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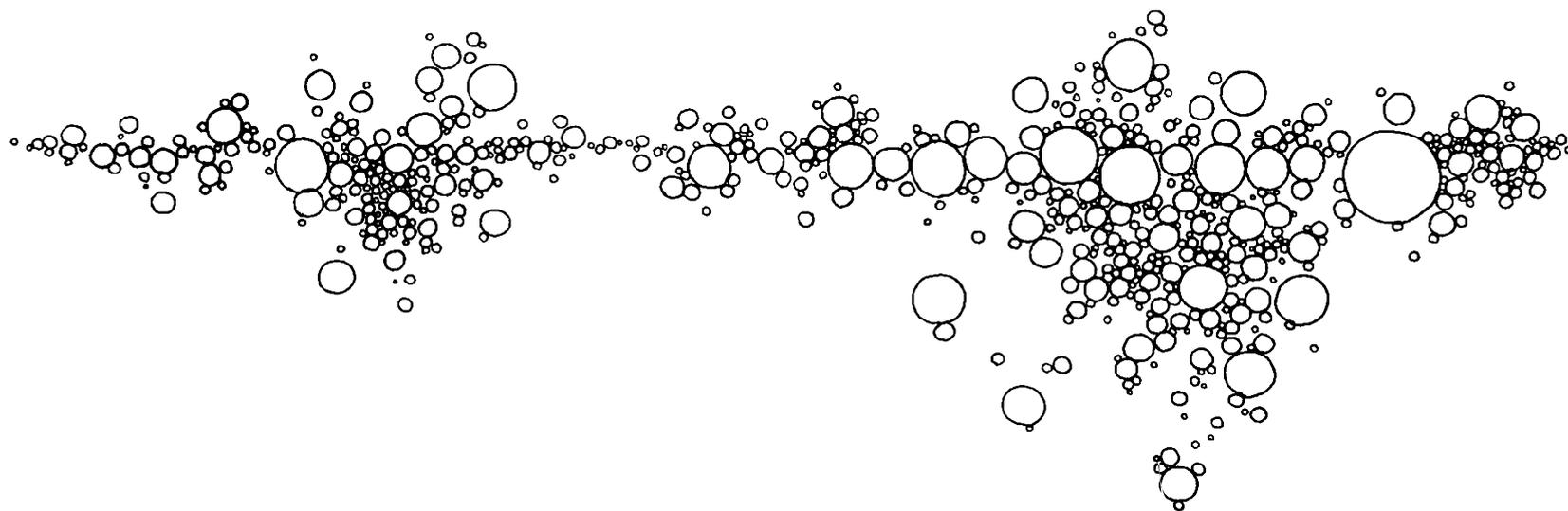


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VESSEL AND SOLSVART

BERIT ELLINGSEN

The new heat reaches us from the seeping marsh, the lichen-veiled trees, and our soft bedding of damp sphagnum moss. The water, which used to be as cool as a mallard's feet, is now as warm as bat blood, the trunks that were hunched and slowly choked by vines have stretched like flowers in the sun, and the glistening purple earthworms that used to peek up through the moss are no longer here.

Vessel sits up. His eyes are milky, with a stripe of black cutting across the eyeball, deltas of red at the edges. His lips are gone, exposing his teeth, they are still quite white. Tiny beads cover his brow and the bridge of what's left of his nose, like the droplets that seep out when you cut a fruit in half. He wipes the moisture away with a worm-eaten hand, then smiles at me, the missing lips making him look genuinely happy.

"It's turning warmer," Vessel says, his voice like dry leaves. "Like last time?"

"The sun is coming back," I say. "We must prevent it."

"It's been cloudy for as long as I can recall," he says and strokes my back with one fleshless digit.

"You don't remember how it used to be."

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He drags himself to the edge of our mound, a crocodile nest hidden in the swamp grass, then leans forward and splashes brown water across his face and neck. He pulls his t-shirt off, it's just a few strings of once-white cotton looping around his chest and shoulders, but he keeps it nevertheless. He dips the remnants of the garment in the water, kneads a few times, then folds it up and wrings it, slaps the moist fabric out and pulls it back on, now patterned with rotten grass and other detritus. His black pants had two pockets down either leg, but now only the upper left pouch is still there.

I used to mock him, but then he found a soft crocodile nest in the middle of the marsh and rolled and rolled and rolled with the poor crocodile mother and her three toothy children until the water frothed red and sloshed far up on the muddy bank, and the reptiles left while they hissed loudly at us, and I took care of the eggs.

"I'll call you Solsvart," he said. "That means Blackbird."

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He sits down, stretches his legs out in front of him and ties two moss-furred branches, one along the outside of his right thigh and the other along the inner thigh, with thick-barked ivy vines in looping, tight knots. When he is finished, he pushes himself up and hobbles, leg out, down to the rowboat on the bank.

The old craft is even more diminished than last time we were awake. Beetles and maggots have eaten away at the rim, the wood is as smooth and gray as the tree trunks that float ashore at the coast. The previously broad blade of the single oar that is left is now barely wider than the shaft. But the bottom of the boat is still intact, covered by orange and brown and yellow leaves.

I hop up on the bow and he leans onto the stern and pushes the rowboat out into the languid current. Long green water lily stems waft like tendrils in the wake of the ancient wood and the warm fragrance of decay rises from the

water. The boat scrapes along the mud, then floats. Vessel throws himself on the transom, pulls himself forward and slides down on the leaves. They crinkle in protest and two gray centipedes scuttle up from the dryness and over the rim.

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We move slowly through the night, the cloud cover like a lid, as it has been for almost as long as I can remember. Across the still surface a loon calls for her lover. Frogs and cicadas fill the air with noise. Bats, their silhouettes darker than the gloom, cut the fetid air with their wings. A moth the size of Vessel's head flutters out of the blackness, a pale blotch shaped like a human skull flashing on its back. Vessel shouts and ducks and ruffles the hair he has left.

"I hate moths," he mutters. Then he lies down again on the dry leaves and I alight on his chest.

The current takes us to a narrow but deep stream that curls through the forest. Beneath us luminescent fish glitter like gold coins. Sparse foliage covered with dust scrape the bow and sides. I glance up now and then, but Vessel remains still. The water clucks and chortles against the worm-pitted wood.

The little stream grows larger and larger and brighter and brighter in color, until it is almost beige and so wide the wall of vegetation on both sides of it sinks into the morning mist. The boat tilts with the pull of the current and increases in speed. Vessel springs up, glances around, then pulls the oar out from the bottom of the rowboat and plunges it into the churning water. A short while of furious staking brings us down across the current to the opposite shore. At the first sight of a sandy bank, Vessel steers the boat on land. There, he pulls the ancient wood up into the underbrush, then starts walking upstream along the river.

THE CITY OF STONE

After a day's journey along the riverbed, the trees thin to bushes, then give way to a grassy moor that stretches inland. We leave the water's edge and follow the heath towards the foothills in the distance. There is only the soft sound of the tip of the oar against the ground as Vessel leans onto the shaft while he makes his way across the plain, the whisper of grass against his legs, and the susurration from the insects that surround us. We continue day and night.

When the ground turns dry and gray with pebbles and sand, the foothills have come much closer. The pale outline of a path winds along the steep slopes. We follow it up into the mountains.

"Stay on the path to the next peak," I tell Vessel after a trip in the air. At the summit, which is lower than the others around us, the ground is white and very cold, like it is in the high north, but when we are past the watershed, the path turns dusty and stone-filled again.

As we start the descent, and the trail sidles past a blade-edged crag, a wide plateau with geometrical shapes, rectangles and squares of all sizes, interspersed with parallel lines, and the occasional circle, more lines, and more rectangles, come into view. It looks like a maze constructed from right angles only.

We descend the final slope and enter the City of Stone. The geometrical patterns are created by long, low walls of enormous stone blocks. Scattered along the walls are mounds and piles of cracked mineral and broken stone. Here and there a corner is still standing—two walls leaning into one another, or a jagged piece of floor juts out from a wall like a path to the heavens. Other places we see the zig-zag traces of staircases that once climbed the stone, or the wooden remnants of shutters and doors. It is impossible to guess how high the walls once were. Now they reach barely to Vessel's thigh, and all their edges are worn concave by the dust and wind. We enter the outlines which the unknown structures have left on the ground, but all we find are

more collapsed walls, debris and stone. There are no other sounds than the shrieking of the wind through the broken walls and the crunch of Vessel's footsteps on the ground. The air smells of snow, yet even at this elevation there is a moist warmth to the air, like perspiration, and the days are brighter than in the lowland.

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Occasionally, Vessel lies down on his back in the gravel. I curl up in the crook of his arm as I'm afraid the wind will pick me up and hurl me across the ground before I wake.

The City of Stone turns light and dark a few times more. In the distance, rays of sunlight break through the rushing clouds. The wind never ceases or dies down. We find a lump of more than a dozen rats stuck in a hole at the bottom of a wall. The rodents' tails have been tangled together, broken at the knots, healed crooked, and grown together, so no individual could go where it wanted to. Their skin is dry and buckled, as if it has been cured, and their little claws curl helplessly beneath their bodies. They have been dead for so long they don't even smell. We walk on.

It grows dark and light and dark again. The field of walls and mounds and gravel does not end. The wind becomes a constant whistling in our ears.

"Let's go back," I say.

Vessel grins and starts walking down the remnants of a street.

"This way," I say and turn in the direction of the mountains in the distance. There, beyond rows and rows of fallen barriers, is the slope we came down from and the path that clings to its side.

"No, this is a city and we shall treat it as one," Vessel says. He follows the dead traces of streets and roads back to the foothill, even when only open stretches or completely collapsed walls separate us from our goal.

THE CITY OF TREES

We descend the mountains and the foothills, cross the heath, and return to the broad, warm river. The boat is where we left it on the taupe-colored bank.

"Let's follow the river to the ocean," I say. "Perhaps we will find what we seek there."

Vessel pushes the old wood back into the cloudy current, pulls himself up on the stern and crawls down into the leaf-covered bottom. I settle on his chest and together we travel slowly to the coast.

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It is night when we arrive. There is a faint glow in the sky from the full moon, but it cannot break through the clouds. Our boat crunches ashore. The gravel beach curves gently up from the ocean, which is as black and gleaming as a crow's eye.

Vessel pushes the rowboat further up on land and with a heave and a stumble, turns the boat around. Its rounded bow and broad flanks gouge deep gashes into the sand and oily water rushes in to fill the depressions.

We begin to walk, not so close to the water as to be slowed down by the fine, gray sand deposited there, or so far up on land as to be hindered by the tall, sharp grass growing there. Instead, we walk along the part of the shore that has been packed dense and hard by the ocean's constant heartbeat. A slow surf hisses along the beach, depositing reams of piss-yellow foam that rolls and flutters like flags in the breeze. Here and there we pass the remains of tree trunks, branches and seaweed that have been washed ashore. They are dry and smooth and have been turned to stone by time and the unending wind. We more feel than see the ocean, pushing against us in wave after wave, slowly swallowing the land.

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We follow the coastline for several days and nights. None of us say anything,

but it's an easy silence. When the shore becomes lined with low fir trees, blushing bilberry shrub and purple heather, we turn inland. The underbrush soon gives way to a carpet of yellow fir needles. Row upon row of brown trunks and green canopies stretch out in every direction and dampen the wind to a whisper. The air is heavy with the scent of tree sap and rotting wood. Only gnarled roots, jagged rocks and reddish-black anthills break the monotony of the endless ranks of trees.

"I smell smoke," Vessel says, sniffing the air. "Do you?"

I look up at the ragged patch of sky that is barely visible between the dark treetops.

"Perhaps it is from the City of Trees?" I say.

We follow the scent of the smoke. Vessel's oar-leaning footsteps make almost no sound on the thick fir needles. Soon I can smell the smoke too. Night falls, then dawn, then night again. It is warm and the silence hums in our ears.

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We enter a clearing and then we see the city, above us, in the trees. Circular wooden platforms held aloft by fans of narrow struts fill the sky like clouds. We can make out the dark shapes of structures atop the platforms, small dwellings with domed roofs. Between the platforms stretch long rope bridges, and garlands with hanging lanterns and rope ladders descend nearly to the ground.

But the trees and platforms are charred black and the ground is gray with ashes that whirls up and dusts the air. Most of the platforms have split and fallen down. Seared tree trunks and the remnants of rope bridges and huts litter the ashes. Spiraling ferns flash green among the gray. Saplings and vines stretch up, but the canopies above them have already started to retake the sky.

Vessel walks over to a piece of rope that dangles from a platform and tugs at it. The fiber turns to dust in his hand.

"Here I can't go," he says.

"I will be back shortly," I say and fly up. Vessel sits down on a fallen trunk and leans against the fir behind it.

I check every platform and dwelling I can see, but find among the singed walls and perforated floors only the remnants of tables and stools, cracked pottery, and burned bones. As I land on the edge of a wooden disc, it creaks loudly, breaks off, plunges into the ground in a cloud of ashes, and tumbles into the ferns.

Vessel slowly stands, then limps over to inspect. The wayward structure has tipped a charred fir over, leaving a net of roots hanging like wet hair from the end of the overturned trunk. Vessel leans forward and peers into the hole. He hunches down and pulls out a bundle of blackened snakes. The serpents are coiled tightly around one another into long ropes, each as thick as Vessel's lower arms, and are as crisp and brittle as the burned wood around us.

"They were too busy mating to care about the fire," Vessel says. He tosses the cluster of seared snakes into the soot and rubs his hands on his trousers. There is nothing here for us.

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We can't follow the scent back, so I fly up over the cone-shaped canopies and look for the dream-like glimmer of the sea to set us on the right course. This must be done several times a day, as Vessel has a tendency to walk in circles when he has no bearing. On the long trek back, we speak only once.

"Is that what everything will look like when the sun has eaten us?" I say.

THE CITY OF REEDS

When we are back at the hissing shore, we follow the coast north for two days and two nights. We progress fast as the gravel is easy to walk on and there is nothing to confuse our sense of direction.

On the second night we see something on the beach, partly on land, half bobbing in the waves. Tiny black flies cover the ground like billowing black

lace and part before Vessel's bare and grime-streaked feet with a sharp and angry hum. An overpowering smell of putrefaction drowns out the scent from the sea, and we are not surprised when we see that the thing in the water is the slime-covered corpse of a giant squid. The mottled, spindle-shaped form is at least four times longer than our rowboat and the two leading tentacles twice the length of the body itself. Its ten muscular limbs are as thick as tree trunks yet waft limply in the surf, tangling and sliding into one another. The bulging, gelatinous corpse has ruptured along the side and spilled its precious catch in a long reeking mound; glistening herring, slim sardines, and tiny gray shrimp, black crabs with legs the length of Vessel's arms, a couple of rusty-red octopi, and the saw-toothed jaw of a small sperm whale.

An enormous eye as wide as Vessel is tall stares out onto the beach and the rustling heath beyond. Through the transparent skin, we see that black pigment covers the back of the eyeball. In the faint light from the ocean it gleams like silver.

Vessel places his hands by the dead animal's eye, leans forward and pushes so the soft flesh quakes and quivers. He wades into the dead school of fish and crustaceans, and shoves at the middle. Then he pushes at the animal's broadest, tentacle-adorned end, before he moves back to the head. He pushes and pulls until he manages to shift the enormous corpse enough for the waves to take hold of it and drag it out to sea with them. Gas bubbles to the surface in a torrent of sound and smell, but the squid vanishes into the depths. Afterwards Vessel scrubs his hands and feet in the black water for a long time.

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The next morning we reach the City of Reeds. But the beach is empty, not even a twig of driftwood or a blade of seaweed can be seen on the shore. There is only sand and pebbles and Vessel's three-legged footprints unfurling in a long tail behind us.

"This is where the City of Reeds used to be," I say.

Vessel looks around. Out in the deeper water, a swell lifts and crests and is illuminated from behind by the gray dawn that shines in from the horizon. For a brief moment, dark forms and shapes gleam deep inside the wave, like distant stars, before the fluid wall crashes down and rolls unimpeded towards the shore. Vessel wrings off the tatters of his shirt, unties the thin branches that support his leg, pulls off his pants and hobbles out into the water.

"Here, I cannot follow," I say and settle on the smooth gray pebbles while the wind ruffles the feathers on my back.

Vessel limps out into the gray waves until only his head peeks above the surface and the long strands of hair that still stick to his skull float like black kelp about it. Then even that disappears into the water.

I close my eyes and imagine Vessel suspended between the dark ocean floor and the bright sea surface like a bird in a breathing sky. There, among luminescent cold water reefs, mounds of gray brain coral, billowing black nudibranchs and blood-red sea anemones, he sees glazed roofs and hedge-bounded gardens in a grid of streets lined with vehicles and garbage bins and lamps. Some of the houses have sharply slanting roofs with many gables and horizontal siding, and small windows with sheer silk curtains that waft in the water. Other homes have flat roofs and floor-to-ceiling glass doors and white vertical blinds floating out through a gap in the transparent barrier. In the gardens Vessel spots old pear trees, cherry saplings, red rhubarb spreading its wide leaves over the lawn, maples, birches, larks, white roses, pink honeysuckle, and orange lilies. But he sees no people and no animals, only empty gardens and houses.

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The day passes and darkens to night. It is noticeably warmer than before we set out on our journey. The black surf rolls lazily onto land, occasionally sending a spray of salty drops my way. I see a faint motion out among the gloomy waves, like the slick head of a seal or an otter, but it's Vessel, slowly swimming towards the shore. He continues until he's almost on land, then stands up and limps out of the surf. He wrings his hair and shakes the mois-

ture off his hands, then puts his dry clothes back on.

"Did you find anything?" I say.

"Lots," he smiles and sea water tumbles out of his lipless mouth and down his chest. "Gardens, houses, roads, but the roads were cracked and broken, the gardens covered in weeds and the houses empty and peeling. The vehicles had rusted apart and everything was dark and quiet. I saw no one, neither living nor dead."

"I saw you among the houses and the gardens, the trees were still green and lights glowed in some of the windows," I say.

"I'm afraid it wasn't so," Vessel says.

"Did you find anything that can help us stop the sun?"

"No, not a single object, except for starfish and sea kelp and corals."

"Then we have failed in our stewardship again." I bow my neck and a cold tear forces itself out of my eye and down my beak.

Vessel folds his time-eaten hands around me, picks me up and puts me on his shoulder, which is somehow still warm.

"One more place," he says.

THE CITY OF TAR

Tar is said to have been a wealthy city once, glittering at the edge of the boiling marshes that separate the endless fir forests from the icy wastes. Others claim Tar used to be an extensive factory that squeezed bitumen from the bog, liquefied the black material and shipped it south beyond the tundra. Avenues of rusty pipes still criss-cross Tar like old scars, and rows of circular tanks gape silently into the dusk-dark sky. Tar is still gleaming, but now from a thousand flickering, dripping torches that fill the air with a greasy, black smoke that mixes with the stench of decomposition from the bog and the odor of the city's own pitch-smeared buildings. Since offal and nastier wastes are thrown right out of the sheds and shacks and into the marsh, we smell Tar long before we get there.

Despite its quivering luminance, Tar is nearly quiet. The most prominent noise is Vessel's slow footsteps on the petrified wooden planks that lead from the edge of the bog to the dark cluster of buildings that is Tar. Behind the sound of Vessel's walking, there is a creaking and grating and whirring. Between the pipes and tanks we see the silhouettes of tall pumps that dip their heads into the tar, again and again and again. Occasionally we hear the sound of shutters opening and closing behind us and the murmur of voices. The torches sputter and hiss and somewhere nearby water drip-drip-drips.

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As we cross the street between a dark staircase and a narrow alley we see a shadow moving quickly away from us. Vessel shouts and hobbles after it. I lift and chase the shadow too. We turn corner after corner, deeper and deeper into the maze of tarred and sagging wood. A pebble flies out of the darkness towards me, like an undiscovered asteroid. I circle higher. Vessel, oar in hand, catches up to the stranger.

The person turns toward us. It is a head taller than Vessel, with skin the color of lard drawn taut over sharp bones, round blue eyes that blink out of sequence on either side of a narrow skull, a thin axe-head of a nose running down its face and a mouth that reaches almost behind its neck. The fingers are so long they fan out on the planks, yet the feet are round like table-legs, wrapped in mud-caked rags. Between its arms hang what I at first think is a bag or a pouch, but which turns out to be a stomach flapping out of the cracked chest.

He stares at Vessel's hands, then motions for us to follow. The tar person leads us along the bitumen-dark streets to a small building with a flat roof and glass windows that are still intact. The cloudy panes glow a faint, misty blue.

"Tomorrow at dawn," the tar person smacks.

Vessel inclines his head. Our guide then takes us to a shack at the edge of the maze, up a creaking staircase that winds along a naphthalene-stinking wall to a lopsided door on the second floor. At first the door seems stuck in

the frame, but our host pulls until the barrier slams open and bangs into the wall behind it. The tar person takes down the torch that hangs by the door. The cone of quivering, smoky light reveals a room about the length and width of our rowboat, with a bed on the wall furthest from the door.

The tar being puts the torch back into the holder and scuttles headfirst down the wall. Vessel removes the torch and puts it out by stepping on it, grinding it to ashes under his dirty, long-nailed feet. Inside, he feels the lock for a key but finds none. When he sits down on the gray wool blanket on the bed dust plumes from it. Vessel pulls his legs up, swivels around and lies down on his back. He blinks a few times, then falls silent. I settle on his chest and dream about the curtains wafting behind the windows in the City of Reeds.

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I wake Vessel in the middle of the night. He groans and turns over to re-enter his rest. I bite his right earlobe, the one that has the most flesh left on it.

"Time to search," I say.

Vessel climbs up on the building and from there he crawls across the rooftops while I guide him from the air back to the structure with the glowing windows. There he creeps in through a hole in the wall.

Luminescent blue lichen fills the corners and streaks the walls and ceiling, affording just enough light to see by. Dried mud crunches underfoot. The room is empty save for a cabinet in the back. Flanking the cabinet are two dusty beeswax candles in heavy pewter holders. The candles are bent like the necks of swans searching for food beneath the marsh surface and are so long the wicks lean against the dirty floor.

Vessel slides the cabinet open, its innards glowing with fungal luminescence. On a cushion of red velvet dotted with green mold sits a skeletal right hand. Thick rings bearing smooth mineral ovals adorn the thumb, middle and little finger. Another shelf contains the bones of a child's left foot. Further down is a mounted right foot, the toenails curved and filthy.

On the bottom shelf is a carving in polished granite depicting a mass of ropy limbs that curl and slither and slip into one another. The knot has no beginning and no end and makes me think of rat tails tangled so tightly that their owners can't move, snakes mating in a pit while the forest burns around them, and the arms of a dead giant squid rolling limply in the surf. This is what we need to get rid of, what is burning us up, like a warning we did not heed or a wrong we did not right.

The moment Vessel grasps the object the ground begins to shake. Out in the bog orange jets of burning gas flare up and the creaking pumps stop and begin to fall apart in a chorus of slowly bending metal, bangs and clangs. Then we hear the slamming of doors, pounding of steps, and yelling of thick-tongued voices from all around us.

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Vessel limps as quickly as he can. We hear shuffling and flapping and panting at every corner, behind every shutter and door, the mud burps and suckles, the tarred wood screams from being scratched by long, thin hands. When I fly higher I see them, a dark crowd filling the streets and alleys like oil seeping from stone. Vessel can't flee into the bog, the tar won't hold his weight and it is said to be bottomless, so he has to stay on the wood.

He struggles along the main thoroughfare, the straightest and shortest passage through the maze of sheds, and almost makes it. But they stream out of the side-streets and alleyways just as he reaches the single road of planks that creeps out into the bog towards land. Vessel faces them, both hands on the smooth, worm-eaten wood of his bladeless oar. The tar people open and flap their stomachs, scrape their bat-fingers, and come at him on the narrow walkway. The sound of wood against claws fills the air, accompanied by the creaking and squeaking and screeching from the collapsing pumps and pipes out on the tar-lake.

During the melee Vessel's left hand suddenly droops from his wrist like a rotten flower and tumbles to the ground. One of the tar people dives forward and catches the limb before it rolls into the bog. As one, Tar's inhabi-

tants rear their pale heads into the air and flutter and smack their gray lips and thick tongues. The tar person throws the loosened body part into the crowd and a meadow of hands rises up to pass it further and further back into the shed maze.

We run. Behind us the dripping torches and smoking jets die down one by one and Tar slowly turns as black as the night.

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We crunch across the stone beach to the rowboat, turning occasionally to see if long shadows are following us, but the shore is empty. Vessel launches the rowboat back into the black waves, crawls in and lets the tide carry us slowly away from land.

The horizon is a wound at the edge of the world. Between the red gash and the lid of clouds rises an enormous inflamed orb that breathes long tongues of conflagration into the void. The heat is like a thousand fires burning.

The closer we drift towards the sun, the hotter the air becomes and the brighter the sky turns. We lie down at the bottom of the rowboat for shade. Vessel's hair fans out on the leaves and he pushes me beneath it for cover, but smoke soon rises from us both and the scent of charred flesh stings our noses.

Vessel cups his hands into the water and soaks us thoroughly. When we start burning again, he cools us with more water. When that is no longer enough, he loosens the branches from his leg and twists the vines that held them in place into a wide loop. He hangs the loop from the stern, takes the carving out of the single pocket of his pants and places it at the bottom of the boat, and slips me gently inside the worn fabric. Then he drops into the water, holding onto the vines with his remaining hand. Thus we follow the boat further and further out towards the sun.

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There is a loud creaking noise and the rowboat shudders as if from an im-

pact. At the bottom of the wood, the carving has swelled up, like a corpse in the ocean. It is now wider than Vessel is tall and still growing. The air itself is screaming and the ocean has started to seethe.

Vessel pulls himself up into the boat, strains against the gigantic stone knot, grunts and groans, and somehow manages to push it over the rim. The carving splashes up a thin spray, before it sinks into the black water. Just a few wide bubbles dissolve on the surface.

But then the water explodes into a plume and something very large and heavy shoots up from the sea. Greasy dark water plunges off it like waterfalls and a stench assaults the air. The writhing knot is no longer cold stone, but reeking flesh. It rises and rises, until it reaches the searing sun that just freed itself from the horizon's red grasp.

The twisting rat kings, serpent nests and squid's tentacles envelop the sun like an embrace before dying. Then all slowly start to contract. There is the cry of a million broken-tailed rats, burning vipers, and bursting squid, and the sun's disc cracks into a firework of glowing embers that fall from the sky like shooting stars, but are so small they go out before they hit the ocean. Only a sliver of the inflamed sun remains. The heat and light drop to the tepid dusk we have had for almost as far back as I can remember. The remaining pieces of rat, snake and squid plunge into the sea, smelling like singed hair, burned skin and boiled meat. They are so large a flood wave rises from them.

The wave swells and grows and rushes us back to the stony shore much faster than the tide took us out. The flood rolls and churns and reaches far inland, until it is diverted by the rivers and streams and marshes there, and we are finally deposited on dry ground, on a small mound of grass, an abandoned crocodile nest shaded by vine-choked trees veiled with lichen.

Vessel crawls out of the rowboat and drags himself to the top of the mound, while I lie exhausted on his head. He turns onto his back, places me on his quiet chest and smiles. One by one the stars become visible in the heavens. They are all small and faint and brown, having burned off their white and yellow a long, long time ago.

LETTER TO A STRANGER

JEAN FERRY

translated by Edward Gauvin

from The Conductor and Other Tales (Wakefield 2013)

We have just arrived in a rather curious land. I don't know if this letter will ever reach you. To tell the truth, I'm not quite sure we've arrived, since the earth keeps moving under our feet even though we've stepped off the ship. The *Valdivia* herself has vanished since I set foot on the dock, and I don't know if I'll ever see it again. There is no postal service in this land, or any inhabitants, either; I don't know if I'll be able to send you this letter, or how it will reach you. Nor do I know whom to send it to; still, I hope you get it. My traveling companions — where are they? I have no idea yet, but they can't have completely disappeared. There must be something left somewhere, some trace of them; I will set out in search. I suppose I'll find them, but you never know, so I thought I'd write this letter first. Still, I won't have much to do once I'm done writing, for I think I'm on an island. I'm not entirely certain, though the entire perimeter of shoreline has passed beneath

my feet since I arrived, and after two days I found myself back where I'd started. Yesterday, there was a high, smooth-sided mountain in the middle of the island, but today I'm no longer sure it's there.

What I really wanted to tell you is you must never to come to this land. To be sure, one wants for neither food nor water, and the houses are rather comfortable, if one can adjust. No, what's troubling is the manner of existence. I'll never get used to it. The solitude here is too populous for me. It's bearable by day, but at night... the noise of thousands of invisible breaths astonishes and, let me tell you, terrifies. It's hard to explain. But you'll understand. Haven't you, in the dark, ever reached out with your foot for the final step of a staircase, only to find there wasn't one? Do you remember the utter disarray you felt for a moment? Do you remember those patient explorations in bed at night when, just as you were about to fall asleep, your leg suddenly relaxed and you almost fell who knows where? Well, this land is always like that. Matter itself here is made of the same stuff as that step missing from your staircase. You never get used to it, I promise, and you must never come here.

I wound up here because of a stupid mistake. No one warned me. The *Valdivia* was en route to Melbourne. How could the captain have gotten so turned around? One night, the Southern Cross fell from the sky, and I complained to the steward, we shouldn't stand for this; he maintained that the same thing happened every trip. And now here I am, absolutely alone; I don't want anything anymore, except a strange feeling tells me I absolutely have to get out of here. But how? I'll certainly look into it soon, I still have a few more little things to do, but tomorrow I'll start looking for the dock. Maybe the *Valdivia* has come back. Surely it will, since it came once already. I've lost track of the days somewhat, there's no calendar here, you know, and I've no desire to play Swiss Family Robinson with a pole and notches. Of course, I didn't have all this gray hair aboard the *Valdivia*. I must start looking for the dock again tomorrow, I've waited too long.

The streets are dismal and rainy by day; that's understandable, since no one lives here. But by night, what bustle! And please note: not a soul to be

seen. I'm a sober-minded fellow, I know these houses didn't build themselves, and yet one must, as they say, come to terms with it. But it is terribly hard work, in this land where nothing happens as it does elsewhere. Since I arrived, I think I've been too busy coming to those terms, so busy I never will. I'd be better off getting back to looking for the dock.

Please understand. No one here wants to be disturbed. In fact, I think they never come out of their houses. That seems simple, but how to explain it? Oh, they don't mean me any harm, and if I stayed long enough, we'd wind up getting along, but there's always someone behind you, and when you turn around, no one's there; it gets aggravating after a while. Right now, for instance, someone's looking over my shoulder as I write; I think it'd be better if I didn't turn around. I'll finish this letter tomorrow, I can't write when I'm being watched. I'll try to find the dock again. I'm not unhappy, I assure you, and yet, who'd want to see their best friend here? There are people who'd be happy on this island, but I'm not one of them.

Every life should have a little whimsy, sure, but really, when a man no longer knows if the sun in the sky means noon or midnight, when a great wind from the plains wraps around your personality like stripes around a barber pole, I say "Enough!" It's decided: tomorrow, I'll go looking for the dock. Deep down, my only nightmare is that the *Valdivia* will come for me when I'm not there, and leave again without ever having seen me.

THE MUSEUM OF THE FUTURE

H.V. CHAO

apologies to S.M.

“How could you communicate with the future? It was of its nature impossible. Either the future would resemble the present, in which case it would not listen to him: or it would be different from it, and his predicament would be meaningless.”

—George Orwell, *1984*

I.

The Museum of the Future is located in an outlying district for which further development was planned, but never realized. It may be reached by taking northbound buses 6 or 23A, or the spur route of the green metro line to the final stop. The station sits behind the desk of a vast plaza which it supervises, with its massive clock, like a concrete bureaucrat. Emerging from this terminus we seem to face, with the sun just beginning its ascent, a desert of human manufacture, were it not for the gaiety of a lone gelato vendor under a striped umbrella. From there, the museum is a ten-minute walk.

As we proceed through this concentric suburb past houses with their

spruce lines, the impression is one of uniformity imposed on a staggering scale: an attempt to transcend the present with design. Yet the district's spiderweb might seem tattered from above, its radial arrangement interrupted: here by a run-down dwelling, there by a gaping excavation for one never built, while all around unfinished streets run dry in gravel piles backed by unplanned woods. The era of exuberant experiment is over. A shaggy hedge extends unkemptness towards us as if in greeting, and a toppled marble bust nestles by a broken mower in the weeds.

The museum itself remains an imposing edifice, conceived on a colossal scale the air of gentle desolation does little to dispel. It is hard to tell from the mottled concrete whether the façade is blank from wear or still awaiting ornament. To our left, the oblong pool holds only old leaves; the stricken plaster of its basin is pale blue as though recalling skies the vanished waters once reflected. Dandelions push up between the fitted flagstones. Interest in the future begins with disappointment.

II.

A gigantic hourglass fills the atrium of the museum's entrance. The future, that immense and sandy mass, flees grain by speeding grain into the past through the blinding transit of the present. The hourglass requires no periodic upending; in a gesture toward infinitude, the sand in the upper bulb is mysteriously replenished. We have often wondered why a technology so anachronistic—though some say timeless—was chosen to greet visitors to the museum. And really, the concealed mechanism must be rather simple, on the order of the detached faucet that, from midair, releases a torrent barely hiding the plastic column within, through which water cycles up to fall again. We recall such gimmicks and enticements from the fairs and midways of our youths, with all their noise and garish lights, and this causes a certain resentment, amplifying our befuddlement, for isn't the future meant to be altogether different from everything we've ever known? And yet the

actual mechanism remains satisfyingly mysterious. Engineer fathers, with their families in tow, can only offer guesses on the process. From time to time, sand in the upper bulb shifts, resettles. A reflected skylight makes an opaque shape on the perfectly transparent glass.

III.

We are delighted by the miscellany of moving walkways in the Hall of Transport: walkways encased in corridors of colored glass, walkways under sectioned canvas awnings, walkways rising at steep angles, walkways corkscrewing slowly floorward from great heights. Shadows dapple us, waft and ripple past, and for a moment we might be forgiven for believing ourselves on the ocean floor, so various are the airships that dally and meander overhead: the fanciful airphibians, the discopters, the gyroyachts, the flying wings. Busy ogling the countless conveyances, we realize only belatedly that although we have stopped in our tracks—are, in fact, standing stock still—we have not ceased to advance: beneath our feet, our own moving walkway bears us imperturbably along, at a stately pace suited to admiring the sights without letting our eyes linger on any single one. For there is a secret the museum's curators know well: it is in glimpses, flashes, shards that the future lodges most deeply in the heart, pieces of a dream our memories return relentlessly to reassemble.

IV.

Pausing, pointing, rubbernecking, we press on through this congestion of invention, this chaos of progress. We duck as the monoflyer on its single rail makes a roller coaster swoop just past our heads. A hoverflivver about to run us over takes abruptly to the air, oblivious to the whistle of an autocop, and in the oncoming lane, a tricar commuter breaks bread with his neighbor

from a battery-powered toaster. The future is busy.

Critics have quite rightly pointed out there is a great deal of gimcrackery in the Hall of Gadgetry: the moon capsule with its upholstered salon, the pedal-powered pogomobile, the astrodavenport, the spherical atomic folly... the wave of junk and clutter banks, threatening to drown us in hokiness, but already we are climbing toward the exocoupe with its three headlights on a dais of pink glass, pointing the way out with its nose. A gentle but insistent breeze blows from the darkened doorway beyond, and this would be our last impression of the hall, were it not for an old man in a cardigan nearby. Only his shoulders, hunched against the wind, and the occasional shiver betray him as a visitor, instead of a museum mannequin. With his back to the exit, he stands rapt before the display of the levitating lounge. A faint round print, as though from use, depresses the yellowed doily of the headrest; on the seat lies a folded paper, its front page forever showing the same grainy five-second footage of a zeppelin. The scene, bathed in an amber glow, glazes the codger's spectacles, tingeing a single memorial tear.

V.

In fact, an unbroken series of moving walkways paves museum corridors between the themed Halls. Sometimes visitors may be seen pausing in these halls with an absent air: their ears have picked up the walkways' near hum, as of a river that locates us in a wood. Once we know to listen for it, we are apt now and then to tune in, then resume our journey oddly refreshed and reassured.

Some have speculated these moving walkways are meant to sustain the illusion that the future will be delivered to us without our having to lift a finger. Such is its imminence that we need only stand and wait to come into our own, heirs to a kingdom of confirmed prediction.

Others claim it is rather the reverse: that we, instead, are being delivered forward. Itching, twisting, aching, slouching, saddled with cameras or

suffering our children's tugs and pleas, lost in thought or plunged in conversation, fervently awaiting or utterly oblivious, we are with every moment and in every attitude brought closer to the future, whether we like it or not. Black and sleek, the placid belts roll on, tines glinting in the muted light.

VI.

What first strikes us in the Hall of the White City is its blancheur and éclat. The noonday of Cartesian reason seems to tumble from the rows of slanted glass above to bless this resplendent scale model. For although the White City is far less than life size—our gazes travel at eye level the fiftieth stories of towers, and we could, if we wished, rest a casual elbow on a ledge of stepped skyscraper—the reigning impression is nevertheless one of monumentality. By our ankles, broad and stately boulevards fan out like winning hands. The lithe passerelles of the heights remain out of reach, and gloriously crowned by the sun from whatever angle we crane our necks to squint at them.

Some visitors are content to be awed by the White City. Perhaps it is their first time; perhaps they are susceptible to beauty, or among those to whom hope comes easily, and often. We find these people everywhere, the very lifeblood of museums, admiring with soft gasps the sunflowers or poised apples no matter the artist's style or school.

To others, the White City is simply an outsized architectural maquette, as if inflated with the pomp of civic promise. The whiteness of the buildings is a curdled dream. How eagerly they've waited for the White City to come true—how terribly, unforgivably long. If only they could tear in rage through the display, avenging disappointment!

Still other visitors wander the White City with their minds on the laundry, the roast marinating at home in the fridge. In its clean lines they see sterility. Where are the grit, the smoke, the sewer reek, the groans of trucks and honks of thwarted cars and the cursing pushcart vendors? Chaf-

ing at the silence of their fellows, they keep up a steady stream of gossip with their friend—they never come alone—about who misbehaved at last night's party. Their minds fizz, populating the White City with a thousand cares and worries, reducing it to the level of their own distraction.

Finally, some visitors are quieted, even subdued. We find them already weary, as if having come a great way to reach this, one of the museum's first rooms. The men are studies in gray, and a few strands of the ladies' hair have come loose from whatever holds it. In their unfocused gaze, the White City seems its truest self: an assembly of curiously vacant façades whose blankness they meet with their own. Are these pristine walls a tabula rasa or, more likely, a reflection of some inner exhaustion beyond both hope and disappointment? An air of desolation surrounds these lost souls, their coats folded over an arm and spilling down their laps. And so, seated among the towers as if at a bus stop, they wait for the future they have given up imagining to become inevitable.

VII.

In the Museum, the future is not restricted to exhibits; the very architecture bodies forth futurity. The walls' immense expanses race up, wordless and replete, melting into rarified heights. The pyramids and cones, the saucers and paraboloids disposed about have the splendor of platonic forms. And in these vast, impartial spaces, visitors to the Museum of the Future sometimes seem engaged in a curious game of hide and seek. Husbands, pivoting with a quip to find their wives gone, may spot them framed smartly by a steel arch. Mothers calling for their children may, on turning toward an echoing reply, feel their gazes funneled down a torqued arcade to the vanishing point. Having climbed the spiral sweep of a suspended ramp, we emerge onto a massive, empty mezzanine where, as if to furnish scale for some supreme portraiture, we are the only human figure.

These visions give us a dizzying *déjà vu*—what is it they remind us of?

And opening the brochure to orient ourselves, we find our answer. On page after page, in picture after picture, the architecture of the future seems to conscript us, with careful compositions, into the authority of its geometry. Clustered, staggered, segregated, posed, austere decentered or strategically distant, we are forced by features to conform, subjects of setting, elements of an absolute décor. For if anything the future is a totality, and possesses a superior coherence. It comes all at once, or not at all.

At such moments, there seem to be two museums: the one where we stand, and another, purely on paper. It is this second museum that we set out from home today, lured by the brochure, to visit. And with a creeping sense of disenfranchisement, we wonder how we wound up here instead. For the museum where we stand seems, strangely, somehow less than the sum of its photos—or rather, less than the world suggested by that sum, beyond the edges of the frames.

In this light, the game of hide and seek among the visitors takes on an altogether different air. And in their faces we now see fulfillment or surprise not at found parents or partners, but at glimpses of something else hiding in plain sight, more conjecture than locale.

VIII.

Docents wear white, the preferred color of the future. Their seamless uniforms blend in with the spotless walls and, when glimpsed in distant galleries, they seem to be disembodied heads bobbing about. Here and there a head pauses, bent forward with a kindly smile to address a child. Its hushed speech is cadenced, stately; its attitude unfailingly attentive and obliging.

In these postures approaching some ideal of solicitude, the docents can seem like oracular automata, roving interfaces of a master computer. But drawing close for questions, we see crow's feet to either side of the men's clear gazes, gray traces in the hair pulled back from the women's brows. And of course, there is no master computer. Docents are engaged on a strictly

volunteer basis ever since the museum suffered severe budget cuts.

IX.

In the course of our visit, we encounter room after immaculately furnished room which, it seems, someone has just left. The sliding door of floor-to-ceiling glass stands open on the empty patio; the impeccably positioned cushions provide swatches of apposite color by the pool. Beckoned by its seemly waters, we pace its rectilinearity and, through a portal in the far hedge, find a further living room with floating globes shedding soft light on a table of smoked glass. From yet another salon, we survey a green lawn where, among discreetly situated white stones, two chaise longues slung low from bright steel bars bask in a startling mimicry of morning sun. And on, and on, tickled by an impish sense of trespass, drawn forward as if by the echo of footsteps, overheard laughter, the updraft of someone's passing, we plunge deeper into these deserted chambers after our vanished hosts. Who are they, the people who lead such a charmed life? How different it must be, of another order altogether, one in harmony with the lithe vase in its alcove and the intuitive canvas centered on the bare wall. In fact, as we look around, we are increasingly aware that it is we who sound the false note: we, with our dazed eyes and faintly aching feet, and always in the wrong clothes. Where are the undone tie, the kicked-off heels, the coats slumped on a sofa arm after a long day at the office? We dare not disturb the artful disposition of glasses on the oval table, or even perch in rest on so much as a corner of the teledivan with its untouched pillows. We have with piercing clarity pictured surroundings that exalt and inspire us, but failed ourselves to make the matching transit, and in the scheme of their garden, this thought is a serpent. Heads bowed, we hurry from the room, lest another visitor should, on rounding a corner, chance upon us, and we should ruin, if even for a moment, the illusion of flawless appointment.

X.

A balcony of glass and brushed steel supervises a view of roofless cubicles repeated in a grid across the floor. We have come, in the years since the height of its popularity, to recognize this as the very landscape of drudgery. For the Hall of Work belongs firmly to the past, a future we believed left behind. Indeed, curators would long ago have closed it, but for a curious ritual that visitors lingering through evening may witness.

On certain weekdays after business hours, a sea of seeming employees will flood the hall, while bars outside the museum are filling up for happy hour: the men in gray flannel suits, the women in decorous dresses. They hang their hats and open their briefcases on vacant desks. Then they embark on an elaborate and unsmiling pantomime of work. An escalator brings us down for a closer look.

Once among them, we are startled by their youth. And the framed photos they set beside the phones are not of their children, but of their own childhood. For they are all young enough for someone to still think of them as children—if, in some cases, only they themselves. Sometimes it is quite hard to tell how old the oldest are. There is a penitential aspect to their postures in their cubicles—awaiting, like a cellbound monk or a nun, some confirmation.

Watching them, we are moved by their devotions. For one and all, bent studiously over a document or conferring intently by a coatrack, they carry out their tasks with the devout and utmost gravity of children at play. It is as if they are living out a memory of work, enslaved by some outmoded seamliness; as if only these clothes could enable true labor; as if the real work of the world occurred only in offices like these, to which their parents once led them by the hand—that there, some seriousness since mislaid still awaits them, and never in their own startups of loosened ties and t-shirt Tuesdays, pinball break rooms and four-thirty board meetings with beer.

XI.

The doors ahead gently part. A corridor whose lavender cedes stealthily to violet delivers us into a beguiling gloom where, with eyes that strain as though through falling evening, we see a family relaxing. On a sunken couch, Mom watches Sis sprout from the vidcube, fuzzy in fluorescent armlets. Junior orchestrates palettes, practicing scales on his chromatic theremin; Dad, puttering over aeroponic bonsai, ticks boxes in the weather preferendum on a tactual slate. Our gaze, moving past him out the picture window, is drawn up into the massive sweep of a toroidal colony as it bends from view beneath a curve of paneled sky. A blue unbroken lake runs down the middle, between a quilt of farms and green repeated yards. Here in the universal suburbia, leisure has come into its promised land. So convincing is the scene we almost feel a thrum, an implacable rotation underfoot that like the earth's keeps the tumblers on their coasters. Outside, capsules scuttle to and fro among the stars.

The Hall of Domesticity is sometimes called the heart of the museum. And many credit its enduring appeal to its ties with tradition. For the silhouettes of visitors against the bright dioramas, the scuffed varnish of black flooring where displays blur and glow—these remind us of nothing so much as the museums of our childhoods, with their cavemen in bear pelts, their sabre-toothed tigers, their alert and regal elk. And just as in those museums, on days when school trips have stretched unbearably long, we surrender to a curious somnolence, a magical disorientation. For if this is the future, why should it feel so much like coming home?

The dim solemnity, on the verge of dream, extends a promise of haven and, enfolded in these early memories, we watch a mother readying dinner. The chronofridge informs her which vegemins and vitables are about to expire. She wears a flowered terry apron over her moodsuit, currently a tranquil green. Curled up in a convex porthole, a toddler in cadet pajamas makes faces at his pet dolphin nosing the glass. The kitchen trembles in a net of blue glim-

mer and seaweed shadows, imbricate traceries of light.

It seems we have come to these scenes a prodigal, a penitent, and after all these years, a stranger—no more than a ghost in the glass that divides us from their happiness. These animatronic parents and siblings, if they could see, would stare right through our yearning selves. Why should these fulfillments be refused us? Why should they hold us at arm's length? Now that we have found our way back, why should we ever leave? And looking over our shoulder, we see that we have come a long way from the entrance to the hall—that in fact, we are almost at its end.

The sameness of these happy families set against the distances, these automatons, ridiculous and pitiable: is it not they, locked in the performance of memory, who are ghosts? Shackled to enacting these scenes by some unfairness, they cycle through their motions almost ceremonially. The lighted windows, abducted from their context by the dark, align in backward repetition to infinity.

XII.

Among the many rooms of the museum, there is always one that opens—each time in a different wing, it seems—from behind a sagging barrier of hazard tape on absolute dark. No sudden Jupiter looms forth, as from an orrery, to startle and locate us. From out of the hidden distance, not even the wink of an exit sign hints at the extent of the void.

Most visitors pass up this entrance gaping like a chasm, some with a mild dread they would be hard pressed to explain, and others from mere uninterest, construing it correctly as a room unused or under renovation. But still others linger, fascinated, at the brink of the immaculate black as though the emptiness itself were worth consideration. For is this not the blackness from which all exhibits are born? Does it not, as we lose ourselves in their illusory depths, secretly underlie even the most luminous dioramas? And when at last they are dismantled and removed from rotation, is this not

the darkness to which the room will return? In that sense—or so the hands, clasped behind backs, of those visitors stopped in rapt contemplation, seem to whisper—is this not the truest future, from which all others arise and subside, of pure potential and abiding repose?

XIII.

We emerge into what seems to be a mockup of a monorail station. A single steel line, gleaming with reflected light, runs beside a platform and into tunnel at either end. To our right, a digiposter resolves into the face of a blonde, beaming at us in advertisement, but someone has with marker blacked out the exact squares of her front teeth and given her a swarthy mustache. Reassured, even perversely pleased, we cannot repress a chuckle.

As we proceed past empty benches, something like a chill rises from the cement, recalling all the nights it took us too long to get home alone from parties, their residual elation drained away with waiting. The sense of dereliction is powerfully familiar, as though the universal fate of public transit were disrepair. We glimpse naked wiring through a breach in the drywall, a map of the museum savaged as if by a knife. At such times we are disenchanted with the museum and impatient with its lapses, its fiscal woes and disrepair, for the illusion of futurity is, if anything, sustained only by consummate cosmetics. We cannot hide our disappointment at these cracks in the veneer, and just then, a fluorescent bulb begins to stutter.

We are almost at the far end of the platform. Leaning forward, we peer first into the dark, then down at our own feet, and step back in shock. A pair of legs in dark gray pants stick out from under the platform edge. Mud has dried pink on the thick-soled boots. There is an inert slump to the hips. We are backing away when what we took absurdly for a dead body twitches, and we hear a clanking from below. A metal panel in the floor pops open, and through it we spot scattered tools, a bucket of dirty water. The supine man in coveralls gives us a wave. Flustered and apologetic, we back into an orange

cone, and stumble through a steel door.

It seems to be a back alley behind the museum. The dilapidation is drastic. Lingering smoke pall the scene. Two dumpsters, marred by spray paint, drift toward a cement runnel in the asphalt, as though with menacing sentence to block the way forward. The door clicks shut and is, we find, locked.

A grimy pane lies shattered at our feet. How did we lose our way? Through no fault of our own—a chance misjudgment—we have exited the museum, but how can we return? The odor of burning plastic overpowers the sewage stink. We recall the rumor that for every seemly, ideal hall in the museum is another one of sludge and grime and metal grate and exposed plumbing. And as we pick our way past the dumpsters, our fear, while never leaving us, gives way to dark relief and then a wild delight, as of a dream shrugged. The fires guttering in oil drums, the dented shopping cart with one lame wheel run up against the cinderblocks—these free us from the onus of becoming. We plunge in shame and glee into these looted ruins, fleeing the memory of our intentions.

Then a peal of silver laughter rings out. Through an undimmed pane, we see a well-dressed couple at a table in what we recognize as one of the museum's many conveniently located cafés. And lurching through a wreath of steam, we find that we have joined them. A display lists the daily specials; pastries line the doilies in a case of curved glass. Still shaken, we sit down with our snacks. A TV is playing in the corner. On it, an urchin generation with smudged faces clamber over chunks of fallen buildings to escape the feral clans, combing the ruins for an unopened can of peas, only to find, in the curved face of an urn, the chrome portrait of their own desperation: matted hair, chapped lips, blood drying at the temple. And we too laugh, for surely that future—why didn't we think of it?—is also part of the museum.

XIV.

Among the maps and highlights, our brochure contains a welcome from Simon Elgin, a beloved figure. Simon was always an imaginative child, and so when, at the tender age of twelve, he ran away from home, it was to take up residence in the museum. He was a precocious student whose brilliance won him the flattery of his teachers, and his parents, at a loss to occupy his lively curiosity, often took him there to while away their Sunday afternoons. As they approached the colossal entrance, he would run up to the reflecting pool, and taking his father's hand, make his teetering way along the lip, twinned by his own image in the water. He fell in once, and another time, got lost. After that, his fear replaced by wonder, he would deliberately dawdle in some ignored corner, long past the closing time announcements when they paged his name, until guards finally returned him to his worried parents waiting in the lobby. But soon their marriage faltered. Simon's grades fell and, once a keen follower of current events, he tired of the papers he so avidly devoured. Impatient for the sluggish now to catch up with tomorrow, he decided to make his home in the latter.

He managed to remain undetected in the museum for five years. He slept in the model rooms and stole food from the many cafés. When he was finally found out, the picture of him—caught by a curator's flashlight behind the wheel of the teardrop exocoupe—made the front page of every local paper. It emerged that he'd stayed hidden for so long thanks to Henry, a museum handyman who'd befriended him. But when the time came to leave, Simon had been living in the future so long he was unready for the present. His first feeling, on stepping out into the sunlight, was one of disappointment. The reflecting pool lay empty, and the leaves that had once spotted the water's surface now filled the basin with its cracked and peeling plaster. His father had moved to another city. The present no longer seemed interested in overtaking the future, but had instead veered off in an entirely different and inscrutable direction. Simon felt frightened—unmoored—and sought

refuge in what had always been his safest haven, a known quantity, a fixed point (if always fixed on the horizon). During his stay in the museum, Simon had learned a great deal from Henry about exhibit upkeep, and so it was thanks again to Henry that after a brief sojourn in the world outside, Simon was allowed to return, this time as Henry's legitimate apprentice. Visitors, recognizing him from the news, would wave when they saw him adjusting an automaton, or in coveralls sweeping up with a headlight broom after departed re-enactors in the Hall of Work.

As ever an avid learner, Simon worked his way up to head docent and finally curator, and that is how, hands clasped behind his back, we find him in the lobby today, surveying the departing visitors at closing time. Of all the curators, only he makes his home in the museum, in a small room off his office. He is older now—glasses frame his softened features chastened by spots, and a hint of belly shows through his sweater vest—but accompanying these changes is an air of patience. He has learned that things that happen do not happen for the better or the worse—they are simply those that happen. But for all that he has not given up hope. As ever, he refuses to keep up with the news, which is easy in the museum's cloistered atmosphere. Still, he sees the signs coming: here, a soaring arch snuck into a civic center, there the resurgence of a gleaming fin. He knows that one day when he finally leaves the museum, the world will look exactly like his dreams. Cars, whether they fly, will in every way resemble the ones meant to. From beside the ticket counter he watches with approval as the guards turn away late would-be entrants, while evening blue settles on the slate walk, just beyond the hours he can make out backwards on the glass doors.

XV.

Wandering through the Museum of the Future, it may strike us that some of the objects on display are already part of the present we know and navigate daily. The egg chair, the residential obelisk, the foam igloo, the visio-

phone, the sleeping tube, the skybridge, the machine for living—all these we often overlook, so ordinary have they grown. Have we managed somehow to smuggle bits and pieces of the present into tomorrow?

More likely, these bits and pieces of the future, borne on some inconsistent current, have merely trickled back to us, talismans of hope and progress, advances on a promise. Their presence in the museum makes them somehow seem to shimmer, ghostly. Wrested from the everyday and in their rightful context, we see them again and as if for the first time, less clearly but more forcefully. These visitations lure us forward, into ever hazier precincts. The bridges in the sky become bridges to the merely imagined, drawing away from our outstretched fingers in this gallery of reverie.

XVI.

Some have said that the Museum of the Future is irrelevant—that its universal baggage, jetscalator, moon jeep, dolphin lexicon, having failed to come about, have outlived their usefulness and no longer serve a purpose, not even novelty, not even kitsch. The museum, they say with some bitterness, is a monument to folly, a public embarrassment, a showroom of broken promises. These words come to mind as we contemplate the City Under Glass. Each time we return to it, we notice something new—although whether these elements have just been added, or whether they have always been there, we cannot say.

Standing over its dome, we watch as, slowly, in a way we know by heart, the room darkens and the model begins to glow from beneath, lighting our faces as though we peered into a scrying pool. It recalls, in its serene containment, the train sets that formed our first ideas of towns and mountains, roads and rivers; that gave us, as the linked cars sped by at eye level, a sense of the possibilities of the world. Now, from above, we can encompass it, holding it, as it were, in the palm of our mind, or the dome of our skulls. Our imaginations populate its every recess, as if every flickering window were a neuron,

every line of light a firing synapse.

There is the city we live in, bequeathed to or imposed upon us, which we struggle against daily that we might with toil wrest from it a place to lay our heads, and there is this city of spires, of pods and contoured towers, of crystal buildings bound in rows of light, hanging gardens, streamlined cars forever frozen in their place along the ruled acreage of boulevards. We cannot inhabit this city: that is the source of its infinite perfectibility, and melancholy solace. It is precisely at this point, freed from the burden of pertinence, that the museum joins the ranks of dream, and becomes part of that compost of longings from which we draw the consolation we call art.

XVII.

Only one film ever plays in the theatre at the Museum of the Future, but it plays continuously. We may enter at any time, without fear of having missed a thing, by purchasing a ticket from the student in the booth. Among museum employees, he alone seems bored, hair disheveled, face disgruntled, leafing through a weekly with the latest goings-on elsewhere in town. His dress never conforms to code, consisting often of torn jeans and, variously, a worn leather jacket, a flimsy pinstriped vest, or a blazer spotted with slogan buttons. Without rising from his slouch, he takes our money and pushes, with our ticket, a pair of glasses through the window slot. Beside his half-smoked pack of cigarettes on the desk, an empty candy wrapper peeks from a gift shop copy of a book his boss has lent him, which he will never finish.

In the film, a man and a woman are driving down a highway in the dark. Their headlights pick out the dotted yellow on the faded asphalt. They may be in the desert—is that a cactus whipping past, that distant silhouette a mesa?—but one thing is clear: they are pressing on with quiet, seemingly urgency, as if afraid of being late. They tear through veil after veil of mist, the tatters slipping from the windshield. We cannot see the odometer, but from the bottom of the screen comes the green and faintly comforting glow of

the dash. From time to time, the camera pans out the window on the driver's or the passenger's side, and through the parting mists we see the city of the future—bright rotundas, louvered ziggurats orbited by blinking vehicles, silver glideways ringed in arches slender as a rocket's hurtle—and a gasp comes from the audience. But where is it? Are they going too fast? Have they passed it by? When will the beams of their headlights find the sign, its dazzling reflective letters? Where are the exit, the off-ramp, and the blazing portal?

We clutch our glasses and we wait. We are waiting for the moment we have heard so much about. When the instructions scroll across the bottom of the screen, we bend our faces forward and bring our cupped hands to our eyes.

We put them on; we put the glasses on. We look up.

O YOU WHO DROWN IN ROSES

ARIEL TROPE

We could have forgiven them any fault but the one that was their own. By then, when you went out for a smoke at earthrise, you didn't notice how the antique planet spilled blue down on the plains of Mars. It was just the way things were. Rose-colored clouds and sands like fine, freeze-dried blood had ceased to impress us. It was only human. There was enough air to breathe and, if you slapped on a couple oxygen patches, enough to finance a cigarette or two smoked consecutively, leisurely out in the dunes behind the tavern, no more than that. The unmartial purity of earthlight was something you put up with when you worked the night shift. Annie and that lot always say it gives you cancer to stand too long outside under earthrise but they work days and like to feel superior to the rest of us.

Everyone believes there's something better outside the perimeter, even though everyone knows there's not, which is half of why I have a job in the first place. I stand sentinel the first five hours up in the hills above the Mare Sirenum, putting a halt to the ones that try to cross it. The second five are spent below with the generators: strong, fat giantesses huffing up their chemical banquet, churning out big geysers of air that dissipate into the fontanelle above the mars, cling to it in fragile old dandelion wisps. (We have

dandelions now, among other invasive species.) The machines are our mothers. We are their handmaids. They are our wives and we are theirs. Outside the perimeter, the air just gets thinner and thinner until there's nothing at all you can breathe. Wolves and deer in shades ranging from blush to vermillion have evolved with frightening rapidity. You can tell they are native to this place not only because of the color—perfect camouflage in the red-mauve plains of the Mares—but because of the gills—translucent panes of flesh pulsing with light and life, always at work, extracting every morsel of oxygen from the anemic atmosphere.

It was the wolves, really, who started it. When there's air enough to propagate sound, you can hear them howling like cellos played with a consort of granite bows. That sound is a promise and always we believe it. Some say the wolves are oracles, great councilors, but that they will not tell your future unless you come to them where they live. Many's the morning I've seen a wet gleaming on the sands, a pearly red splotch scarcely distinct from the red of the mars beneath, and known it for the remains of a supplicant I couldn't stop. You can't save the ones that don't want it, Charlie says. But I don't know about that. I think maybe you can—save them that is. Only it's harder and mostly they hate you for it.

Others say the wolves are our shepherds. There is a map in the song—at least, that's how the story goes—to a city under a great crystal dome. In the dome there is air for all and food for all and they are safe from winter and the desert. There, the best of the decadent customs of Old Earth are preserved. Everyone's got a seat on the council. Everyone dances in the streets. Each night, so many rose petals crash down from the lid of the dome that one or two are drowned, a happy death.

This is what the wolfsong says to us. These are its mysteries. It is a simple song.

In truth, we are jealous of the ones that go, though we know what they suffer. We can forgive them any fault but this: that they do not take us with them. A mo' ago, as we went down from the tower for a final cigarette, Charlie caught sight of one of those grisly oblations—a mother and an infant, we

learned later, who had somehow managed to slip through the barrier. We had been drinking a little that night and, in any case, she had known to wear red and pink. Like the deer. Like the wolves. The search team recovered a few things—a silver charm, the swaddling bands, a swatch of cheap fuchsia dress, some slivers of bone. Must have slipped through just after earthset, we told ourselves, when it's hardest to see anyway, spectagoggles or no. Yes, must have slipped through then. Each of us assured the others that no one was to blame. And the whole while the jealousy roiled and cooked in our stomachs like something preparing to give off a bad smell. We leashed it in place and cultivated it, a clever, malevolent pet. It lived there, deep down where it's a secret, deep down where it's a drug. I think I stopped drinking for about a week.

Later, we divided the talismans among us—charm, swaddling bands, dress, bone. One of the night crews polished up the bones to a high shine. (They use them to gamble when the shift is slow.) The charm went to me of all people—a trumpery piece shaped like a squashy sphere, the continents of Old Earth picked out on its side in shallow scratches. I keep the thing in the pocket of my flame-retardant jumpsuit, the one I wear when I'm down among the giantesses. Who can say why. We have decided no one is to blame. O you who drown in roses, please forgive.

ABBREVIATIONS

KINTON FORD

K

K would be an inaccurate eavesdropper. It's part of his essential, sweet, and often infuriating innocence of spirit. He'd see all tension as misunderstanding, readily resolvable if only they both understood how each was getting the other wrong. But of course K doesn't eavesdrop.

R

R invariably does the right thing. Her actions always manifest her integrity and her valiance for truth. There's nothing of the toady in her. It's inevitable that the way she plumbs her own depths would make her question everything, even (or especially) her own motives. So that she is the only person to be skeptical of her absolutely reliable integrity. She is reliable: you can count on her judgments to be disinterested. But you end up having to defend her to herself, after the fact, when she wonders about possible other cases. She lacks the convictions of her courage.

A

There's a particular kind of anecdote that A tells well. It culminates with

someone laughing, good-humoredly, at some incident or remark that we thought would vex them. The anecdote is usually about someone we find scary or fierce or grim, so that in A's telling the laughter is the surprising climax, not the adverb or gerundive it would be in another person's story. These anecdotes are almost always about moments from many years earlier. I don't know anyone else who tells stories like this, nor anyone else who savors so fully and remembers so long that little moment of relaxed clarity. I love it when A gets to the sunny point where "He just laughed and said..." That patch of sun helps reconcile me to realities.

E

E is always relaxed. At first that makes her relaxing to be with, but when you get to know her a little better you can see that it's willed. There's a kind of isometric exercise there: she holds herself in check and part of what she holds in check are the expressions that would ordinarily indicate the effort she's making to do so. Her face is always tranquil. So knowing her a little better you relax less. Or maybe more. If you're the type who gets anxious around serene people, the discovery that she isn't actually serene can come as a relief.

It may be a relief in more ways than one. The initial impression she makes—for me at a lovely outdoor party on a summer's evening where she was the hostess and I was the friend of a friend—might be remembered later as a little psychotic. A couple of genuinely psychotic people I knew had a similar aura of sheer self-possession. I think this was because when they weren't dealing with their monsters, they had no anxiety at all about dealing with all the stresses of ordinary life. They knew how trivial such stresses were. They were genuinely at ease. But E never is, and this makes me like her much more, and is one of the cures for my own attraction to unfathomable charisma.

O

I ran into O, who asked with his usual air of superior humane concern after a friend of ours (more mine than his) who'd been ill. Our friend was okay now, and I told O that. For the briefest instant, intense disappointment flickered

on his face. It was unmistakable, though he recovered almost immediately and converted his look to one of satisfaction with the news.

Why was O disappointed? Because he wanted to indulge his sympathy? Because our friend's illness might have been good to think with? Might have confirmed the horror of the world and the comparative safety from which O viewed it? Did he wish to feel sympathy for me or for our friend? Or perhaps for himself most of all—that would cover the most motivational ground.

I could not speak to O after that encounter. It was striking how unambiguous his reaction was. And yet I think O did me a service. He showed me what such a reaction looked like—one I haven't seen in anyone else. I think better of everyone else, thanks to O.

P

When I first met P his rationality was refreshing. I am always attracted to troubled people. No one else seems deep to me. P was no exception to this rule: he was deep. No, what was refreshing about him was the way he understood his own emotions. He was as moody as anyone, but he didn't blame me for whatever it was his mood was blaming me for. I like to put myself in the line of fire of other people's moods—this is a weakness of mine (or maybe a strength): it's a kind of pride in thinking that I can be helpful to them (and win their love) if I can be a kind of toreador of their emotions, showing them that there's nothing to hate behind the discrete red flag I use to attract their attention, their anger. But I found when I met P a kind of unexpected pleasure, an unexpected shortcut to serenity, in the way he never did think there was anything behind the flag.

Alas, this peace was false. P didn't blame me, but ultimately this meant that P didn't care (about me, about anyone, I think). There was nothing behind the flag—and nothing beside it either. I was just another version of it: nothing to get exercised about. P knew it was all within him and so for him I was trivial. If I angered him at all, as I sometimes think I did, it was only for being trivial.

I thought I could be friends with P forever, but it turned out I was never friends with him at all.

H, I, J and me

There are a very few people whom I judge by using myself as a touchstone. What I mean by this is that given their declared interests, their declared intellectual and emotional character, they should want to be friends with me. I don't mean interests as in an online profile; I mean that if they really are interested in what they purport to be interested in, if they really are able to think seriously about what they purport to be interested in, they should be interested in me. This sounds much more arrogant or obnoxious than it should. It's just a way of saying there are certain people you should click with, and don't, and in that set a subset defined by the fact that it's their fault, not yours.

It's really about whether a certain kind of friendship could happen, which I think would depend on whether they would have the same somewhat unusual attitude towards that kind of friendship's happening that I do.

Well, then: H disappoints me, because he should be the kind of person who would get me (as for example B does), and he just doesn't. Whereas I (elle), who at first glance would seem to have very little in common with me, and who could easily and legitimately be even more haughtily uninterested in me than H is, is tireless in her friendship (and I'm usually the tireless one). It seems to me that much of what I know about I is characterized by her friendship; and much of the much less, but still adequate, knowledge that I have of H is characterized by his lack of interest in it.

Which brings me to J, one of the very few friends to whom I could describe this, knowing that he'd get it immediately. Which he did.

Q

Q is very charming, enthusiastic, candid and frank. He's genuinely interested in you. His face lights up when he sees you, and I feel the same when I see him. And yet one of the things that he's candid about is just how superficial his

interest and his pleasure are. It's all there for you, he's unreserved—which means there's nothing in reserve. He's a pure consumer, and his frankness is a mode of consumption, a gusto in being with you that just means that he's enjoying the moment and nothing more. And he's enjoying it selfishly, which is part of the pleasure. He evokes by contrast that odd anxiety in real friendship about when you'll see each other again. (Here we are now, let's anticipate our next meeting.) But Q feels none of that anxiety, and you realize it's because he'll take away nothing from your encounter. The condition of his charm and enthusiasm, of his frank and candid and selfish pleasure, is that none of this will make a difference to him, he won't think about it again. He can give you all his radiant attention for the moment because it's so mobile—and then it will move away. He's a pleasure to be with, but in the end I always wish that I'd been watching TV instead.

S

Let us assume that Homer was a drunkard, that Vergil was a flatterer, that Horace was a coward, that Tasso was a madman, that Lord Bacon was a speculator, that Raphael was a libertine, that Spenser was a poet laureate. It is inconsistent with this division of our subject to cite living poets, but posterity has done ample justice to the great names now referred to. Their errors have been weighed and found to have been dust in the balance; if their sins "were as scarlet, they are now white as snow"; they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and redeemer, Time.—Shelley

S has helped cure me of my desire to meet and get to know writers. But is this a loss or a gain?

U

U is a crony. You might think cronyism or being a crony is a *relation* to others. Simmel might think that being a crony is a sociological facet of human existence. But U is like the sound of one hand clapping. He's a crony even when alone. He shows that cronyism is a Platonic and not just an Aristo-

telian characteristic. Somewhere there exists the form of the crony pure and simple, and U instantiates it. I like him.

AA

AA is amazing with those younger than he is. More energetic, faster, more delighted by the world. He draws everyone into his own incessant vitalism, and makes everyone feel happy. He had this effect on me for years. But it became clear, alas, that the energy he drew and returned to us went through the circuit of his insatiable greed. There was nothing he wouldn't do for you if he loved you. There was nothing he would do for you if he stopped. He had no idea how much damage he could do by stopping. Or perhaps he didn't care. It was then that you felt how deeply he'd insinuated himself into the network of your own energies, how brightly he lit up the world, made it his own. When you were his own too, that was fine. But when you weren't, you lost more—you lost the world he'd remade for you when you lost his love. His love? The illusion that it was love, vital and generous, the illusion that things could be vital and generous.

FF

Because FF has exquisite manners he believes himself to be impregnable in all human relation. He cannot be in the wrong because his manners are better—more deferential, more delicate, more sublimely agreeable—than those of anyone he is ever in contact with. He is the embodiment of class, of a class of one, the class of which he is the sole member. To interact with him at all is to be treated with extraordinary and unending graciousness, which has the effect of making you feel that you should feel gratitude for the grace which accepts you as adequate (though of course you're not) to its tact and generosity. So when you fall out with FF, there is no way that the breach will ever be healed. Of course he will accept instantaneously any petition you make to return to good terms with him, without a beat of hesitation. But hesitation is where friendship lies, the sense that someone is pondering your meaning, then accepting it; it's in the feel of resistance overcome by recognition. The

breach isn't healed, with all the work that healing would entail. It's treated as manners require: it surrenders any claim to polite notice and disappears entirely.

There is no possibility of the recognition that lays down the rhythm of friendship with FF—he cannot be in the wrong and therefore he cannot recognize another point of view. And he also works so hard to be in the right, in his own mind (he doesn't let you see the work, but I've known him for a long time and I do see it). Yes, he recognizes the points of view of others in general—his manners compel it, the substance of his manners is just such recognition. But you, whoever you are, are for him only part of that general otherness, and you never become the object of a specific attitude. (Indeed the fact that I am not the object of any specific attitude, resentment, regret, contempt, is for me the emblem of our break.) He is above intending any harm, and yet I do feel made somehow less substantial. It was easy to float in the buoyant, unflagging, unfocussed thoughtfulness of his attention, but just as easy to float away, softly and forever. All that thoughtfulness, and none of it a thought about you.

To resent him for any of this would seem like bad manners, and I don't.

BB

BB is a holy, sophisticated naïf. When her otherworldly saintliness misfires, when her moral judgments are crushingly wrong, carelessly oppressive, you can see the narcissism that has to be part of her commitment to saintliness. What else could protect her from the scorn of the worldly, the this-worldly? Her narcissism is also half-divine, part of her goodness, the condition for her goodness. I hate my own exasperation with her. I wish I liked her less, or that I liked her more.

X

Who knows anything about X? Me least of all.

GG

GG has a stentorian voice. Somehow it hits enough tones and overtones that it causes noisy reverberation in any room he's in. Something rattles, and buzzes and fuzzes what he's saying. So I always resolve his words an instant too late, as in a badly dubbed movie. Hearing him is like hearing my own annoying echo on a bad cell-phone connection. But the asynchrony is deeper: what he says is difficult enough to understand that it would take me a second to catch up anyhow. He's one of those people who fill the buffer of short-term memory when you try to attend to what they're saying. And my buffer overflows when I have to pay attention to his voice, his words, his meanings, and the noise they elicit from the objects whose multiplicity they highlight, all at once. I try to look into his eyes as he speaks, so as not to be distracted by his out-of-synch mouth. It's like hearing Picasso but looking at Rembrandt. He really means what he's saying. He cares and it's deep. But I have to remember this at just the right level, remember it without noticing it, so that I don't get entangled in yet another loop. Sometimes it works, like falling down stairs but finding your feet are right there after all, falling as fast as you are. Then the noise becomes beautiful, and I catch up with the meaning, and I can see all that his beautiful eyes are trying to convey.

DV

DV can be perfectly proud of others, of those close to him, and of his family pre-eminently. He will talk with great, alert, enthusiastic tenderness of all the achievement, all the mastery, all the subtlety, all the refreshing, surprising, invigorating quirkiness of those he loves. His pride in them more than compensates for his sublimely unsubtle failure to see that he is going on, at a length so great as to pass the ludicrousness that would set a natural limit to it, about how much of their endless promise they've attained to, how wonderfully self-coincident they have made themselves.

I used to appreciate this in him, was sufficiently affected by it as to take some pride myself in enjoying his excessive and generalized uxoriousness (as though his whole social circle were the spouse of his dreams). Sure, you could

find him annoying, even criminally annoying, with his endless willingness to waste your time. But then, you were a friend of his too, so it was a good thing, a generous thing in you to reciprocate his friendship by appreciating his general generosity of sentiment. And it was a way to be equally generous to those he loved.

But then it turned out that this really was just boasting on his part. Not quite the way you'd think, not the kind of boasting that's pretty familiar, boasting that someone amazing loves or esteems one. That kind of boasting has a mildly flattering thread wound into the cable of its superiority: "I am boasting to you, and want you to think well of me, I who have the ear of the Prince of Wales." It's nice, in a dim, distant way that the friend of the Prince of Wales cares what I think; nice too that I can allow myself a little mild contempt for this person who, despite being a friend of the Prince of Wales, has shown himself just a bit vulgar.

But DV's boasting isn't like that. It hardly feels like boasting at all. He's not talking about himself—at least that's how it feels. It's as though those he boasts of are his possessions, as though, by virtue of being his friends' qualities, those qualities are his also, but that this so goes without saying that he doesn't have to refer to himself at all. This is why his friends don't come out in his anecdotes as interesting, independent personalities and people. They're just a bundle of talent or achievement, a bundle he can sling over his back and claim ownership of.

I would not have noticed this, I don't think, except for the way I have seen him drop people. He finds others with similar talents to those he drops, maybe even superior ones, and since such talents are fungible for him, it doesn't matter whose he owns, hence whom he owns, whom he owns. He is capable of walking out on a lifetime of friendship, of love, of community, without a second, or a second's, thought.

This is what he did not long ago, but long enough ago that he really did it. He didn't walk out on me; this isn't personal; I think he still thinks that we're friends, and I have no interest whatever in discussing any of this, or anything at all, with him. Which it's really easy not to do, since I'm just

another credit in another ledger of the qualities he enjoys in the world. His narcissism is so perfect, so unanxious, that it doesn't occur to him to care what other people think. That's why his boasting can be so charming and so inoffensive. He doesn't care what anyone thinks: he likes thinking about them not as people but as goods. He likes the commodity that his friends offer him, constituting as they do a kind of extended phenotype that allows a wider scope for self-enjoyment.

He's serene as a monkey, and I can't even resent it, though I resent myself for all the work I did defending him to myself against the charge of his being a monstrous bore and boor. I thought that love fueled his boorishness, and I liked that. I was wrong.

HH and II

HH and II are fascinating people, smart, thoughtful, engaged, involved, serious. They work together very well as a couple: HH is a narcissist, and II is what Freud analyzed as an efflorescence of narcissism: his narcissism is devoted to hers, and gratified by it. And this is what makes them work well together: her narcissism is gratified by his praise of her commitments, which she can adjust and model on his commitments to her. They think really hard about things; they *dive* (as Melville said), and they can dive because they have each other and the interesting configuration of praise that having each other gives them: he praises her, and his own virtues are shown in that the palpable help and succor that his praise gives her fortifies him as well: she is the evidence of his selfless devotion, her achievement is the evidence of his selfless devotion and is also his achievement. I mean he makes it possible for her to work and to love. That's his work and love. So they have made something great of their characters. The very thing that makes so many people go so far in the wrong direction, when balanced as they've balanced it, makes them go very far (dive very deep) in the right direction.

But all this requires a kind of protectiveness on their part which admits very few people. That protectiveness is a kind of intelligence like the outer sanctuaries of the Mormon Temple. You're invited into the precincts,

made to feel surrounded by their sensitivity and insight and understanding, seasoned with a kind of tender dryness, a kind of confiding sardonic attitude towards those outside. But that attitude also prevents you from going deeper. You're within it with respect to outsiders, everyone else, but outside of a more formidable version of it with respect to real friendship with them. They're ungenerous to those who they don't trust absolutely. They miss things, they miss people that way. Or rather I miss them, miss what they could be in my life if they would let me be what I could be in theirs. But it would probably be demanding too much of them to ask them to do the triage with so many people attracted to their charismatic intellects. If they were easier in their own lucidities and depths, if they didn't have to spend so much time balancing narcissism with understanding, they would have the energy to be fairer to others. But their virtue isn't *fairness*, and fairness would disable them. They're *not* disabled, but I'm disabled in relation to them. We could be friends if we could be friends.

MM

MM's charisma is contagious, or at least what makes him charismatic is the way his charisma feels contagious. He's ebulliently witty, fast, sharply ironic but always in a way that makes you feel part of the small and privileged population of his friends—you never imagine that you could be the object of his irony. It's exhilarating, the relief you feel in that exemption. All the pleasure of irony is still available to you, but without any of background anxiety that you might one day find yourself on the receiving end of it.

And the great thing about MM is that you never are. His sharpness is matched by his loyalty. I've never heard him turn against a friend. He's amused by his friends, as amused by them as if they were ineffectually trying to get away with being silly or venal or self-dealing. But his glee is appreciative, loving, energizing, and if you were trying to get away with something, some petty vanity, you immediately find yourself meaning it as play instead, for his amusement and for your own. It makes you a better person.

Everyone around him sounds like him, or tries to. Being with him is

like being one of the stars of a Cole Porter musical. It's better by far than any petty vanity you could come up with yourself.

And yet no one ever quite sounds like him. I can see them trying—trying too hard, though it doesn't feel too hard for them. For them it's a pleasure. But sad to say, their pleasure blights my own. They think they sound as much like him as I think I do. I want him to direct his irony at them, too. I want some acknowledgement of everyone else's slavish imitation. The acknowledgement can be kind, fine, but I want some hint of it.

When I'm with him, I forget my resentment, which certainly comes from my pride, though I'm not proud of it. We're so witty together! He makes me eloquent, he understands what I mean to say and somehow listens with such responsiveness to eloquence that the eloquence just fits into his hearing like puzzle pieces when the jigsaw is almost done. How I wish other people would realize that he doesn't take quite the same pleasure in their transparent emulations and imitations. But I think, alas, that he may.

NN

I have always liked guarded people. They have a certain kind of discretion that is straightforward in itself. With such people I never have to feel that there's something about me that they're turning away from, that they're more relaxed elsewhere, around other people. I find them charismatic. Their charisma comes partly out of their combination of frailty and a self-knowledge that more than matches their frailty. They are in command of themselves, and unaffected by their frailty, which makes them serenely self-possessed. They're guarded because they expect so little from extraversion, and therefore demand very little. They've cultivated subtlety and so their own resources for living in the region of thought they inhabit are more than ample, are almost princely, but for their discretion. I like being able to see their subtlety and to be allowed to partake in it with them. I like their trust, their sense, warranted by their subtle apprehension of my own character, that I'll never trespass, never go too far. I like being trusted by the preternaturally guarded.

I guess that paragraph's really about me, but I thought about these

things with respect to NN, who's an example of someone whose guardedness goes wrong. He's been so guarded, for so long, that it's not clear that there's anything left that he's guarding anymore. I don't mean it's not clear what he's guarding—it never is among the kind of guarded people I like. But with NN it feels as though his guardedness has become a pure and empty habit. He doesn't trust me, and I neither want him to nor think he should.

And yet I know he's unhappy. Maybe that's the problem. His guardedness doesn't get him anything. It's not life-affirming. *Life-affirming?* Yes. Their contrast with NN makes me see how what I like in guarded people is that they are generally life-affirming. The world is so full of possible interest that they see it everywhere, in almost overwhelming profusion. I like their intense look of anxious curiosity as they watch the world, with the curiosity winning out, though protected by the anxiety. And there's enough that's really interesting that they can afford to protect themselves from most things, can afford their own frailty, their capacity to feel hurt. But NN isn't frail. He's sad. Whatever was frail about him has been shattered. He couldn't afford it. And I am sorry to say that I couldn't afford him.

L

Yesterday was L's birthday. He turned 76. He was cheerfully gloomy when I talked to him on the phone. He told me he'd been born at dawn, after his mother had been in labor all night. Of course she had, but he rarely talks of his mother, so I mention it. Yesterday morning he was up at dawn, and saw day coming in, and there was something powerful in his sense that dawn is dawn, yesterday's and the dawn of 76 years ago.

L is stunned by old age, which doesn't bode well. We quoted Stevens's "The Rock" to each other. But L is also endlessly curious about human experience. He's willing to try anything to know what it's like. And so his curiosity gets the better of him, and he likes old age the better for it, since he now knows it from the inside. For him it's an experience of perpetual novelty: he keeps getting older; he keeps *being* old. That may bode somewhat better. It's like the lost freshness of youth, again. But L was always like that.

W

W is the best person in the world for me to tell a story to. When we talk I am quick, economical, inventive—he riffs better than anyone I know and he loves the way I riff too, the way I can keep up with him, which no one else can. I can keep up with him *because* he loves it. But (even here! just look!) I can't get up to speed without him. I'm ashamed of this, not only for the obvious reasons—the way I'm selling myself short—but also because it might indicate a strange, involuntary arrogance on my part, as though no one else could bring this talent out in me because no one else were worth it. I hope it's not really arrogance, though, but narcissism, a desire to make myself understood in a way that I can rely only on W to get intuitively. But I wish I could trust everyone else more.

V

I like being able to tell when V is loving the book he's reading. When it's time to stop, he'll put a bookmark in and then hold the book for a second over his head and gaze up at the top of the pages of the closed book, tilted down at him from above, to see where the bookmark is. He can feel the pleasure he'd take of blood rushing to his head if he were in the attitude he's holding the book in. And I can feel the way the book weighs on his arm, balanced now as it isn't when it's open and he's reading it, held up by the nearly locked forearm, balanced with a slight pleasant sway centered at the shoulder. Because his arm's extended he's looking at the book from a greater distance than when it's open and he's reading it.

It's real love you can see in his eyes: he likes seeing how much he's read, and how much he has yet to read. He loves what he's read, and he loves how much he has left to read. He gazes at the book searchingly, the way you look at someone you love, always glad to think that you can keep looking, that there's so much pleasure to be had in the looking. He can keep reading; he's happy with what he's read; he's happy with how much there is to read; and his love is a kind of confidence that the book will last, even when he's done, that the part that he's read is still a part of the book, which is a part of his life; that

the part that's to come will be the fulfillment of the promise that the part that he's read has made. So that the promise will be fulfilled, and nothing will be lost, because what's coming ratifies what's gone, so that what's gone is still coming, is still going to be taken up by the future. Just as when you love someone, the present feels like it's part of the future, and there's hurry and no hurry at once—you're hurrying to the leisure of the present. That's what V gets out of reading and remembering reading and anticipating reading a book that he loves.

CONTRIBUTORS

H.V. Chao's fiction has appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *West Branch*, *Epiphany*, *The Antigoniish Review*, *The Nashwaak Review*, *The Coachella Review*, *Brèves*, and *Le Visage Vert*. He is at work on a short story collection called *Guises*.

Berit Ellingsen (beritellingsen.com) is a Korean-Norwegian writer whose stories have appeared in *Unstuck*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *elimae*, *Metazen*, and other literary journals. Her short story collection, *Beneath the Liquid Skin*, was published by firthFORTH Books in 2012. She was also nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the British Science Fiction Award in 2012. Berit's novel, *The Empty City* (Jnana Press, 2011) has been translated into French by François Bon (*Une Ville Vide*, Publie, 2013).

Surrealist, Oulipian, satrap of the College of 'Pataphysics, **Jean Ferry** (1906-1974) was primarily a screenwriter in his day, best known for his collaborations with Clouzot, Buñuel, Malle, and Franju. He was also the greatest specialist of his day in the works of Proust's neighbor, Raymond Roussel. His stories have appeared in *Weird Fiction Review*, *The Coffin Factory*, *Anomalous*, and *Tin House*. "Letter to a Stranger," first published in *Le Mécanicien* (Gallimard, 1953 ; Finitude, 2011) is forthcoming in *The Conductor and Other Tales* from Wakefield Press this November.

Kinton Ford says: "If I tried writing something of any length with Doug Nufer's *Never Again* (his undisputed champion, 192-page novel) constraint, an extensive dictionary for culling, cutting, pasting from would probably be my most important resource against repetition. Which makes me realize how interestingly this amazing, spiraling, self-blocking mode pressures the type/token distinction. Pronouns are still okay, yielding (as they usually do) innocuous coreference. But only once; then your last feeble shift is synonymy, among primal proper nouns. Every such word (verbs also, adjectives, adverbs,

articles, arguably), indeed *all* words (we, not being completely inflexible, permit ourselves plurals), desperately, instantaneously soulful represent their sole instantiation. Homonyms help, decoratively anyhow, yet that's fine, since decoration now means Platonic truth itself, descending downwards, wholly absorbed by—thus into—a trajectory constantly darkening.

"Just so, when kidnappers' glued notes demanding ransom come, you feel utter hopelessness strangely, somehow brightly, foreshadowed, legible spatially within those verbal collages' interstices, each paper-stuck cutout its own fragile hostage, knowing much too well time's inevitable, implacable, accelerating diminishment, limiting language and world together, both (sighing gerundively) mourning one another."

Two-time winner of the John Dryden Translation prize, **Edward Gauvin** (edwardgauvin.com) has received fellowships and residencies from the NEA, the Fulbright program, PEN England and PEN America, the Centre National du Livre, the Villa Gillet, and the Lannan Foundation. His volume of Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud's selected stories, *A Life on Paper* (Small Beer, 2010), won the Science Fiction & Fantasy Translation Award. Other publications have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Conjunctions*, *The Southern Review*, and *PEN America*. He writes a bimonthly column on the Francophone fantastic at *Weird Fiction Review*.

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Birkensnake 6 was edited by seven pairs of strangers, who made seven different versions. None of the editors knew one another before the project began. This version was edited by Diana George and Hedy Zimra. Friedrich Kerksieck of Small Fires Press designed and made the print edition of this version. The electronic editions were made by Brian Conn.

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From an evolutionary point of view, our ability to continue to interact with people after they die is something of a mystery, but that habit has surely given us our gift for engaging with people who never cross into our physical space. The right analogy for fictional reasoning is not somebody who dips in and out of our presence... The right analogy is to somebody who we know is gone forever but with whom we still feel connected.—Blakey Vermeule.

Albertine, one might object, was only a character in a novel, not a real person. But she was also a real person—she was Alfred Agostinelli—and so the pain here is real pain. But the name Agostinelli does not designate the person in pain, whom we can only know as the fictional, and anonymous, Albertine. And the truthfulness of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, its lesson, is this: that there is something fictional about all people, something susceptible to anonymity, in the vanishing space beyond generality where pure interiority (like the narrator's) and pure exteriority (like his grandmother's, Albertine's, death's) coincide; and that this fictionality requires our deepest attentiveness, even if it perpetually defeats our acknowledgment. —William Flesch.

I would love to co-edit Birkensnake 6. For the past 11 months, I have lived in Providence. I spent five years in Asia before coming here. My syntax is still off. I am obsessed with strangers and spying.

Pair me up. Let's see what happens.

Hedy Zimra

COLOPHON

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