of spittle appeared on his mustache.

"Osden can't bear to be touched," Olleroo said shakily. "I just brushed against him once by accident and he knocked me off like I was some sort of dirty . . . thing. We're all just things, to him."

"He's evil," Porlock said in a strained voice, startling the two women. "He'll end up shattering this team, sabotaging it, one way or another. Mark my words. He's not fit to live with other people!"

They landed on the North Pole. A midnight sun smouldered over low hills. Short, dry, greenish-pink bryoform grasses stretched away

in every direction, which was all one direction, south. Subdued by the incredible silence, the three Surveyors set up their instruments and set to work, three viruses twitching minutely on the hide of an unmoving giant.

Nobody asked Osdan along on runs as pilot or photographer or recorder, and he never volunteered, so he seldom left base camp. He ran Harfex's botanical taxonomic data through the onship computers, and served as assistant to Eskwana, whose job here was mainly repair and maintenance. Eskwana had begun to sleep a great deal, twenty-five hours or more out of the thirty-two-hour day, dropping off in the middle of repairing a radio or checking the guidance circuits of a helijet. The Coordinator stayed at base one day to observe. No one else was home except Poswet To, who was subject to epileptic fits; Mannon had plugged her into a therapy-circuit today in a state of preventive catatonia. Tomiko spoke reports into the storage banks, and kept an eye on Osdan and Eskwana. Two hours passed.

"You might want to use the 860 microwaldoes in sealing that connection," Eskwana said in his soft, hesitant voice.

"Obviously!"

"Sorry. I just saw you had the 840's there—"

"And will replace them when I take the 860's out. When I don't know how to proceed, Engineer, I'll ask your advice."

After a minute Tomiko looked round. Sure enough, there was Eskwana sound asleep, head on the table, thumb in his mouth.

"Osdan."

The white face did not turn, he did not speak, but conveyed impatiently that he was listening.

"You can't be unaware of Eskwana's vulnerability."

"I am not responsible for his psychopathic reactions."

"But you are responsible for your own. Eskwana is essential to our work here, and you're not. If you can't control your hostility, you must avoid him altogether."

Osden put down his tools and stood up. "With pleasure!" he said in his vindictive, scraping voice. "You could not possibly imagine what it's like to experience Eskwana's irrational terrors. To have to share his horrible cowardice, to have to cringe with him at everything!"

"Are you trying to justify your cruelty towards him? I thought you had more self-respect." Tomiko found herself shaking with spite. "If your empathic power really makes you share Ander's misery, why does it never induce the least compassion in you?"

"Compassion," Osden said. "Compassion. What do you know about compassion?"

She stared at him, but he would not look at her.

"Would you like me to verbalize your present emotional affect regarding myself?" he said. "I can do so more precisely than you can. I'm trained to analyze such responses as I receive them. And I do receive them."

"But how can you expect me to feel kindly towards you when you behave as you do?"

"What does it matter how I *behave*, you stupid sow, do you think it makes any difference? Do you think the average human is a well of loving-kindness? My choice is to be hated or to be despised. Not being a woman or a coward, I prefer to be hated."

"That's rot. Self-pity. Every man has—"

"But I am not a man," Osden said. "There are all of you. And there is myself. I am *one*."

Awed by that glimpse of abysmal solipsism, she kept silent a while; finally she said with neither spite nor pity, clinically, "You could kill yourself, Osden."

"That's your way, Haito," he jeered. "I'm not depressive, and *seppuku* isn't my bit. What do you want me to do here?"

"Leave. Spare yourself and us. Take the aircar and a data-feeder and go do a species count. In the forest; Harfex hasn't even started the forests yet. Take a hundred-square-meter forested area, any-

where inside radio range. But outside empathy range. Report in at 8 and 24 o'clock daily."

Osden went, and nothing was heard from him for five days but laconic all-well signals twice daily. The mood at base camp changed like a stage-set. Eskwana stayed awake up to eighteen hours a day. Poswet To got out her stellar lute and chanted the celestial harmonies (music had driven Osden into a frenzy). Mannon, Harfex, Jenny Chong, and Tomiko all went off tranquilizers. Porlock distilled something in his laboratory and drank it all by himself. He had a hangover. Asnanifoil and Poswet To held an all-night Numerical Epiphany, that mystical orgy of higher mathematics which is the chief pleasure of the religious Cetian soul. Olleroo slept with everybody. Work went well.

The Hard Scientist came towards base at a run, laboring through the high, fleshy stalks of the graminiformes. "Something—in the forest—" His eyes bulged, he panted, his mustache and fingers trembled. "Something big. Moving, behind me. I was putting in a benchmark, bending down. It came at me. As if it was swinging down out of the trees. Behind me." He stared at the others with the opaque eyes of terror or exhaustion.

"Sit down, Porlock. Take it easy. Now wait, go through this again. You *saw* something—"

"Not clearly. Just the movement. Purposive. A—an—I don't know what it could have been. Something self-moving. In the trees, the arboriformes, whatever you call 'em. At the edge of the woods."

Harfex looked grim. "There is nothing here that could attack you, Porlock. There are not even microzoa. There *could not* be a large animal."

"Could you possibly have seen an epiphyte drop suddenly, a vine come loose behind you?"

"No," Porlock said. "It was coming down at me, through the branches, fast. When I turned it took off again, away and upward.

It made a noise, a sort of crashing. If it wasn't an animal, God knows what it could have been! It was big—as big as a man, at least. Maybe a reddish color. I couldn't see, I'm not sure."

"It was Osden," said Jenny Chong, "doing a Tarzan act." She giggled nervously, and Tomiko repressed a wild feckless laugh. But Harfex was not smiling.

"One gets uneasy under the arboriformes," he said in his polite, repressed voice. "I've noticed that. Indeed that may be why I've put off working in the forests. There's a hypnotic quality in the colors and spacing of the stems and branches, especially the helically-arranged ones; and the spore-throwers grow so regularly spaced that it seems unnatural. I find it quite disagreeable, subjectively speaking. I wonder if a stronger effect of that sort mightn't have produced a hallucination. . . ?"

Porlock shook his head. He wet his lips. "It was there," he said. "Something. Moving with purpose. Trying to attack me from behind."

When Osden called in, punctual as always, at 24 o'clock that night, Harfex told him Porlock's report. "Have you come on anything at all, Mr Osden, that could substantiate Mr Porlock's impression of a motile, sentient life-form, in the forest?"

Ssss, the radio said sardonically. "No. Bullshit," said Osden's unpleasant voice.

"You've been actually inside the forest longer than any of us," Harfex said with unmitigable politeness. "Do you agree with my impression that the forest ambiance has a rather troubling and possibly hallucinogenic effect on the perceptions?"

Ssss. "I'll agree that Porlock's perceptions are easily troubled. Keep him in his lab, he'll do less harm. Anything else?"

"Not at present," Harfex said, and Osden cut off.

Nobody could credit Porlock's story, and nobody could discredit it. He was positive that something, something big, had tried to

attack him by surprise. It was hard to deny this, for they were on an alien world, and everyone who had entered the forest had felt a certain chill and foreboding under the "trees." ("Call them trees, certainly," Harfex had said. "They really are the same thing, only, of course, altogether different.") They agreed that they had felt uneasy, or had had the sense that something was watching them from behind.

"We've got to clear this up," Porlock said, and he asked to be sent as a temporary Biologist's Aide, like Osden, into the forest to explore and observe. Olleroo and Jenny Chong volunteered if they could go as a pair. Harfex sent them all off into the forest near which they were encamped, a vast tract covering four-fifths of Continent D. He forbade side-arms. They were not to go outside a fifty-mile half-circle, which included Osden's current site. They all reported in twice daily, for three days. Porlock reported a glimpse of what seemed to be a large semi-erect shape moving through the trees across the river; Olleroo was sure she had heard something moving near the tent, the second night.

"There are no animals on this planet," Harfex said, dogged.

Then Osden missed his morning call.

Tomiko waited less than an hour, then flew with Harfex to the area where Osden had reported himself the night before. But as the helijet hovered over the sea of purplish leaves, illimitable, impenetrable, she felt a panic despair. "How can we find him in this?"

"He reported landing on the riverbank. Find the aircar; he'll be camped near it, and he can't have gone far from his camp. Species-counting is slow work. There's the river."

"There's his car," Tomiko said, catching the bright foreign glint among the vegetable colors and shadows. "Here goes, then."

She put the ship in hover and pitched out the ladder. She and Harfex descended. The sea of life closed over their heads.

As her feet touched the forest floor, she unsnapped the flap of her holster; then glancing at Harfex, who was unarmed, she left the gun untouched. But her hand kept coming back up to it. There was no sound at all, as soon as they were a few meters away from the slow, brown river, and the light was dim. Great boles stood well apart, almost regularly, almost alike; they were soft-skinned, some appearing smooth and others spongy, grey or greenish-brown or brown, twined with cable-like creepers and festooned with epiphytes, extending rigid, entangled armfuls of big, saucer-shaped, dark leaves that formed a roof-layer twenty to thirty meters thick. The ground underfoot was springy as a mattress, every inch of it knotted with roots and peppered with small, fleshy-leaved growths.

"Here's his tent," Tomiko said, cowed at the sound of her voice in that huge community of the voiceless. In the tent was Osden's sleeping bag, a couple of books, a box of rations. We should be calling, shouting for him, she thought, but did not even suggest it; nor did Harfex. They circled out from the tent, careful to keep each other in sight through the thick-standing presences, the crowding gloom. She stumbled over Osden's body, not thirty meters from the tent, led to it by the whitish gleam of a dropped notebook. He lay face down between two huge-rooted trees. His head and hands were covered with blood, some dried, some still oozing red.

Harfex appeared beside her, his pale Hainish complexion quite green in the dusk. "Dead?"

"No. He's been struck. Beaten. From behind." Tomiko's fingers felt over the bloody skull and temples and nape. "A weapon or a tool . . . I don't find a fracture."

As she turned Osden's body over so they could lift him, his eyes opened. She was holding him, bending close to his face. His pale lips writhed. A deathly fear came into her. She screamed aloud two or three times and tried to run away, shambling and stumbling

into the terrible dusk. Harfex caught her, and at his touch and the sound of his voice, her panic decreased. "What is it? What is it?" he was saying.

"I don't know," she sobbed. Her heartbeat still shook her, and she could not see clearly. "The fear—the . . . I panicked. When I saw his eyes."

"We're both nervous. I don't understand this—"

"I'm all right now, come on, we've got to get him under care."

Both working with senseless haste, they lugged Osden to the riverside and hauled him up on a rope under his armpits; he dangled like a sack, twisting a little, over the glutinous dark sea of leaves. They pulled him into the helijet and took off. Within a minute they were over open prairie. Tomiko locked onto the homing beam. She drew a deep breath, and her eyes met Harfex's.

"I was so terrified I almost fainted. I have never done that."

"I was . . . unreasonably frightened also," said the Hainishman, and indeed he looked aged and shaken. "Not so badly as you. But as unreasonably."

"It was when I was in contact with him, holding him. He seemed to be conscious for a moment."

"Empathy? . . . I hope he can tell us what attacked him."

Osden, like a broken dummy covered with blood and mud, half lay as they had bundled him into the rear seats in their frantic urgency to get out of the forest.

More panic met their arrival at base. The ineffective brutality of the assault was sinister and bewildering. Since Harfex stubbornly denied any possibility of animal life they began speculating about sentient plants, vegetable monsters, psychic projections. Jenny Chong's latent phobia reasserted itself and she could talk about nothing except the Dark Egos which followed people around behind their backs. She and Olleroo and Porlock had been summoned back to base; and nobody was much inclined to go outside.

Osdén had lost a good deal of blood during the three or four hours he had lain alone, and concussion and severe contusions had put him in shock and semi-coma. As he came out of this and began running a low fever he called several times for "Doctor," in a plaintive voice: "Doctor Hammergeld . . ." When he regained full consciousness, two of those long days later, Tomiko called Harfex into his cubicle.

"Osdén: can you tell us what attacked you?"

The pale eyes flickered past Harfex's face.

"You were attacked," Tomiko said gently. The shifty gaze was hatefully familiar, but she was a physician, protective of the hurt. "You may not remember it yet. Something attacked you. You were in the forest—"

"Ah!" he cried out, his eyes growing bright and his features contorting. "The forest—in the forest—"

"What's in the forest?"

He gasped for breath. A look of clearer consciousness came into his face. After a while he said, "I don't know."

"Did you see what attacked you?" Harfex asked.

"I don't know."

"You remember it now."

"I don't know."

"All our lives may depend on this. You must tell us what you saw!"

"I don't know," Osdén said, sobbing with weakness. He was too weak to hide the fact that he was hiding the answer, yet he would not say it. Porlock, nearby, was chewing his pepper-colored mustache as he tried to hear what was going on in the cubicle. Harfex leaned over Osdén and said, "You *will* tell us—" Tomiko had to interfere bodily.

Harfex controlled himself with an effort that was painful to see. He went off silently to his cubicle, where no doubt he took a double or triple dose of tranquillizers. The other men and women, scat-

tered about the big frail building, a long main hall and ten sleeping-cubicles, said nothing, but looked depressed and edgy. Osden, as always, even now, had them all at his mercy. Tomiko looked down at him with a rush of hatred that burned in her throat like bile. This monstrous egotism that fed itself on others' emotions, this absolute selfishness, was worse than any hideous deformity of the flesh. Like a congenital monster, he should not have lived. Should not be alive. Should have died. Why had his head not been split open?

As he lay flat and white, his hands helpless at his sides, his colorless eyes were wide open, and there were tears running from the corners. He tried to flinch away. "Don't," he said in a weak hoarse voice, and tried to raise his hands to protect his head. "Don't!"

She sat down on the folding-stool beside the cot, and after a while put her hand on his. He tried to pull away, but lacked the strength.

A long silence fell between them.

"Osden," she murmured, "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. I will you well. Let me will you well, Osden. I don't want to hurt you. Listen, I do see now. It was one of us. That's right, isn't it. No, don't answer, only tell me if I'm wrong; but I'm not. . . . Of course there are animals on this planet. Ten of them. I don't care who it was. It doesn't matter, does it. It could have been me, just now. I realize that. I didn't understand how it is, Osden. You can't see how difficult it is for us to understand. . . . But listen. If it were love, instead of hate and fear . . . Is it never love?"

"No."

"Why not? Why should it never be? Are human beings all so weak? That is terrible. Never mind, never mind, don't worry. Keep still. At least right now it isn't hate, is it? Sympathy at least, concern, well-wishing. You do feel that, Osden? Is it what you feel?"

"Among . . . other things," he said, almost inaudibly.

"Noise from my subconscious, I suppose. And everybody else in the room . . . Listen, when we found you there in the forest, when I tried to turn you over, you partly wakened, and I felt a horror of you. I was insane with fear for a minute. Was that your fear of me I felt?"

"No."

Her hand was still on his, and he was quite relaxed, sinking towards sleep, like a man in pain who has been given relief from pain. "The forest," he muttered; she could barely understand him. "Afraid."

She pressed him no further, but kept her hand on his and watched him go to sleep. She knew what she felt, and what therefore he must feel. She was confident of it: there is only one emotion, or state of being, that can thus wholly reverse itself, polarize, within one moment. In Great Hainish indeed there is one word, *ontá*, for love and for hate. She was not in love with Osden, of course, that was another kettle of fish. What she felt for him was *ontá*, polarized hate. She held his hand and the current flowed between them, the tremendous electricity of touch, which he had always dreaded. As he slept the ring of anatomy-chart muscles around his mouth relaxed, and Tomiko saw on his face what none of them had ever seen, very faint, a smile. It faded. He slept on.

He was tough; next day he was sitting up, and hungry. Harfex wished to interrogate him, but Tomiko put him off. She hung a sheet of polythene over the cubicle door, as Osden himself had often done. "Does it actually cut down your empathic reception?" she asked, and he replied, in the dry, cautious tone they were now using to each other, "No."

"Just a warning, then."

"Partly. More faith-healing. Dr Hammergeld thought it worked. . . . Maybe it does, a little."

There had been love, once. A terrified child, suffocating in the tidal rush and battering of the huge emotions of adults, a drowning child, saved by one man. Taught to breathe, to live, by one man. Given everything, all protection and love, by one man. Father/Mother/God: no other. "Is he still alive?" Tomiko asked, thinking of Osden's incredible loneliness, and the strange cruelty of the great doctors. She was shocked when she heard his forced, tinny laugh. "He died at least two and a half centuries ago," Osden said. "Do you forget where we are, Coordinator? We've all left our little families behind. . . ."

Outside the polythene curtain the eight other human beings on World 4470 moved vaguely. Their voices were low and strained. Eskwana slept; Poswet To was in therapy; Jenny Chong was trying to rig lights in her cubicle so that she wouldn't cast a shadow.

"They're all scared," Tomiko said, scared. "They've all got these ideas about what attacked you. A sort of ape-potato, a giant fanged spinach, I don't know. . . . Even Harfex. You may be right not to force them to see. That would be worse, to lose confidence in one another. But why are we all so shaky, unable to face the fact, going to pieces so easily? Are we really all insane?"

"We'll soon be more so."

"Why?"

"There *is* something." He closed his mouth, the muscles of his lips stood out rigid.

"Something sentient?"

"A sentience."

"In the forest?"

He nodded.

"What is it, then—?"

"The fear." He began to look strained again, and moved restlessly. "When I fell, there, you know, I didn't lose consciousness

at once. Or I kept regaining it. I don't know. It was more like being paralyzed."

"You were."

"I was on the ground. I couldn't get up. My face was in the dirt, in that soft leaf mold. It was in my nostrils and eyes. I couldn't move. Couldn't see. As if I was in the ground. Sunk into it, part of it. I knew I was between two trees even though I never saw them. I suppose I could feel the roots. Below me in the ground, down under the ground. My hands were bloody, I could feel that, and the blood made the dirt around my face sticky. I felt the fear. It kept growing. As if they'd finally *known* I was there, lying on them there, under them, among them, the thing they feared, and yet part of their fear itself. I couldn't stop sending the fear back, and it kept growing, and I couldn't move, I couldn't get away. I would pass out, I think, and then the fear would bring me to again, and I still couldn't move. Any more than they can."

Tomiko felt the cold stirring of her hair, the readying of the apparatus of terror. "They: who are they, Osden?"

"They, it—I don't know. The fear."

"What is he talking about?" Harfex demanded when Tomiko reported this conversation. She would not let Harfex question Osden yet, feeling that she must protect Osden from the onslaught of the Hainishman's powerful, over-repressed emotions. Unfortunately this fueled the slow fire of paranoid anxiety that burned in poor Harfex, and he thought she and Osden were in league, hiding some fact of great importance or peril from the rest of the team.

"It's like the blind man trying to describe the elephant. Osden hasn't seen or heard the . . . the sentience, any more than we have."

"But he's felt it, my dear Haito," Harfex said with just-suppressed rage. "Not empathically. On his skull. It came and knocked him down and beat him with a blunt instrument. Did he not catch *one* glimpse of it?"

"What would he have seen, Harfex?" Tomiko asked, but he would not hear her meaningful tone; even he had blocked out that comprehension. What one fears is alien. The murderer is an outsider, a foreigner, not one of us. The evil is not in me!

"The first blow knocked him pretty well out," Tomiko said a little wearily, "he didn't see anything. But when he came to again, alone in the forest, he felt a great fear. Not his own fear, an empathic effect. He is certain of that. And certain it was nothing picked up from any of us. So that evidently the native life-forms are not all insentient."

Harfex looked at her a moment, grim. "You're trying to frighten me, Haito. I do not understand your motives." He got up and went off to his laboratory table, walking slowly and stiffly, like a man of eighty not of forty.

She looked round at the others. She felt some desperation. Her new, fragile, and profound interdependence with Osden gave her, she was well aware, some added strength. But if even Harfex could not keep his head, who of the others would? Porlock and Eskwana were shut in their cubicles, the others were all working or busy with something. There was something queer about their positions. For a while the Coordinator could not tell what it was, then she saw that they were all sitting facing the nearby forest. Playing chess with Asnanifoil, Olleroo had edged her chair around until it was almost beside his.

She went to Mannon, who was dissecting a tangle of spidery brown roots, and told him to look for the pattern-puzzle. He saw it at once, and said with unusual brevity, "Keeping an eye on the enemy."

"What enemy? What do *you* feel, Mannon?" She had a sudden hope in him as a psychologist, on this obscure ground of hints and empathies where biologists went astray.

"I feel a strong anxiety with a specific spatial orientation. But I

am not an empath. Therefore the anxiety is explicable in terms of the particular stress-situation, that is, the attack on a team member in the forest, and also in terms of the total stress-situation, that is, my presence in a totally alien environment, for which the archetypical connotations of the word 'forest' provide an inevitable metaphor."

Hours later Tomiko woke to hear Osden screaming in nightmare; Mannon was calming him, and she sank back into her own dark-branching pathless dreams. In the morning Eskwana did not wake. He could not be roused with stimulant drugs. He clung to his sleep, slipping farther and farther back, mumbling softly now and then until, wholly regressed, he lay curled on his side, thumb at his lips, gone.

"Two days; two down. Ten little Indians, nine little Indians . . ." That was Porlock.

"And you're the next little Indian," Jenny Chong snapped. "Go analyze your urine, Porlock!"

"He is driving us all insane," Porlock said, getting up and waving his left arm. "Can't you feel it? For God's sake, are you all deaf and blind? Can't you feel what he's doing, the emanations? It all comes from him—from his room there—from his mind. He is driving us all insane with fear!"

"Who is?" said Asnanifoil, looming precipitous and hairy over the little Terran.

"Do I have to say his name? Osden, then. Osden! Osden! Why do you think I tried to kill him? In self-defense! To save all of us! Because you won't see what he's doing to us. He's sabotaged the mission by making us quarrel, and now he's going to drive us all insane by projecting fear at us so that we can't sleep or think, like a huge radio that doesn't make any sound, but it broadcasts all the time, and you can't sleep, and you can't think. Haito and Harfex

are already under his control but the rest of you can be saved. I had to do it!"

"You didn't do it very well," Osden said, standing half-naked, all rib and bandage, at the door of his cubicle. "I could have hit myself harder. Hell, it isn't me that's scaring you blind, Porlock, it's out there—there, in the woods!"

Porlock made an ineffectual attempt to assault Osden; Asnanifoil held him back, and continued to hold him effortlessly while Mannon gave him a sedative shot. He was put away shouting about giant radios. In a minute the sedative took effect, and he joined a peaceful silence to Eskwana's.

"All right," said Harfex. "Now, Osden, you'll tell us what you know and all you know."

Osden said, "I don't know anything."

He looked battered and faint. Tomiko made him sit down before he talked.

"After I'd been three days in the forest, I thought I was occasionally receiving some kind of affect."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"Thought I was going spla, like the rest of you."

"That, equally, should have been reported."

"You'd have called me back to base. I couldn't take it. You realize that my inclusion in the mission was a bad mistake. I'm not able to coexist with nine other neurotic personalities at close quarters. I was wrong to volunteer for Extreme Survey, and the Authority was wrong to accept me."

No one spoke; but Tomiko saw, with certainty this time, the flinch in Osden's shoulders and the tightening of his facial muscles, as he registered their bitter agreement.

"Anyhow, I didn't want to come back to base because I was curious. Even going psycho, how could I pick up empathic affects when there was no creature to emit them? They weren't bad, then.

Very vague. Queer. Like a draft in a closed room, a flicker in the corner of your eye. Nothing really."

For a moment he had been borne up on their listening: they heard, so he spoke. He was wholly at their mercy. If they disliked him he had to be hateful; if they mocked him he became grotesque; if they listened to him he was the storyteller. He was helplessly obedient to the demands of their emotions, reactions, moods. And there were seven of them, too many to cope with, so that he must be constantly knocked about from one to another's whim. He could not find coherence. Even as he spoke and held them, somebody's attention would wander: Olleroo perhaps was thinking that he wasn't unattractive, Harfex was seeking the ulterior motive of his words, Asnanifoil's mind, which could not be long held by the concrete, was roaming off towards the eternal peace of number, and Tomiko was distracted by pity, by fear. Osden's voice faltered. He lost the thread. "I . . . I thought it must be the trees," he said, and stopped.

"It's not the trees," Harfex said. "They have no more nervous system than do plants of the Hainish Descent on Earth. None."

"You're not seeing the forest for the trees, as they say on Earth," Mannon put in, smiling elfinly; Harfex stared at him. "What about those root-nodes we've been puzzling about for twenty days—eh?"

"What about them?"

"They are, indubitably, connections. Connections among the trees. Right? Now let's just suppose, most improbably, that you knew nothing of animal brain-structure. And you were given one axon, or one detached glial cell, to examine. Would you be likely to discover what it was? Would you see that the cell was capable of sentience?"

"No. Because it isn't. A single cell is capable of mechanical response to stimulus. No more. Are you hypothesizing that individual arboriformes are 'cells' in a kind of brain, Mannon?"

"Not exactly. I'm merely pointing out that they are all interconnected, both by the root-node linkage and by your green epiphytes

in the branches. A linkage of incredible complexity and physical extent. Why, even the prairie grass-forms have those root-connectors, don't they? I know that sentience or intelligence isn't a thing, you can't find it in, or analyze it out from, the cells of a brain. It's a function of the connected cells. It is, in a sense, the connection: the connectedness. It doesn't exist. I'm not trying to say it exists. I'm only guessing that Osden might be able to describe it."

And Osden took him up, speaking as if in trance. "Sentience without senses. Blind, deaf, nerveless, moveless. Some irritability, response to touch. Response to sun, to light, to water, and chemicals in the earth around the roots. Nothing comprehensible to an animal mind. Presence without mind. Awareness of being, without object or subject. Nirvana."

"Then why do you receive fear?" Tomiko asked in a low voice.

"I don't know. I can't see how awareness of objects, of others, could arise: an unperceiving response . . . But there was an uneasiness, for days. And then when I lay between the two trees and my blood was on their roots—" Osden's face glittered with sweat. "It became fear," he said shrilly, "only fear."

"If such a function existed," Harfex said, "it would not be capable of conceiving of a self-moving, material entity, or responding to one. It could no more become aware of us than we can 'become aware' of Infinity."

"The silence of those infinite expanses terrifies me," muttered Tomiko. "Pascal was aware of Infinity. By way of fear."

"To a forest," Mannon said, "we might appear as forest fires. Hurricanes. Dangers. What moves quickly is dangerous, to a plant. The rootless would be alien, terrible. And if it is mind, it seems only too probable that it might become aware of Osden, whose own mind is open to connection with all others so long as he's conscious, and who was lying in pain and afraid within it, actually inside it. No wonder it was afraid—"

"Not 'it,'" Harfex said. "There is no being, no huge creature, no person! There could at most be only a function—"

"There is only a fear," Osden said.

They were all still a while, and heard the stillness outside:

"Is that what I feel all the time coming up behind me?" Jenny Chong asked, subdued.

Osden nodded. "You all feel it, deaf as you are. Eskwana's the worst off, because he actually has some empathic capacity. He could send if he learned how, but he's too weak, never will be anything but a medium."

"Listen, Osden," Tomiko said, "you can send. Then send to it—the forest, the fear out there—tell it that we won't hurt it. Since it has, or is, some sort of affect that translates into what we feel as emotion, can't you translate back? Send out a message, We are harmless, we are friendly."

"You must know that nobody can emit a false empathic message, Haito. You can't send something that doesn't exist."

"But we don't intend harm, we are friendly."

"Are we? In the forest, when you picked me up, did you feel friendly?"

"No. Terrified. But that's—it, the forest, the plants, not my own fear, isn't it?"

"What's the difference? It's all you felt. Can't you see," and Osden's voice rose in exasperation, "why I dislike you and you dislike me, all of you? Can't you see that I retransmit every negative or aggressive affect you've felt towards me since we first met? I return your hostility, with thanks. I do it in self-defense. Like Porlock. It is self-defense, though; it's the only technique I developed to replace my original defense of total withdrawal from others. Unfortunately it creates a closed circuit, self-sustaining and self-reinforcing. Your initial reaction to me was the instinctive antipathy to a cripple; by now of course it's hatred. Can you fail to see my point? The forest-

mind out there transmits only terror, now, and the only message I can send it is terror, because when exposed to it I can feel nothing except terror!"

"What must we do, then?" said Tomiko, and Mannon replied promptly, "Move camp. To another continent. If there are plant-minds there, they'll be slow to notice us, as this one was; maybe they won't notice us at all."

"It would be a considerable relief," Osden observed stiffly. The others had been watching him with a new curiosity. He had revealed himself, they had seen him as he was, a helpless man in a trap. Perhaps, like Tomiko, they had seen that the trap itself, his crass and cruel egotism, was their own construction, not his. They had built the cage and locked him in it, and like a caged ape he threw filth out through the bars. If, meeting him, they had offered trust, if they had been strong enough to offer him love, how might he have appeared to them?

None of them could have done so, and it was too late now. Given time, given solitude, Tomiko might have built up with him a slow resonance of feeling, a consonance of trust, a harmony; but there was no time, their job must be done. There was not room enough for the cultivation of so great a thing, and they must make do with sympathy, with pity, the small change of love. Even that much had given her strength, but it was nowhere near enough for him. She could see in his flayed face now his savage resentment of their curiosity, even of her pity.

"Go lie down, that gash is bleeding again," she said, and he obeyed her.

Next morning they packed up, melted down the sprayform hangar and living quarters, lifted *Gum* on mechanical drive and took her halfway round World 4470, over the red and green lands, the many warm green seas. They had picked out a likely spot on Continent G: a prairie, twenty thousand square kilos of windswept

graminiformes. No forest was within a hundred kilos of the site, and there were no lone trees or groves on the plain. The plant-forms occurred only in large species-colonies, never intermingled, except for certain tiny ubiquitous saprophytes and spore-bearers. The team sprayed holomeld over structure forms, and by evening of the thirty-two-hour day were settled in to the new camp. Eskwana was still asleep and Porlock still sedated, but everyone else was cheerful. "You can breathe here!" they kept saying.

Osdan got on his feet and went shakily to the doorway; leaning there he looked through twilight over the dim reaches of the swaying grass that was not grass. There was a faint, sweet odor of pollen on the wind; no sound but the soft, vast sibilance of wind. His bandaged head cocked a little, the empath stood motionless for a long time. Darkness came, and the stars, lights in the windows of the distant house of Man. The wind had ceased, there was no sound. He listened.

In the long night Haito Tomiko listened. She lay still and heard the blood in her arteries, the breathing of sleepers, the wind blowing, the dark veins running, the dreams advancing, the vast static of stars increasing as the universe died slowly, the sound of death walking. She struggled out of her bed, fled the tiny solitude of her cubicle. Eskwana alone slept. Porlock lay straitjacketed, raving softly in his obscure native tongue. Olleroo and Jenny Chong were playing cards, grim-faced. Poswet To was in the therapy niche, plugged in. Asnanifoil was drawing a mandala, the Third Pattern of the Primes. Mannon and Harfex were sitting up with Osdan.

She changed the bandages on Osdan's head. His lank, reddish hair, where she had not had to shave it, looked strange. It was salted with white, now. Her hands shook as she worked. Nobody had yet said anything.

"How can the fear be here too?" she said, and her voice rang flat and false in the terrific silence.

"It's not just the trees; the grasses too . . ."

"But we're twelve thousand kilos from where we were this morning, we left it on the other side of the planet."

"It's all one," Osden said. "One big green thought. How long does it take a thought to get from one side of your brain to the other?"

"It doesn't think. It isn't thinking," Harfex said, lifelessly. "It's merely a network of processes. The branches, the epiphytic growths, the roots with those nodal junctures between individuals: they must all be capable of transmitting electrochemical impulses. There are no individual plants, then, properly speaking. Even the pollen is part of the linkage, no doubt, a sort of windborne sentience, connecting overseas. But it is not conceivable. That all the biosphere of a planet should be one network of communications, sensitive, irrational, immortal, isolated. . . ."

"Isolated," said Osden. "That's it! That's the fear. It isn't that we're motile, or destructive. It's just that we are. We are other. There has never been any other."

"You're right," Mannon said, almost whispering. "It has no peers. No enemies. No relationship with anything but itself. One alone forever."

"Then what's the function of its intelligence in species-survival?"

"None, maybe," Osden said. "Why are you getting teleological, Harfex? Aren't you a Hainishman? Isn't the measure of complexity the measure of the eternal joy?"

Harfex did not take the bait. He looked ill. "We should leave this world," he said.

"Now you know why I always want to get out, get away from you," Osden said with a kind of morbid geniality. "It isn't pleasant, is it—the other's fear. . . ? If only it were an animal intelligence. I can get through to animals. I get along with cobras and tigers; superior intelligence gives one the advantage. I should have been used in a zoo, not on a human team. . . . If I could get through to

the damned stupid potato! If it wasn't so overwhelming . . . I still pick up more than the fear, you know. And before it panicked it had a—there was a serenity. I couldn't take it in, then, I didn't realize how big it was. To know the whole daylight, after all, and the whole night. All the winds and lulls together. The winter stars and the summer stars at the same time. To have roots, and no enemies. To be entire. Do you see? No invasion. No others. To be whole . . .”

He had never spoken before, Tomiko thought.

“You are defenseless against it, Osden,” she said. “Your personality has changed already. You're vulnerable to it. We may not all go mad, but you will, if we don't leave.”

He hesitated, then he looked up at Tomiko, the first time he had ever met her eyes, a long, still look, clear as water.

“What's sanity ever done for me?” he said, mocking. “But you have a point, Haito. You have something there.”

“We should get away,” Harfex muttered.

“If I gave in to it,” Osden mused, “could I communicate?”

“By ‘give in,’” Mannon said in a rapid, nervous voice, “I assume that you mean, stop sending back the empathic information which you receive from the plant-entity: stop rejecting the fear, and absorb it. That will either kill you at once, or drive you back into total psychological withdrawal, autism.”

“Why?” said Osden. “Its message is *rejection*. But my salvation is rejection. It's not intelligent. But I am.”

“The scale is wrong. What can a single human brain achieve against something so vast?”

“A single human brain can perceive pattern on the scale of stars and galaxies,” Tomiko said, “and interpret it as Love.”

Mannon looked from one to the other of them; Harfex was silent.

“It'd be easier in the forest,” Osden said. “Which of you will fly me over?”

"When?"

"Now. Before you all crack up or go violent."

"I will," Tomiko said.

"None of us will," Harfex said.

"I can't," Mannon said. "I . . . I am too frightened. I'd crash the jet."

"Bring Eskwana along. If I can pull this off, he might serve as a medium."

"Are you accepting the Sensor's plan, Coordinator?" Harfex asked formally.

"Yes."

"I disapprove. I will come with you, however."

"I think we're compelled, Harfex," Tomiko said, looking at Osden's face, the ugly white mask transfigured, eager as a lover's face.

Olleroo and Jenny Chong, playing cards to keep their thoughts from their haunted beds, their mounting dread, chattered like scared children. "This thing, it's in the forest, it'll get you—"

"Scared of the dark?" Osden jeered.

"But look at Eskwana, and Porlock, and even Asnanifoil—"

"It can't hurt you. It's an impulse passing through synapses, a wind passing through branches. It is only a nightmare."

They took off in a helijet, Eskwana curled up still sound asleep in the rear compartment, Tomiko piloting, Harfex and Osden silent, watching ahead for the dark line of forest across the vague grey miles of starlit plain.

They neared the black line, crossed it; now under them was darkness.

She sought a landing place, flying low, though she had to fight her frantic wish to fly high, to get out, get away. The huge vitality of the plant-world was far stronger here in the forest; and its panic beat in immense dark waves. There was a pale patch ahead, a bare

knoll-top a little higher than the tallest of the black shapes around it; the not-trees; the rooted; the parts of the whole. She set the helijet down in the glade, a bad landing. Her hands on the stick were slippery, as if she had rubbed them with cold soap.

About them now stood the forest, black in darkness.

Tomiko cowered and shut her eyes. Eskwana moaned in his sleep. Harfex's breath came short and loud, and he sat rigid, even when Osden reached across him and slid the door open.

Osden stood up; his back and bandaged head were just visible in the dim glow of the control panel as he paused stooping in the doorway.

Tomiko was shaking. She could not raise her head. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no," she said in a whisper. "No. No. No."

Osden moved suddenly and quietly, swinging out of the doorway, down into the dark. He was gone.

I am coming! said a great voice that made no sound.

Tomiko screamed. Harfex coughed; he seemed to be trying to stand up, but did not do so.

Tomiko drew in upon herself, all centered in the blind eye in her belly, in the center of her being; and outside that there was nothing but the fear.

It ceased.

She raised her head; slowly unclenched her hands. She sat up straight. The night was dark, and stars shone over the forest. There was nothing else.

"Osden," she said, but her voice would not come. She spoke again, louder, a lone bullfrog croak. There was no reply.

She began to realize that something had gone wrong with Harfex. She was trying to find his head in the darkness, for he had slipped down from the seat, when all at once, in the dead quiet, in the dark rear compartment of the craft, a voice spoke. "Good," it said.

It was Eskwana's voice. She snapped on the interior lights and

saw the engineer lying curled up asleep, his hand half over his mouth.

The mouth opened and spoke. "All well," it said.

"Osden—"

"All well," said the soft voice from Eskwana's mouth.

"Where are you?"

Silence.

"Come back."

A wind was rising. "I'll stay here," the soft voice said.

"You can't stay—"

Silence.

"You'd be alone, Osden!"

"Listen." The voice was fainter, slurred, as if lost in the sound of wind. "Listen. I will you well."

She called his name after that, but there was no answer. Eskwana lay still. Harfex lay stiller.

"Osden!" she cried, leaning out the doorway into the dark, wind-shaken silence of the forest of being. "I will come back. I must get Harfex to the base. I will come back, Osden!"

Silence and wind in leaves.

They finished the prescribed survey of World 4470, the eight of them; it took them forty-one days more. Asnanifoil and one or another of the women went into the forest daily at first, searching for Osden in the region around the bare knoll, though Tomiko was not in her heart sure which bare knoll they had landed on that night in the very heart and vortex of terror. They left piles of supplies for Osden, food enough for fifty years, clothing, tents, tools. They did not go on searching; there was no way to find a man alone, hiding, if he wanted to hide, in those unending labyrinths and dim corridors vine-entangled, root-floored. They might have passed within arm's reach of him and never seen him.

But he was there; for there was no fear any more.

Rational, and valuing reason more highly after an intolerable experience of the immortal mindless, Tomiko tried to understand rationally what Osden had done. But the words escaped her control. He had taken the fear into himself, and, accepting, had transcended it. He had given up his self to the alien, an unreserved surrender, that left no place for evil. He had learned the love of the Other, and thereby had been given his whole self. —But this is not the vocabulary of reason.

The people of the Survey team walked under the trees, through the vast colonies of life, surrounded by a dreaming silence, a brooding calm that was half aware of them and wholly indifferent to them. There were no hours. Distance was no matter. Had we but world enough and time . . . The planet turned between the sunlight and the great dark; winds of winter and summer blew fine, pale pollen across the quiet seas.

Gum returned after many surveys, years, and lightyears, to what had several centuries ago been Smeming Port. There were still men there, to receive (incredulously) the team's reports, and to record its losses: Biologist Harfex, dead of fear, and Sensor Osden, left as a colonist.



ONTOLOGY OF THE ATMOSPHERE

7 In Open Air

Ontology of the Atmosphere

Life has never abandoned fluid space. When, in time immemorial, life left the sea, it found and created around itself a fluid with different characteristics—consistency, composition, nature. With the colonization of the terrestrial world,¹ outside the marine environment, the dry world transformed itself into an enormous fluid body that allows the vast majority of living beings to live in an exchange-based, reciprocal relation between subject and environment. We are not inhabitants of the Earth; we inhabit the atmosphere. Terra firma is just the extreme limit of this cosmic fluid at the heart of which everything communicates, touches, extends. Its conquest was, before anything else, the fabrication of this fluid.²

Hundreds of millions of years ago, in a time span encompassed between the end of the Cambrian and the start of the Ordovician, groups of organisms left the sea and deposited the first traces of animal life of which we have evidence: it is likely that these were arthropod homopods,³ in other words beings equipped with legs

and with a pointed caudal appendage—the telson. Their presence on Earth at that point was still ephemeral and experimental: they appeared in the aerial environment in order to look for nourishment or to reproduce.⁴ The world that opened up before them had been fashioned by other living beings. The universe we inhabit is the result of a catastrophe of pollution, one that we call, alternatively, the Great Oxygenation Event or the Oxygen Catastrophe.⁵ Both geological and biological causes seem to have come together to change the face of the planet definitively. The development of the first organisms capable of photosynthesis—cyanobacteria—and the flux of hydrogen coming from the surface of the Earth prompted an accumulation of oxygen, in a first stage instantly oxidized by the elements present in marine waters or on the terrestrial surface (iron, for example, or limestone formations). With the development and diffusion of vascular plants, the atmosphere stabilized itself: the quantity of free oxygen passed the threshold of oxygenation and accumulated in free form. In turn, the massive presence of oxygen led to the extinction of many anaerobic organisms that populated earth and sea, to the benefit of aerobic forms of life.⁶

The definitive settling, in sedentary form, of living beings on dry land coincided with the radical transformation of the aerial space that surrounds and envelops the terrestrial crust: what, from the seventeenth century on, we call “atmosphere” altered its internal composition.⁷ Thanks to plants, the Earth definitively became the metaphysical space of breath. The first to colonize and make the Earth inhabitable were the organisms capable of photosynthesis: the first living beings that were wholly terrestrial are the greatest transformers of the atmosphere.

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At the other end, photosynthesis is a great atmospheric laboratory in which solar energy is transformed into *living matter*. From this point of view, plants have never abandoned the sea: rather they have brought it where it did not exist. They have transformed the universe into an immense atmospheric sea and have transmitted their marine habits to all other beings. Photosynthesis is, in this sense, a cosmic process of fluidification of the universe, one of the movements through which the fluid of the world constitutes itself: what allows the world to breathe and keeps it in a state of dynamic tension.

Plants, then, allow us to understand that immersion is not a simple spatial determination: to be immersed is not reducible to finding oneself *in* something that surrounds and penetrates us. Immersion, as we have seen, is first of all an *action* of mutual compenetration between subject and environment, body and space, life and medium. It is impossible to distinguish them physically and spatially: for there to be immersion, subject and environment have to *actively penetrate each other*; otherwise one would speak simply of juxtaposition or contiguity between two bodies touching at their extremities. Subject and environment act on each other and define themselves starting from this reciprocal action. Observed *ex parte subiecti* [from the subject's angle], this simplicity is expressed as the formal identity between passivity and activity: to penetrate the surrounding environment is to be penetrated by it. Thus, in all space of immersion, *to act* and *to be acted upon* are formally indistinguishable. We experience this, for example, each time we swim.

But the state of immersion is above all the metaphysical site of a more radical identity of being and doing. One cannot *exist* in a fluid space without modifying, by

this very fact, the reality and form of the environment that surrounds us. The life of plants constitutes the most surprising proof of this, in light of the *cosmogonic* consequences they have had on our world. The existence of plants is, by itself, a global modification of the cosmic environment, in other words of the world that they penetrate and by which they are penetrated. It is already *by existing* that plants modify the world globally without even moving, without beginning to act. "To be" means, for them, to *make world* [*faire monde*]; reciprocally, to construct (our) world, to make world is only a synonym of "to be." Plants are not the only living beings to experience this coincidence: organisms display it in an even more obvious manner. One must then generalize this find and conclude that *the existence of every living being is necessarily a cosmogonic act* and that a world is always, simultaneously, a condition of possibility and a product of the life that it hosts. Every organism is the invention of a way of producing the world ("a way of world-making," to put Nelson Goodman's phrase to different use), and the world is always a space of life, a lifeworld.

From this perspective, one can measure the limits of the notions of place or environment—which continue to represent the relation between the living being and the world exclusively under the aspects of *contiguity* and *juxtaposition*—and can begin thinking of them as ontologically and formally autonomous from the living organism that inhabits them. If any living being is a being in the world, every environment is a being within beings. The world and the living are nothing but a halo, an echo of the relation that binds them together.

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We will never be able to be materially separated from the matter of the world: every living being constructs itself starting from the same matter that makes up the mountains and the clouds. Immersion is a *material* coincidence, which starts under our skin. This is why organisms do not need to go beyond or outside themselves to reinvent the face of the world; they have no need to act, to rejoin their “environment,” or to perceive it: through the simple act of being they already fashion the cosmos. To be in the world necessarily means to *make world*: every activity of living beings is an act of design upon the living flesh of the world. On the other hand, in order to construct the world, one need neither fabricate an object different from oneself (spilling matter out of one’s skin) nor perceive, recognize, seize a portion of the world directly and consciously and *want* to change it. Immersion is a more profound relation than action and consciousness—it is underneath praxis as well as underneath thought: a silent and mute design, an *ontological* design. It is this “plasmability,” which is only the absence of resistance to life; it is this *ease* with which cosmic matter metamorphoses into a living subject and becomes the *actual body* of certain organisms (even below the annexation represented by nutrition). In this respect, plants let us see the most radical form of being in the world: they adhere to it completely and without passivity. Far from being passive, they exercise on the world, which *we all* experience through the simple act of being, the most intense influence with the richest consequences, and this on a global, not a local scale. They change the world, not just their environment or their ecological niche. To think of plants means to think of a being in the world that is *immediately cosmogonic*.

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Photosynthesis—one of the major cosmogonic phenomena, and one that is indistinguishable from the being itself of plants—is neither of the order of contemplation nor of the order of action (as the construction of a dam by a beaver would be). In this way plants force biology, ecology, and also philosophy to rethink once more the relations between the world and the living.

In fact it is not possible to interpret the relation between plants and the world through the profoundly idealist model conceived of by the German naturalist Jakob von Uexküll. Following Kant's doctrine and assuming that we should recognize each animal's status of sovereign subject over its organs, von Uexküll conceived of the world as "a bubble [that] represents the animal's environment and contains all the features accessible to the subject":⁸

We can say, with Kant, that there is no absolute space on which our subject cannot exercise an influence, because the specific matter of space, the signs of place and direction, is a subjective product, just like its form. Without spatial qualities and their synthesis in universal form produced through apperception, there would not be space but only an assortment of sensorial qualities like colors, sounds, smells, and so on, which would have their specific forms and places but would lack a site of encounter.⁹

This is because "[e]very subject spins out, like the spider's threads, its relations to certain qualities of things and weaves them into a solid web, which carries its existence."¹⁰ The environment is thus "a psychical product [*psychoïdales Erzeugnis*] and cannot be deduced from physical or physiological factors. Each environment is supported by a spatial and temporal

frame that consists of a series of perceptual characters and signs of order.”¹¹ This model is insufficient for at least two reasons. First of all, it conceives of the relationship with the world under the form of cognition and action: access to the world is given only through these two channels, as though “the rest of the life” of an individual were enclosed inside him or her and not thrown into the world, exposed to it, obliged to feed off it, to construct itself out of its elements. Second—but this is a consequence of this main limitation—von Uexküll’s model entails that access to the world is of an *organic* nature, in other words takes place in and through an organ (it is irrelevant whether a cognitive or a practical one). Plants not only do not act and do not perceive—at least not in an *organic* way, that is, starting from parts of the body *specifically* built for this purpose—they also do not expose themselves to the world couched in a specific organ. No, it is with the totality of their body and being, without distinctions of form or function, that plants open to the world and merge into it.

Nor is it possible to conceive of the relation of plants to the world through niche construction theory. This theory, which has received its most detailed treatment from John Odling-Smee, Kevin N. Laland, and Marcus W. Feldman,¹² claims that, instead of limiting themselves to suffering environmental pressure, organisms are capable of modifying their own existential niche, or that of others, through their metabolism and activity.¹³ The idea of an action of the living on the surrounding environment¹⁴ goes back to the last book by Charles Darwin published during his life, where he demonstrates, against his own theses on natural selection, that “[w]orms have played a more important part in the

history of the world than most persons would at first suppose. [...] Each year [*sc.* in England],” he writes, “a weight of more than ten tons of dry earth annually passes through their bodies and is brought to the surface on each acre of land”;¹⁵ their action is thus decisive for the disaggregation of rocks, the erosion of the soil, the conservation of ancient ruins,¹⁶ and the soil’s preparation for the growth of plants.¹⁷ Though they “are poorly provided with sense-organs” and thus incapable of learning about the external world, they demonstrate great expertise in the construction of burrows and, in particular, they give clear proof of possessing “some degree of intelligence instead of a mere blind instinctive impulse, in their manner of plugging up the mouths of their burrows.”¹⁸ The modifications that these barely organized creatures produce in the higher layers of the globe are not limited to influencing the lives of other living beings (humans and plants alike), but also influence the state of their specific habitats, which are modified to the benefit of future generations. Niche construction theory rehearses Darwin’s finds in order to emphasize how living beings, even the simplest ones, are not just the victims of natural selection and how adaptation to the environment is not their only fate:¹⁹ they are equally capable of modifying the space that surrounds them and of handing down the new world to future generations. In this sense, by producing permanent and transmissible modifications from one generation to the next, living beings produce *culture*,²⁰ which is not a human prerogative but rather a sort of inheritance that is not anatomical but ecological,²¹ an exosomatic inheritance.²² And yet, even though it has made it possible for us to overcome the dualisms that characterize

the classical theory of evolution, niche construction theory does not allow us to conceive of the intimacy that characterizes immersion. The concept of niche in fact brings about a double separation. Elaborated in order to express the reality of a principle of competitive exclusion—the principle of Gause,²³ namely the tendency of two populations who share the same space to eliminate each other in order to enjoy fully the available resources—the concept seems to tackle the relation between the world and the living in exclusive terms: the world is, at least tendentially, the space of a *single* species, the habitat of a specific form of life (as it was also for von Uexküll). Now, to be in the world means finding it impossible not to share the ambient space with other forms of life, not to be exposed to the life of others. As we have seen, the world is by definition the life of others: the ensemble of other living beings. The mystery that needs explaining is therefore the inclusion of all in the same world, and not the exclusion of other beings—which is always unstable, illusory, and ephemeral. What is more, through the concept of niche, one restricts the sphere of influence and of mundane existence to limitrophe space or to the set of factors or resources that are *immediately* related to the living subject. To recognize that the world is a space of immersion means, on the contrary, that there are no real or stable frontiers: the *world* is the space that never lets itself be reduced to a house, to what is one's own, to one's digs, to the immediate. Being in the world means to exercise influence especially outside one's own space, outside one's own habitat, outside one's own niche. It is always the totality of the world one lives in, which is and will always be infested by others.

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In conclusion, the influence²⁴ of any living being on the environment cannot be measured simply by the effects that its existence produces outside itself: its very existence—insofar as it is nothing but a novel fashioning of the anonymous matter of the world—is the foremost influence of a living being on its environment. If the environment does not begin beyond the skin of the living being, this is because the world is already inside it. In this sense, the action of the living being upon the world cannot be considered a form of engineering produced by the ecosystem.²⁵

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“Plants,” wrote Charles Bonnet, “are planted in the air nearly as much as they are in the earth”:²⁶ the atmosphere rather than the soil is their first medium, their world. Photosynthesis is thus the most radical expression of their being in the world. Before being recognized as the principal mechanism of the production of vital energy, photosynthesis was understood as a *natural air-conditioning* device. “I flatter myself,” Joseph Priestley wrote in 1772, “that I have accidentally hit upon a method of restoring air which has been injured by the burning, and that I have discovered at least one of the restoratives which nature employs for this purpose. It is vegetation.”²⁷

Priestley was a unitarian theologian famous for his research on electricity. He placed a mint plant under a bell jar that contained air produced from the combustion of a candle. He remarked that, twenty-seven days later, another candle was still perfectly capable of burning inside the jar.²⁸ According to Priestley, the explanation lies in the fact that plants feed off of gases produced

through animal respiration and putrefaction (“phlogistic matter,” in the terminology of his time). They absorb it and incorporate it into their own substance.²⁹ This discovery led him to formulate the principle of complementarity between the plant world and the animal world: “plants, instead of affecting air in the same manner with animal respiration, reverse the effects of breathing, and tend to keep the atmosphere sweet and wholesome, when it is become noxious, in consequence of animals living and breathing, or dying and putrefying in it.”³⁰ The being in the world of plants resides in their capacity to (re-)create atmosphere. From a certain point of view, the living being itself—regardless of the order and realm to which it belongs—is considered in terms of the type of atmosphere it produces, as though being in the world meant above all “to make atmosphere,” and not the other way round.

Some years later, a Dutch doctor, Jan Ingenhousz, extending Priestley’s intuition, discovered that the capacity of plants to “correct bad air and to improve good air”³¹ was due exclusively to leaves.

It will, perhaps, appear probable, that one of the great laboratories of nature for cleansing and purifying the air of our atmosphere is placed in the substance of the leaves, and put in action by the influence of the light; and that the air thus purified, but in this state grown useless or noxious to the plant, is thrown out for the greatest part by the excretory ducts, placed chiefly, at least in the most part of plants, on the underside of the leaf.³²

Ingenhousz indeed discovered photosynthesis (and not only its effects) when he grasped that this work of purification and of air conditioning was intimately tied

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to the presence of solar light: "the leaves of plants yield dephlogistificated air only in the clear day-light, or in the sunshine, and begin their operation only after they have been in a certain manner prepared, by the influence of the same light, for beginning it."³³ Dipping plants in a pot full of water, Ingenhousz found that the air, having been

prepared in the leaves by the influence of the light of the sun, appears soon upon the surface of the leaves in different forms, most generally in the form of round bubbles, which, increasing gradually in size, and detaching themselves from the leaves, rise up and settle at the inverted bottom of the jar: they are succeeded by new bubbles, till the leaves, not being in the way of supplying themselves with new atmospheric air, become exhausted.³⁴

The fact of being underwater is not against nature, he argues:

It might, perhaps, be objected that the leaves of the plants are never in a natural state when surrounded by pump water; and that thus there may, perhaps, remain some degree of doubt, whether the same operation of the leaves in their natural situation takes place. I cannot consider the plants kept thus under water to be in a situation so contrary to their nature as to derange their usual operation. Water, even more than they want, is not hurtful to plants, if it is not applied too considerable a time. The water only cuts off the communication with the external air.³⁵

The experiences and discoveries of Priestley and Ingenhousz (followed by those of Jean Senebier,³⁶ Nicolas Théodore de Saussure,³⁷ Julius Robert von Mayer,³⁸ and Robin Hill,³⁹ to cite only some of the great scientists

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at the origin of the discovery of the true nature of the photosynthetic process) were important not only because they allowed us to make an enormous step forward in our understanding of plant physiology, but because they represented a radical shift in the way we look at the atmosphere. The air we breathe is not a purely geological or mineral reality—it is not just out there, it is not, as such, an effect of the earth—but rather the breath of other living beings. It is a byproduct of “the lives of others.” In breath—the first and the most trivial and unconscious act of life for a huge number of organisms—we depend on the lives of others. But, above all, the life of others and its manifestations are reality itself, the body and the matter of what we call the world or the medium. Breath is already a first form of cannibalism: every day we feed off the gaseous excretions of plants. We could not live but off the life of others. Conversely, every living being is first of all what makes possible the life of others, a product of transitive life, which is capable of circulating everywhere, of being breathed in by others. The living being is not satisfied with giving life to a restricted portion of matter that we call its body; it also gives life especially to the space that surrounds it. That is where immersion lies—the fact that life is always its own environment and that, because of this, it circulates from body to body, from subject to subject, from place to place.

After all, photosynthesis demonstrates that, if one observes it on a global scale, the fundamental relation between life and the world is much more complex than what we imagine through the concept of adaptation.

Adaptation is a dubious notion, for in the real world the environment, to which the organisms are adapting, is

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determined by their neighbors' activities rather than by the blind forces of chemistry and physics alone. [. . .] the air we breathe, the oceans and the rocks are all either the direct products of living organisms or have been greatly modified by their presence.⁴⁰

Instead of revealing itself as a space of competition or mutual exclusion, the world opens in them as the metaphysical space of the most radical form of mixture, the form that makes possible the coexistence of the incompatible, an alchemical laboratory in which everything seems to be able to change its nature, to pass from the organic into the inorganic. Immersion makes both symbiosis and symbiogenesis possible: if organisms come to define their identity thanks to the life of other living beings, this is because each living being lives already, at once, in the life of others.⁴¹

Plants are the primordial soup of the Earth that allows matter to become life and life to retransform itself into "brute matter." We call "atmosphere" this radical mixture that makes everything coexist in a single place without sacrificing either forms or substances.

More than a part of the world, the atmosphere is a metaphysical space in which everything depends on everything else, the quintessence of the world understood as a space in which each person's life is mixed with the life of others. The space in which we live is not simply a container to which we have to adapt. Its form and its existence are inseparable from the forms of life it hosts and makes possible. The air we breathe, the nature of the soil, the lines of the terrestrial surface, the shapes that form themselves in the sky,⁴² the color of everything that surrounds us: these are all immediate effects

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of life, in the same sense and with the same intensity as they are its principles. The world is not an autonomous entity independent of life, it is the fluid nature of any medium: climate, atmosphere.

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It surrounds us and penetrates us but we are barely aware of it. It is not a space: it is a subtle, transparent body, barely perceivable by touch or by sight. But it is from this fluid, which envelops everything, which penetrates and is penetrated by everything, that we have the colors, forms, smells, and tastes of the world. In this same fluid we can encounter things and let ourselves be touched by everything that exists and does not exist. It is this fluid that makes us think; it is this fluid that makes us live and love. The atmosphere is our first world, the medium in which we are wholly immersed: the sphere of breath. It is the absolute medium, that in which and through which the world gives itself, that in which and through which we give ourselves to the world. More than absolute container, it is the stirring of everything, the matter, space, and force of the infinite and universal interpenetration of things. The atmosphere is not just a part of the world that is distinct and separate from others, but the principle through which the world makes itself inhabitable, opening itself to our breath and itself becoming the breath of things. One is always, in the manner of the atmosphere itself, *in* the world, because the world exists as atmosphere.

The term "atmosphere" is modern. It is a neologism coined in the seventeenth century to give a classical allure to the Dutch expression *dampcloot*, itself a translation of Latin *vaporum sphaera*, a term by which

Galileo was referring to *regio vaporosa*, a “vaporous realm.”⁴³ But before being the aerial region immediately above the terrestrial crust, hot through the reflection of solar light and humid owing to the vapors exhaled by the earth, atmosphere has also been, for centuries, a space of circulation for elements and forms, the metaphysical space of their conjunction, the unity of all things, measured by the coincidence of breath and not by that of substance or form.

The Stoics were the first to have thought of the unity of the world in terms related to the atmosphere. In pondering over the various forms that unity can take and over the form of unity specific to the world in its totality, Stoicism developed its concept of total mixture. One can, in effect, imagine three forms of union produced by the interaction of different substances or objects: simple juxtaposition (*parathesis*), in which different things form a single mass while preserving the limits of their body and without sharing anything, as in the case of a heap of grains; fusion (*sunchusis*), in which the quality of each component is destroyed to produce a new object, which has a different nature and quality from that of the originary elements, as in the case of perfumes; and, lastly, total mixture (*krasis*, or *di'holôn antiparektasis*), in which bodies occupy each other's place, while preserving their quality and individuality.⁴⁴ Now, what one calls “world” cannot be thought of as a simple pile of objects with no relation other than superficial contact, or as a complete fusion of bodies that gives rise to a “super-object”⁴⁵ distinct in essence and quality from its originary components. Alexander of Aphrodisias wrote, summarizing the doctrine of Chrysippus:

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Certain mixtures occur by juxtaposition through two or more substances being composed into the same mass and juxtaposed with one another “by juncture” as he [*sc.* Chrysippus] says, and with each of them preserving the surface of their own substance and quality in such a juxtaposition, as, one will grant, happens with beans and wheat-grains in their juxtaposition [. . .] other mixtures occur by total fusion with both the substances and their qualities being destroyed together as he says happens with medical drugs in the joint-destruction of the constituents and the production of other body from them;

and there is another type, wrote Alexander, that

occurs through certain substances and their qualities being mutually coextended in their entirety and preserving their original substance and qualities in a mixture: this mixture is blending in the strict sense of the term.⁴⁶

To think of the atmosphere as a space of mixture means to overcome the idea of composition and fusion. Between the elements of the same world there is a complicity and an intimacy that go much deeper than those produced by physical contiguity; what is more, this attachment is not identical with an amalgam or with the reduction of the variety of substances, colors, forms, or species to a monolithic unity. If things form a world, it is because they mix without losing their identity.

The unity of mixture, in turn, is not mechanical: “substance is unified because it is entirely pervaded by a *pneuma* through which the whole is held together, is stable and is sympathetic with itself.”⁴⁷ To mix without fusion means to share the same breath. One has to give attention to the unity of a living body: organs are not

simply juxtaposed, nor are they materially liquefied into one another. If they constitute a *body*, it is because they share the same *breath*. The same goes for the cosmos: to be in the world means always to share not only an identity, but the same *breath* (that is, the same *pneuma*). “There is a breath that moves itself toward itself and of itself”:⁴⁸ such is the dynamic of the world, its immanent rhythm. Breath is the art of mixture, what allows each object to mix with the rest of the objects, to immerse itself in them. *Atmosphere*, the sphere of breath, its extreme horizon, is the form of intimacy and unity that defines itself not through homogeneity of substance or form but through the sharing of the same breath, of a family *resemblance* among a collection of elements that is not a simple combination of disparate objects. The atmosphere—the climate—is this unity that has no need to be reduced to a unity of qualities and forms.

What radiates unity also radiates form, visibility, consistency. This same family resemblance is what allows us to recognize the real identity of a collection, and the atmosphere is what makes a place visible to us in its totality, beyond the objects that occupy it. Breath is not only air in motion: it is lightning, unveiling, means of revelation. If the world is unified by a common and universal breath, it is because breath is the originary essence of what the Greeks called *logos*, language, reason. Hence *logos* is what produces the universal mixture, it is what allows everything to mix in the extension of every other living thing without losing its own identity. If breath gives unity to the world, it is because it also constitutes the last root of its visibility and its rationality: breath is the true *logos* of the world, its language, its word, the organ of its revelation.

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The world is the matter, the form, the space, and the reality of breath. Plants are the *breath of all living beings, the world as breath*. In turn, any breath is evidence of the fact that being in the world is, fundamentally, an experience of immersion. To breathe means to be plunged into a medium that penetrates us in the same way and with the same intensity as we penetrate it. Any being is a being of the world [*mondain*] if it immersed in what immerses itself in it. The plant, then, is the paradigm of immersion.

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It is at the heart of all our experiences. It is not a substance: it does not enclose in itself the nature of things. Nor is it a late echo, added once the experience is accomplished. It is a rhythmic movement, regular and tireless, a wave without noise that goes to the limits of the horizon and comes back to us, to brush against our bodies and to explode into our lungs.

Without it, nothing would be possible in our life. Everything that happens to us has to mix with it, to take place within its space. Breath is the first activity of all living beings, the only one that can claim to meld itself with being. It is the only work that does not tire us, the only movement that has no end other than itself. Our life begins with a (first) breath and will end with a (last) breath. To live is to breathe and embrace in one's breath all the matter of the world.

It is not only the most elementary movement of any human body, it is also the first and the simplest of the acts of living beings—its paradigm, its transcendental form. Breath is, quite simply, the first name of being in

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the world. Intellection is breath: the idea, the concept, and what we, ever since scholasticism, call an intentional species are all portions of the world in the spirit, before the word, design, or action may restore to the cosmos these intensities. Sight is breath: it is to welcome light, the colors of the world, it is to have the force of letting oneself be pierced by its beauty, of choosing a portion and a portion only, of creating a form, of initiating a life starting from what we have extracted from the continuum of the world.

Everything in the realm of the living is the articulation of breath: from perception to digestion, from thought to pleasure, from speech to locomotion. Everything is a repetition, intensification, and variation of what takes place in breath. This is why the most different kinds of knowledge—from medicine to theology, from cosmology to philosophy—have used it as the noun that characterizes life in its most different forms, in the most diverse languages (*spiritus*, *pneuma*, *Geist*). To recognize its status, people have made of it a substance separate from others through form, matter, and being—mind [*esprit*]. But the first, most paradoxical attribute of breath is its very lack of substance, its insubstantiality: it is not an object detached from others, but the vibration through which everything opens up to life and mixes with the rest of the objects, the oscillation that, for an instant, animates the matter of the world.

It is a vibration that touches, simultaneously, the living being and the world that surrounds it. In breath, for the duration of an instant, the animal and the cosmos are reunited; and they seal a different unity from the one marked by being or form. It is, however, with and in the same motion that living being and world consecrate

their separation. What we call life is only this gesture, through which a portion of matter distinguishes itself from the world with the same force that it uses to merge with it. To blow is to make the world, to fuse with it and to redesign our form, in a perpetual exercise. To breathe is to know the world, to penetrate and be penetrated by it and its mind [*esprit*]*—to traverse it and to become for an instant, with this same impetus, the place in which the world becomes an individual experience. This operation is never final: the world, like the living being, is only the return of breath and of its possibility. Mind [Esprit].*

Breath does not limit itself to the activity of the living: it defines the consistency of the world, too, and especially that. The space it traces coincides with the world milestones that one experiences. We reach out as far as our breath does. On the other hand, a world without breath would be nothing but a confused mass of objects in the process of decomposition. If it is thanks to breath that we are in the world, it is in and through breath that we have understood and fashioned the world. It is of breath that we have to enquire about the nature of the world: it is in breath that the world reveals itself, it is in breath that the world exists for us.

The innumerable beings that populate the cosmos, the most different and incomparable things, the most faraway moments and spaces, the most incompatible realities draw their unity from the infinite forms of breath. They melt into a world. As a superior unity of everything that is different—a supreme and unsurpassable unity of what is and what is not—it does not exist other than in and through breath.

The metaphysical space of breath is, above all, contradiction: breathing precedes every distinction between

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soul [*âme*] and body, between mind [*esprit*] and object, between ideality and reality. It is not enough to proclaim the facticity of sense and its primacy over existence. Sense and existence always live as breath and in breath: they are its specific vibrations. The world is breath and all that exists in it exists in this form. The existence of the world is not a fact of the logical order: it is a pneumatological matter. Only breath can touch and feel the world, giving it existence. One can only breathe the world.

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The ancients are not the only ones to have made breath into [*sc.* a principle of] the transcendental unity of the world and into the proof that, in this capacity, it is a living reality. In an unpublished fragment, Newton wrote: "Thus this Earth resembles a great animall or rather an inanimate vegetable, draws in aethereall breath for its dayly refreshment & vitall ferment & transpires again with gross exhalation."¹

But one has to wait for the more recent debate around the Gaia hypothesis to recognize that atmosphere constitutes the living unity of the world, the proof that the planet is determined by life. One of its first formulations, in an article that Lovelock and Margulis published in 1974 in the journal *Icarus*, asserts that the existence itself of atmosphere is proof of a "homeostasis on a planetary scale"² and of the fact that "life has modulated the flow of energy and mass at the planetary surface."³ Atmosphere is the vital breath that animates the Earth in its totality.

The idea is quite old. Lamarck was, without a doubt, the first to define atmospheric and climatic space as

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the site of a dynamic interconnection between matter and life, between world and subjectivity. The treatise he dedicated to the science of this liminal space—a science he called *hydrogeology*—opens with this question: “What are the general effects of living organisms on the mineral substances which form the earth’s crust and external surface?”⁴ The possibility of conceiving of the most superficial layer of matter in the terrestrial crust and of the ensemble of gaseous and liquid materials that hang over the planet as an immense fluid for the circulation of being arises from the discovery that “the various *compound mineral substances* occurring in the earth’s external crust in isolated accumulations, veins, and parallel beds, and so on, as plains, hills, valleys, and mountains are exclusively the product of the animals and plants that lived in these areas.”⁵ According to Lamarck, this unity is engendered by the state of aggregation; and the forms of any matter at surface level have the organic faculties of living beings as direct and indirect causes of the existence of that matter. As he had already written in his *Mémoires*,

all the compounds one observes on the globe are due, be it directly or indirectly, to the organic faculties of living beings endowed with life. In effect, these beings form all materials, having the faculty of composing their own substance, and, to compose it, a part between them (plants) having the faculty of forming first combinations that they assimilate to their substance.⁶

This is not simply a matter of influence on the chemical composition. The presence of living beings does not limit itself to determining the aggregation of matter; it also defines its status. The world exists only in those

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places where there are living beings—while the presence of life, for its part, transforms the very nature of space.

What we see here is a movement that operates contrary to the one described by Lamarck in his *Philosophie zoologique*: it is no longer the living being's responsibility to adapt to environmental circumstances—the *circumfusa* of neo-Hippocratic medicine;⁷ rather the environment in its entirety has to become echo, halo, aureole for the mass of living beings—in other words, their atmosphere.

The opposite is also true. If we are atmospherically connected to what surrounds us, this is also because the atmosphere is what constantly engenders the living. This is the conclusion reached by one of the first analyses of the chemical relations between living beings and the environment: the *Essai de statique chimique* by Dumas and Boussingault, published in 1844. The authors start from the assertion that plants function “in every particular, inversely or in opposition to animals”: “If the animal kingdom constitutes an immense apparatus of combustion, the vegetable kingdom, in its turn, constitutes an immense apparatus of reduction.” Their perfect integration is not just the simple supernumerary effect of a preestablished harmony, nor is it just the result of divine government expressing itself in the natural economy, but the consequence of the fact that the life of plants and animals depends entirely on the atmosphere:

What the one gives to the atmosphere, that the other takes from it; so that, surveying these facts from the loftiest point of view, and in connection with the physics of the globe, it would be imperative on us to say that, in so far as their truly organic elements are concerned, plants and animals

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are the offspring of the air, that they are but condensed or consolidated air [...] Vegetables and animals, therefore, come from the atmosphere, and return to it again; they are true dependents of the air. Vegetables, then, assume from the atmosphere the elements which animals exhale into it.⁸

We do not inhabit the Earth, we inhabit the air through the atmosphere. We are immersed in it exactly as the fish is immersed in the sea. And what we call breathing is nothing but the agriculture of atmosphere.

To try and join the two movements—the one that goes from living beings to the environment and the one that goes from the environment to living beings—means to think of the atmosphere as a system or a space for the circulation of life, matter, and energy. This is the radical approach of the Russian naturalist Vladimir Vernadsky. He recognized that “atmosphere is not an independent region of life”⁹ but is also an expression of life. In effect, green plants have created a new, transparent medium for life—atmosphere:¹⁰ “Life creates both the free oxygen in the Earth’s crust, and also the ozone that protects the biosphere from the harmful short-wavelength radiation of celestial bodies.”¹¹ At the other end, life constitutes itself starting from atmosphere: “Living matter builds bodies of organisms out of atmospheric gases such as oxygen, carbon dioxide, and water, together with compounds of nitrogen and sulfur, converting these gases into liquid and solid combustibles that collect the cosmic energy of the sun.”¹² Vernadsky calls the biosphere “the exterior crust of the Earth,” considering it not only as a material region but especially as “a place of transformation of the planet by external cosmic forces. These forces mold and transform

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the faces of the earth and, as a result, the history of the biosphere is sharply distinguished from that of the rest of the planet.”¹³

The principal source of this region is what Vernadsky calls living matter: the collection of organisms and living bodies that are responsible for the creation of new compounds¹⁴ and that “exert a powerful permanent and continuous disturbing effect on the chemical stability of the surface of our planet.” It is living matter that

creates the colors and forms of nature, the associations of animals and plants, and the creative labor of civilized humanity, and also becomes a part of the diverse chemical processes of the Earth’s crust. There is no substantial chemical equilibrium on the crust in which the influence of life is not evident and in which chemistry does not display life’s work. *Life is therefore not an external or accidental phenomenon of the Earth’s crust.* It is closely bound to the structure of the crust, forms part of its mechanism, and fulfills functions of prime importance to the existence of this mechanism. Without life, the crustal mechanism of the Earth would not exist.¹⁵

In this living mass, plants play a major role: “All living matter can be regarded as a single entity in the mechanism of the biosphere, but only one part of life, *green vegetation*, the carrier of chlorophyll, makes direct use of solar radiation. [...] The whole living world is connected to this green part of life by a direct and unbreakable link.”

*

The atmosphere is not something that is added to the world: it is the world as reality of mixture within which

everything breathes. If the natural sciences have trouble conceiving of immersion and mixture as the authentic nature of the cosmos, the human sciences stubbornly keep trying to understand this nature, for instance the climate, on the one hand as a *purely natural fact, and thus excluded from their domain*, and on the other hand as a purely human reality or as an exclusively aesthetic fact, which thus no longer relates to anything that comes from the nonhuman world. Thus, starting from the famous Hippocratic treatise *De aere, aquis et locis*,¹⁶ a vast tradition began to develop that runs from Aristotle to Montesquieu¹⁷ and from Vetrivius to Herder¹⁸ and was to nourish the political geography of Ratzel as much as the metaphysical geography of Watsuji Tetsurô.¹⁹ Throughout the extraordinary diversity of approaches, doctrines, and historical contexts, this tradition concentrates on two ideas. First of all, it is important to recognize, as Abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos would write, that “the human machine is not much less dependent on the qualities of the air, on the changes to which these qualities are liable, and, in short, on all the variations which may obstruct or favor what we call the operations of nature, than the very fruits themselves.”²⁰ Climate is here synonymous with the nonhuman. The human sphere—culture, history, the life of the mind—is not autonomous, it has a foundation in what is not human; the apparently nonspiritual elements—air, water, light, winds—do not engender mind but can influence the human being, his or her behaviors, attitudes, and ideas. Climates engender and set up the majority of humans in their physical aspect and, even more, in their social mores. As Edme Guyot wrote, “the nature of the earth, the quality of its fruits,

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and the difference between climates have contributed to the variety of colors and to the diversity of figures and temperaments among all humans.”²¹ The nonhuman is the cause of the multiplicity of life forms—not only in space but also in time and history.

In radicalizing the Herderian approach, which makes of history, as Kant would say, a kind of “climatology of intellectual and sensory powers of man,”²² Simmel’s sociology made of the concept of atmosphere an absolute medium of social perception: “the atmosphere of someone is the most intimate perception of him.”²³ The idea of atmosphere as the originary dynamism of all sociability would have great success. For example, Peter Sloterdijk conceived of atmosphere at once as an original product of human coexistence and as the paradigm of all cultural life qua cultural life. “The symbolic air-conditioning of the shared space is the primal product of every society. Indeed humans create their own climate; not according to free choice, however, but under pre-existing, given and handed-down conditions.”²⁴ This shared environment is what Sloterdijk calls “sphere,” the geometrical figure of absolute interiority.

Spheres are by definition also morpho-immunological constructs. Only in immune structures that form interiors can humans continue their generational processes and advance their individuations. Humans have never lived in a direct relationship with “nature,” and their cultures have certainly never set foot in the realm of what we call the bare facts; their existence has always been exclusively in the breathed, divided, torn-open and restored space.²⁵

Humans thus “flourish only in the greenhouse of their autogenous atmosphere.” To live in society means to

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participate in the construction of these atmospheres; at the other end, the atmosphere is always a cultural fact. What is more, it embodies the impossibility of a state of nature: for Sloterdijk, climatization means the impossibility of getting access to the natural world. But plants demonstrate, on the contrary, that climatization—air-designing—is the living being's simplest act of existence, its most elementary nature.

Cultural reductionism is proper to a long tradition that makes of atmosphere "the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics." The atmosphere would be "the shared reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver insofar as he or she, in sensing the atmosphere, is bodily present in a particular way."²⁶ This interpretation, which goes back to Léon Daudet, makes of atmosphere "knowledge of the skin, which is as tangential as knowledge of the mind [*esprit*] is and uses epithelial cells in the same way in which knowledge of the mind uses the roots of words."²⁷ This faculty of synthetic knowledge

envelops space and time; it emanates at once from the universe and from us; and it is in us—consciousnesses, persons, populations—as an inclusion of the universal, as that something that connects after having specified, which is neither quantitative nor qualitative but participates in both at the same time and has, in life, a life of its own, dissimulated yet capable of being exposed, analogous to that of radium or the waves at the cryptoid heart of inanimate nature.²⁸

This emanation, "at once moral and organic—under its moral aspect tied to the whole of being; under its organic

aspect tied to epithelial and endothelial tissues”²⁹—is based on a cosmic accord. “The entire cutaneous surface makes us participants in a universal equilibrium, us, the adapted of outer and inner (*adaequatio rei et sensus* [‘the conformity between thing and sense’]).”³⁰

This psychological and gnoseological reduction of atmosphere seems to forget that atmosphere is fundamentally an *ontological* fact that concerns the status and mode of being of things, and not the manner in which they are perceived. If every act of knowledge is, by itself, a fact of atmosphere because it is an act of mixing between subject and object, the extension of the atmosphere’s domain goes well beyond any act of knowledge.

9 Everything Is in Everything

If living is breathing, it is because our relation to the world is not one of being thrown or being in the world, and not even one of mastery—that of a subject over an object that lies before it: no, being in the world means experiencing transcendental immersion. Immersion—and breath is only its originary dynamic—defines itself as inherence or reciprocal imbrication. We are in something with the same intensity and same force as that something is in us. It is the reciprocity of inherence that makes breath an inescapable condition: it is impossible to liberate oneself from the environment in which one is immersed, and it is impossible to purify this environment of our presence.

To inhale is to allow the world to come into us—the world is in us—and to exhale is to project ourselves into the world that we are. To be in the world is not simply to find oneself *in* a final horizon containing everything that we are and will be able to perceive, live, or dream. From the moment we start to live, think, perceive, dream, breathe, the world in its infinite details is in us,

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materially and spiritually penetrating our body and our soul [*âme*], giving form, consistency, and reality to everything that we are. The world is not a place; it is a state of immersion of each thing in all other things, the mixture that instantaneously reverses the relation of topological inherence.

Anaxagoras was the first to give a rigorous definition of mixture as the form that characterizes the world: everything is in everything (*pan en panti*). Immersion is not the temporary condition of a body in another body. Nor is it a relation between two bodies. In order for immersion to be possible, *everything needs to be in everything*. On the one hand, as we have seen, to be immersed in something is to experience being in something that is, in turn, in us. On the other hand, according to Anaxagoras, this absolute, reciprocal mixture that seems to make everything the site of everything else is not a condition limited in space and time, but the form of the world and of all being in the world. For there to be a world, the particular and the universal, the singular and the whole have to interpenetrate, mutually and completely: the world is the space of a universal mixture in which each thing contains and is contained by *all* other things. On the other hand, interiority (being in something, *in esse*) is the relation that ties each thing to *all* other things, the relation that defines the being of *worldly* things.¹

To say that everything is in everything, and thus that immersion is the eternal form and the condition of possibility of the world, means first of all to assert that every physical event is produced as immersion and from the starting point of immersion. In this way, the light that allows me to see the page I write is the sea in which I

bathe. It is, in turn, in the switch, in the cable that ties it to the fixture, and—embryonically—in my hand, which activates it. And the hand that flicks the switch is contained in the light that now illuminates it. Everything is in everything. This mixture makes the world and space into the reality of a universal transmissibility and translatability of forms. But what we call transmission is only the echo of this reciprocal inherence of all things in all other things: the world is a perpetual contagion.

If everything is in everything, it is because, in the world, everything must be able to circulate, transmit itself, translate itself. The impenetrability we have often imagined as the paradigmatic form of space is an illusion: wherever there is an obstacle to transmission and interpenetration, a new plane is produced that allows bodies to reverse the inherence from one to the other, in a reciprocal interpenetration. Everything in the world both produces mixture and is produced by mixture. Everything enters and exits from everywhere: the world is an opening, an absolute freedom of circulation—not side by side with, but *through* bodies and others. To live, to experience, or to be in the world also means to let oneself be traversed by all things. To get out of oneself always means to enter into something else, into its forms and its aura; to return to oneself always means to prepare oneself to encounter all sorts of forms, objects, images—the very ones that Augustine was surprised to find in his memory, generator of mixture and splendid evidence of this total compenetration.²

Science and philosophy have made every effort to classify and define the essence of things and of the living, their forms and their activity; but they remain blind when it comes to their *worldliness*, that is, to their

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nature, which consists in their capacity to enter into any other thing and be traversed by it.

The same goes for matter: it is not what separates and distinguishes things, but rather what makes possible their encounter and mixture. It is not simply reducible to the space of a form's inherence in the world. It is rather the case that, through it, everything is in everything, nothing can separate itself from the fate of the rest, and everything lets itself be traversed by the world and therefore can traverse it.

To make of the world the reality of this perpetual reversal of the inherence of everything in everything means to make space not only the name of a generalized exteriority, but that of a universal interiority: to have within itself everything that contains us. Extension—corporeality—is not the space in which being is external to all other things (*partes extra partes*), with an intensity that coincides with its *conatus sese conservandi* [impulse toward self-preservation]; space is, on the contrary, an experience in which everything exposes itself to being traversed by all other things and strives to traverse the world in all its forms, consistencies, colors, and smells. Hence space and extension are forces that allow all things to breathe, to expand, and to intermingle within breath: to breathe is to let oneself be penetrated by the world in order to make, from the world, something that is *also* made from our breath. Everything breathes and everything is breath because all things interpenetrate.

Therefore a new geometry must be thought out; for the cosmos does not draw either a sphere or a plan. Cosmos as nature is not a horizon that contains in itself all other beings (the sphere), nor is it the totality of things (*ta panta*) or a totality that transcends its elements (the

One, or God). But denying its transcendence in order to make it into an originary power, a *foundation*, or a *root* (ground, *Grund*), as imagined by a tradition that culminated in German idealism, is not enough—just as it is not enough to think of this foundation as *collapsed* [effondré] (an *Ungrund* [“unground”]).³ To affirm that *everything is in everything* (*pan en panti*) does not mean simply to imagine the existence of everything in a single substrate. The cosmos—that is, *nature*—is not the foundation of things, it is their mixture, their breathing, the movement that animates their interpenetration. Put otherwise, the concept of immanence is not enough for us either to think of the existence of the world or to radicalize this existence by making God coincide with world—as pantheism did—by imagining the inherence of all things in God (and by thinking of their coincidence only through God). True immanence is what makes anything exist inside anything else: that everything is in everything means that everything is immanent in everything. Immanence is no longer the relation between one thing and the world, it is the relation that ties things to one another. It is this relation itself that constitutes the world.

In this manner, the totality defines a relationship of radical and absolute interiority, which nullifies any distinction between container and contained. Because, if everything is everything, not only does each thing contain all other things, but a thing has to find itself within no matter what other thing—what is more, in the things it contains. The fact of *being contained in something* coexists with the fact of containing this same thing. The container is also the content of what it contains. This identity is not logical, it is topological and dynamic.

Everything Is in Everything

Every object is a site for every other object and, conversely, to be a place is to find one's world in every other thing. In a certain sense, any thing is a world—where the world is no longer the ultimate, unreachable horizon given only at the end of time and at the farthest extension of space, but the intensional identity with any of its objects. Being in the world no longer means finding oneself in an infinite space that contains everything else; it means being no longer able to experience being in a place without finding this place in yourself, and thus becoming the place of your place. The world is the force that reverses any inherence into its opposite, transforms any ingredient into a place, and any place into an element of the same compound.

Thus the cosmology of mixture is founded on a different ontology from the one traditionally taught. For all action is interaction, or rather interpenetration and reciprocal influence. Physics—the science of nature—should then be completely rewritten. If the world is in all its beings, this means that every being is capable of radically transforming the world. Universal mixture embodies the fact that the world is constantly exposed to the transformation brought about by its components. One need not wait for the Anthropocene to encounter this paradox: it was the plants that, millions of years ago, transformed the world by producing the conditions of possibility of animal life. The “phytocene”⁴ is the clearest proof that the world is mixture and that every being of the world [*mondain*] is in the world with the same intensity with which the world is in it. In this universal mixture, the effect is always capable of modifying its cause, which always resides in the effect. In this sense, immersion is the destruction of the one-way process that

puts totality before the individual, the “before” before the “after.” Causality in mixture is always bidirectional: mixture is always a hysteron proteron. Retroaction, which we have considered a property of life, is only the rhythm specific to breathing, the breath of mixture. It is for this reason, too, that the notions of environment and ambient world should be rejected: the living being is an environment for the world in the same way in which the remaining things of the world are the environment of the living individual. Influence always goes in both directions. Retroaction is an effect of immersion, and immersion is a cosmic fact: it constitutes the form and the condition of possibility of the cosmos, not the effect of some *human* actions. The notion of Anthropocene transforms what defines the very existence of the world into a single action, historical and negative: it makes nature a cultural exception⁵ and makes the human being an extranatural cause. Above all, it neglects the fact that the world is always the reality of the living beings’ breath.

From this angle, cosmology is a pneumatology—or, better, it is its higher form. To know the world is to breathe it, because each breath is a production of the world: what appears to be separate comes together in a dynamic unity. To breathe is to taste the world. And, for each living being and each object, the world is that which is given through and thanks to breath. The world has the taste of breath. If every mind [*esprit*] makes the world, this is because each act of breath is not just the simple survival of the animal in us, but the form and consistency of the world of which we are the pulse.

There is nothing metaphorical or arbitrary about this coincidence between pneumatology and cosmology. To

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interrogate the world—its form, its limits, and its consistency with the breath that allows us to know it and to adhere to it—permits us to find evidence that classical cosmology will never be able to obtain. In the immanence of breath, the world appears to be something closer and extremely different from what we imagined. It is the unseen face that plants allow us to contemplate.

SILENT SPEECH

1

In thinking about what to say, I hear the silence within.

It starts as an unidentifiable collection, a hesitant murmuring -- I see it almost as a darkness that begins to move, an uncertain matter in pursuit of form.

Something starts to develop, to gain definition, dim at first and then slowly, mysteriously brightening, and suddenly, words appear. They break out of this darkness to bubble up, and reverberate as an inner voice.

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A shark's tooth is a remarkable amulet

It's sharp tip cut straight through the gaze of the evil eye

A shark's tooth is not a word when it rests on the mouth of the shark

Things change when it hangs on a silver necklace

A word seems to be something that has no function beyond signification

But this is not always the case

Opening one's mouth, shouting, reciting, occupying the position of the speaker

This is the wildest form of the word,

Even when nothing is said